

Performance CAR



Class of

1993

We name the
Performance Car
of the Year

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BMW 840Ci

FIRST DRIVE

THE ADMIRATION GAME



- Third model for 8 Series
- 286bhp V8 engine, 0-62mph 7.4secs (claimed)
- Price £52,950, on sale now

Stand up for a moment if you recognise yourself. You've got exactly £52,950 in used notes in your briefcase and you want, more than anything else in the world, to empty it onto the desk of a car dealer. You will insist that the car you buy today will look just about as sexy as any on the road, but you don't want to have to get too involved with the messy business of driving it. You want power — but not too much — and speed (but not so you'd notice). And safety, and comfort, and gadgetry, and yes, technology too, please. Everything and nothing at the same time or, to put it another way, a BMW 840Ci.

This is a car which, from any angle, you simply have to admire. Like its sibling 850, it knocks the stuffing out of arguments that seek to dismiss Bavarian styling as predictable, and annoys onlookers by dragging their heads around when they're trying so very hard to remain unimpressed while waiting for the bus (that's a double decker, not a Mercedes 600).

But if you have to admire the 840 then you should be aware that it's not compulsory to fall in love with it. Neither



● Slimmed-down headlamps minimise the 'pop-up' effect

compulsory nor, I'm saddened to report, even possible.

The V12-powered 850 has not yet emerged as the car we're always pining for, and thus the 4-litre V8 was always going to have its work cut out under the same bonnet. But we've seen this 32-valver before in 7 Series guise, and we know it's a hard puncher capable of some quite torquey feats. With 294lb ft of hauling strength applying itself at 4500rpm, it shouldn't ever be guilty of leaving you wanting, and indeed its mid-range activities make it the crown prince of flexibility.

Power makes itself available at the first flick of the pedal, and eases itself through the rev band with the consistency of mum's more successful custard, arriving with a gentle roar at a

peak figure of 286bhp with around 5800rpm showing.

But (and isn't there always a big one) the engine as fitted here is under the jurisdiction of a 'sophisticated' five-speed automatic gearbox, which is by a considerable margin more sophisticated than most drivers. It does the job that the enthusiast driver would much rather be doing himself, and what's more it does it differently (albeit that you can use this box as a kind of clutchless manual). Roll on springtime, when the six-speed manual box comes bounding onto the stage. I'll be applauding.

Meanwhile, by 'talking' to the engine through a collection of terrifyingly clever electronics, the auto box makes decisions about driving style and road conditions, helped by the selection of either economy, sport or winter settings. It promises you that all changes will be smoother than Leslie Phillips, and they are, but when the chips (and the accelerator) are down you find yourself waiting for an agonising second while the gearbox and the engine talk amongst themselves. If you get bored waiting and choose kickdown you get a high-revving lunge which seems to tell you the car doesn't approve of your impatience. It also tells you that, while it looks as good as a Ferrari and twice as plush, it ain't no sports car.

The suspension and the ride reinforce this last point. The road is definitely down there. You know this because you saw it just before you shut the door. But between the tarmac and the 235/50 R16s, through the race-bred active rear axle and the automatic stability and traction control,

and via the little-finger-light power steering, not a lot gets through to your palms. They'd just love to be sweating even a little bit, but they don't have to. 'It's OK,' says the car. 'We'll take care of that for you, sir. You just relax.'

It's hard not to 'just relax', actually, since you're sitting on an oasis of buffalo leather being force-fed information about the weather by the on-board computer while listening to a riotous stereo and marvelling at the fact the seatbelt is forming opinions about how fat you are before adjusting itself accordingly. The fact that this baby is rumoured to despatch the first 60mph in 7.4 seconds is small consolation indeed, and a top speed of 155mph is almost certain to feel like about 65 if you ever get up there. But gazing dreamily over that gorgeous bonnet is a mighty satisfying way to pass



● It's black and it's leather — this is travelling BMW class



● Immaculate V8 offers a consistent flow of power

the time while you're waiting. If you had a chauffeur then you wouldn't even need to put your hands on the wheel, but then again you'd be more concerned with playing *ado sardines* in

the back, where the sculpted leather outby-holes interpret the term "bucket" rather too literally. You may need the fire brigade to extract you.

I'm sorry if I sound cynical but it's just so damned frustrating when you see a car looking this fantastic giving such a negligible return to the keen driver. Though BMW won't have any of it, I can only conclude they want to attract a kind of driver whose wallet alone would have the seatbelts talking to the electronic computer brain in hushed whispers — "We've got a fat one here, Jerry," etc. etc. Bring your own stoppers.

Ging Fountain

- ▲ **FOR:** Stunning looks, class regale
- ▼ **AGAINST:** Does it all for you
- **VERDICT:** The 325i, only less so

325i CONVERTIBLE



None for 84, the 325i loses its head in mighty impressive fashion, coming away with its lines splendidly upheld, its rigidly secured and not a hint of intrusion about the operation of its hood.

At £28,000 (20% is £20,100) it doesn't come cheap, but you're going to love it anyway. The six-cylinder, 192bhp, 2.5-litre engine is a fiery number still, ruffing your hair considerably on its way to 62mph in 8.6secs, and thereafter onwards to a top speed of 142mph — figures which all but match the hard-top model.

Safety is big in the frame, with an automatic roll-over system incorporating the windscreen frame and pop-up rear roll-bars. The electric hood is easy as pie to operate, and stows so neatly you can be caught wondering which way it went.

Handling remains razor-sharp, the 2-axle at the rear helping to supply poise in the corners, while soufle-shake has once again been kept wholly at bay.

● The 316i and 318i have both been fitted with heavily revised four-cylinder engines, giving more mid-range torque, reduced emissions and reduced fuel consumption.

