

# car

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**THE  
NEW LOTUS  
THAT'S MORE  
FUN THAN A FERRARI**



# Drives



## BMW 850CSi

BMW'S 8-SERIES COUPE has been a flop. After a promising start in 1989, demand for the 850i plummeted and production was reduced from 56 to a mere 12 units per day. Criticism centered on the antiquated design, poor space utilization and the lackluster performance of the 300-hp 12-cylinder engine. In 1991, optional rear-wheel steering was added, improving handling, but not sales. But although the car's contribution to BMW's total sales volume had shrunk to 0.8 percent by the end of 1992, and the Bavarians are unlikely to replace the car at the end of the decade, they have decided to give it one last chance. For 1993, they have introduced

three new models: an up-specced 850C, a heavily priced 840i powered by the 280-hp 4.0-liter V8, and the 850CSi. And this flagship model is the most convincing 8-series yet, with uprated suspension, brakes and steering, and, best of all, a strong 5.6-liter V12.

This engine, developed by the Motorsport division, is based on the 850i's 300-hp 5.0-liter V12. Bored and stroked to 5.6 liters, it delivers 360-hp (up 27 percent) at 5300rpm and maximum torque of 398lb-ft at 4000rpm. It also has new pistons, a stronger crank, hotter cam profiles, a new intake manifold, an oil cooler and a new engine management system.

To cope with the leap in power, the 850CSi's suspension has been extensively reworked.

The reinforced front axle carrier has bigger wheel bearings and hydraulic mounting points, and the anti-roll bars, springs and dampers have been

revised at both ends. The new car has also gained a larger, stronger clutch complete with vibration damper, and the differential has been fitted with an oil cooler. The Servotronic power steering has been recalibrated to give a quicker, more linear action, and rear-wheel steering, permitting steering angles of up to 1.8 degrees, made standard. Governed by steering angle, vehicle speed and g-force, the rear wheels always steer in the same direction as the front wheels.

Counter-steer, to aid parking, was rejected on safety grounds.

The brakes have been improved, too. Four-piston calipers grab the enlarged inner-ventilated front discs. Together with bigger rear rotors, they provide astonishing stopping power. Four-channel ABS is standard, and so is the brake-actuating ASC-T traction-control system, which can be turned off. Unlike the 850C, the CSi cannot be had with swivable dampers, automatic transmission or the new Dynamic Stability Control (DSC), whose steering angle sensor is incompatible with the 4es software.

Visually, the CSi differs only subtly from its lesser brethren. It has a new nasal air dam which increases downforce and houses three large cooling-air

apertures. Its rear bumper has been redesigned to incorporate two pairs of polished large-diameter tailpipes, and to double as an aerodynamic aid. The door mirrors, too, are different - more slippery than those on the other cars, but very small. Another telltale is the design of the wide five-spoke alloy wheels.

Inside, the car hasn't changed much. The latest 850i is still an object lesson in poor packaging, but it does look classier than its predecessors thanks to higher quality materials, new colour schemes and the extended use of leather, standard on the CSi. Also present are driver and passenger airbags, air-conditioning, power everything, infra-red-controlled central locking, metallic paint, music, an electrically adjustable steering column, a ski-bag and alloy rims.

Those who insist can have wood trim executed in bird's-eye maple which puts the 850CSi perilously close to gold chain and chest-wig territory. The same must be said about some of the colour schemes offered by BMW's newly founded Individual offshoot. It's good to know that the Bavarians

BMW tries again with the 850, giving it a bigger engine, subtle new look.



# Drives

will supply any colour combination the customer specifies, but this freedom of choice can lead to such taste aberrations as the all-violet car on display at a Munich main dealer.

The key question is, of course, whether all these changes have turned the 850CSi into a desirable car, a vehicle that truly earns its CSi badge. Your first impression is that they haven't, for you can't help noticing that all the old flaws are still there: cramped cabin, useless rear seats, elephantine centre console, and the odd shape with long overhangs each end of a surprisingly short wheelbase. Mind you, the CSi does look better than the Ci. It sits almost an inch closer to the ground, its wheels are at last wide enough to justify the boy-racer blisters that shroud them (they wear 235/45ZR17 rubber at the front, 265/40ZR17 at the rear), and the new bumpers and aprons give the car a more aggressive and purposeful appearance.

But your heart really does beat faster when you hear that 5.6-litre V12 fire up. It has your spine tingling at the first dab of the throttle. The

torque curve of the big V12 is truly awe-inspiring. With over 300lb ft on tap at idle, one wonders why BMW felt compelled to mate this refined and responsive engine to a six-speed gearbox - a four-speeder could have done the job. The tune played by the tailpipe quartet is not as raucous as that of an American V8, nor as frenzied as an Italian 12. Instead, the Bavarian motor produces an unmistakable roar which goes from muffled to membrane-menacing.

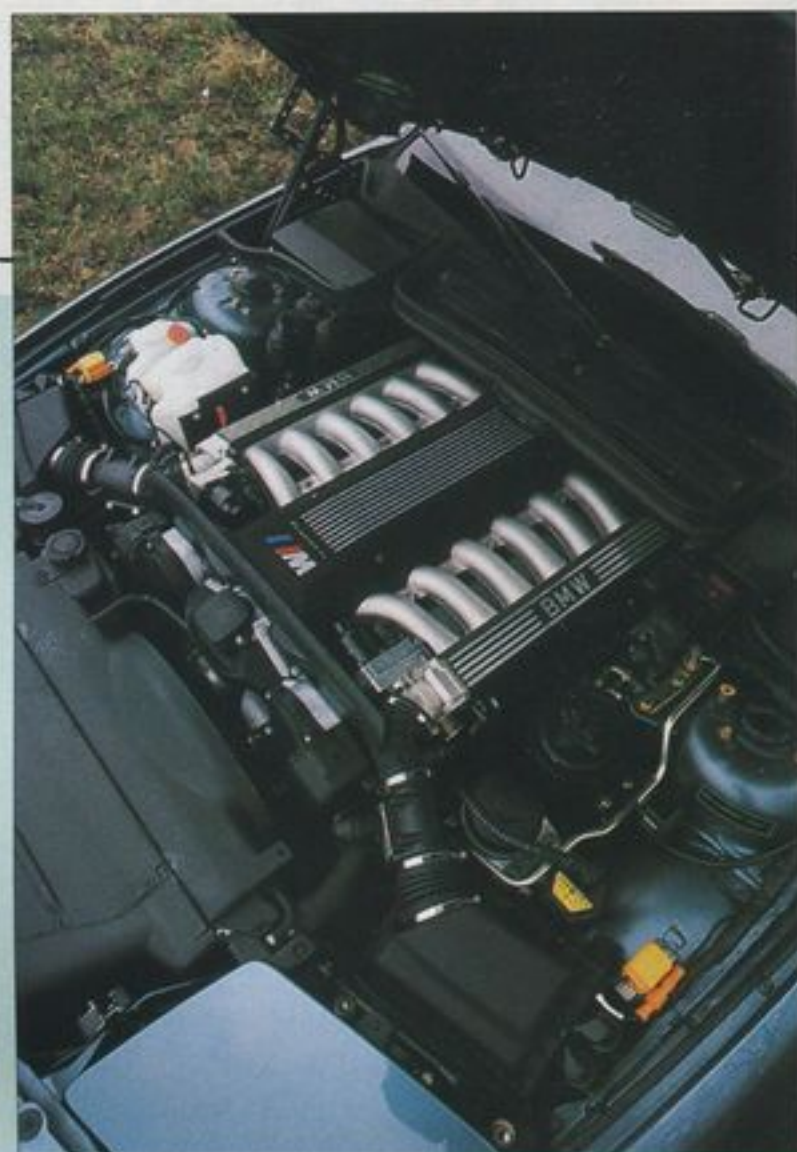
Electronically restricted to 156mph, the 4103lb 850CSi sprints from 0-62mph in 6.0 seconds (850Ci: 6.8). The average ECE fuel consumption works out at 22.0mpg, but our test car returned a far more realistic 12.9mpg. So although the tank holds a generous 20 gallons, the driving range can be a short 275 miles when you feel like playing.

But the domain of the 850CSi is the autobahn. Porsche 959 excepted, no car betters this 380bhp BMW for stability. The body doesn't seem to lean at all; even through fast sweepers it remains utterly flat. Longitudinal movements are also

absent - a touch of brake dive, a hint of acceleration squat, that's it. While other cars require corrections at the wheel whenever you apply power or back off, the 850CSi remains totally unperturbed.

Boring? Actually, no. Not when you're going fast, scanning the traffic and the road surface. Thanks to the rear-wheel steering, any correction, lane-change or emergency braking exercise is easy, effortless and safe. Unless you grossly overshoot the mark, the car is always perfectly controllable, requiring no more than a flick of the wheel to direct it. The fat Michelins tramline under braking, but otherwise the car's high-speed behaviour is viceless. Directional stability is excellent, susceptibility to cross winds minimal.

The fun factor on secondary roads is greatly enhanced by the new engine and reworked suspension. Amber warning light flashing furiously, ASC+T stifles power oversteer and ensures traction on slippery blacktop and through tight corners. ASC+T can be a life-saver, but even disciplined drivers will



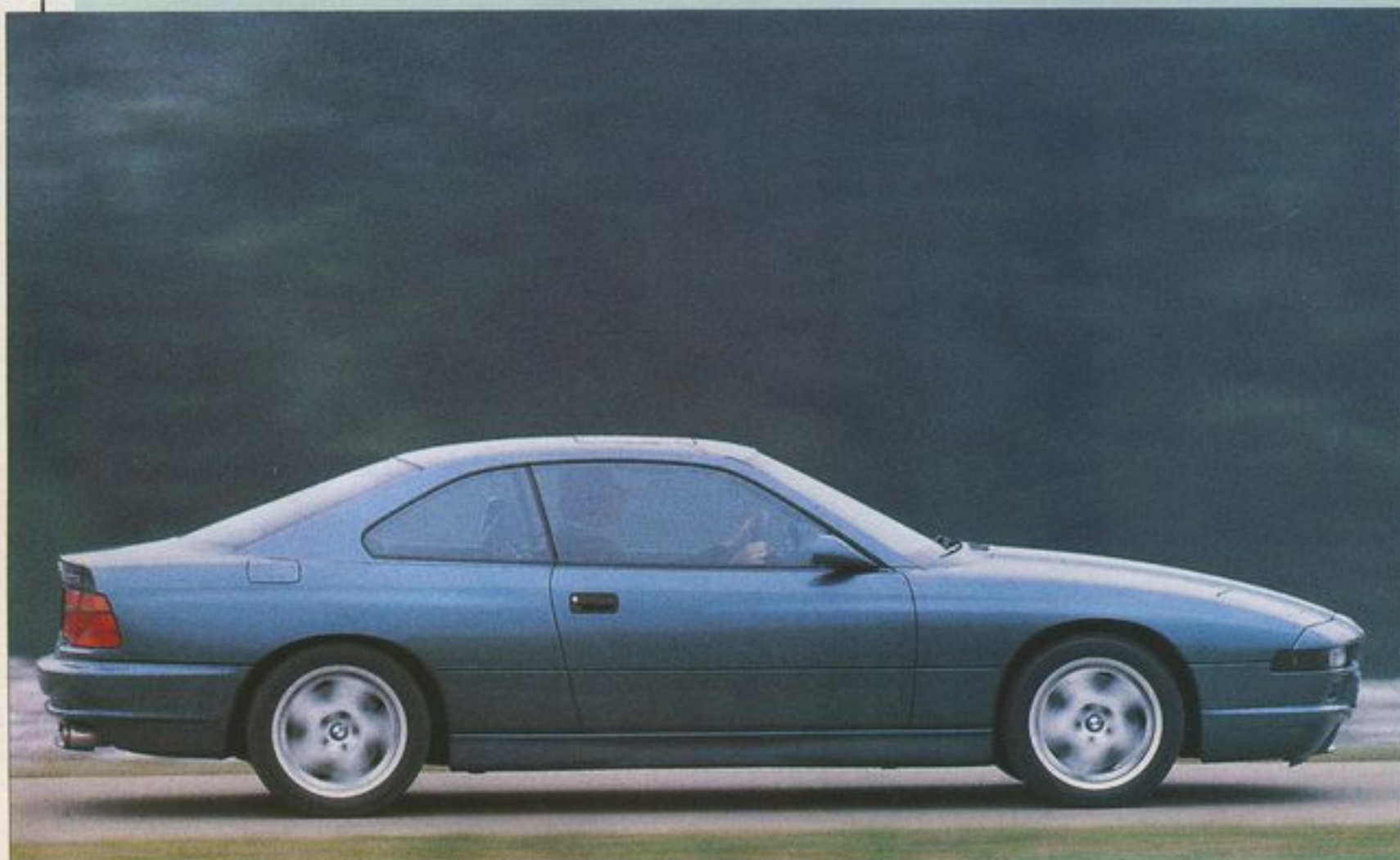
occasionally feel tempted to switch it off. Without traction control, the 850CSi calls for a responsible right foot and the ability to control lurid tail slides.

The 850CSi's steering is the first Servotronic system that actually works the way it's meant to. It is light only when lightness is required (parking speeds), it always provides the right amount of road feel, and it's commendably quick (2.8 instead of 3.3 turns lock to lock). The brakes also deserve full marks:

CSi's 5.6 V12 gives 380bhp - enough for 62mph in 6.0sec, governed 156mph

for their initial bite, progressive pedal action and their stopping power which seems to be unaffected by gradients or aggressive driving. The six-speed transmission suffers from long throws and a rather vague shift pattern, but the gearing is spot on and the clutch light and communicative.

Four years after its launch, the 8-series BMW has metamorphosed into something approaching a proper sports car. The 850CSi is fast, comfortable, beautifully balanced and a lot of fun to drive. Whether its qualities are enough to restore the model's tarnished reputation, we shall see. **Georg Kacher**



## Vitals

★ PRICE: c£75,000

★ ENGINE:  
5.6-litre V12,  
380bhp at 5300rpm,  
398lb ft at 4000rpm

★ PERFORMANCE:  
(claimed) 156mph,  
6.0sec 0-62mph,  
22.0mpg

★ DUE IN BRITAIN:  
now