

# GIA



**AUDI S4**  
**BMW M3**  
**MERCEDES C43 AMG**

At last some true rivals for that landmark four-door supercar, the BMW M3. Audi's new S4 fields a twin-turbo V6 propelling through quattro drive, while AMG has just stuffed a big V8 into the Merc C-class

# NIT

[TEST]





# Audi's S4 masterblaster

**Audi S4:** £36,610, 155mph, 5.5sec 0-60

**S** 4? RINGS A BELL. THREE YEARS ago, there was an Audi 100 S4. Different car, same formula: shoehorn the biggest engine you can find into a given model, sort out the suspension, fit wider wheels and tart up the body so people can tell it's not a run-of-the-mill machine. Audi refined this recipe with the S2 based on the old 80, brought it close to perfection with the wolf-in-sheep's-clothing S6, and recently applied it to its flagship, the mighty 340bhp S8.

There'll be more. Next year we'll see a V8-engined S6 and a turbocharged 210bhp S3. Right now, though, we're looking at the second-generation, totally different S4, available from your Audi dealer in about a month's time. It's based on the successful A4, has a brand new twin-turbo V6 engine that's good for 265bhp, and features such welcome ingredients as four-wheel drive, sported-up suspension and a six-speed gearbox. You can have it either as a saloon or an Avant estate car.

Unlike the even more radical, but short-lived, 315bhp RS2 Avant which was developed with the help of Porsche, the S4 is an in-house production. Its core ingredient is a new 2.7-litre twin-turbo V6, derived from the five-valve 2.8-litre V6 and the latest in a long line of turbocharged Audi engines which began with the 1980 Quattro coupé.

With their low inertia, the small turbos respond promptly to throttle orders, and start boosting the torque curve at very low engine speeds. Two intercoolers take care of healthy charge air temperatures. The four-cam V6 develops 265bhp at 5800rpm while the maximum torque of 289lb ft is on stream from 1850 to 3600rpm. This hefty twist action is relayed to all four wheels via a six-speed gearbox; although an automatic transmission would be a desirable option, it won't happen because there's no room for it.

The quattro 4wd system normally splits the torque evenly between the axles, but when wheelspin threatens at either end, the self-

locking Torsen centre differential will send up to 70 percent of the firepower to where it is needed most. In combination with the brake-activated east-west diff lock, dubbed EDS, the quattro system not only guarantees optimum traction and phenomenal straight-line grip, it also reliably decelerates all four wheels under a trailing throttle.

To make sure that the S4 brakes as well as it accelerates, Audi equipped it with large-diameter inner-ventilated discs. A quicker steering ratio was chosen to provide better feedback, but this time the engineers chose not to fit the hyper-sensitive variable-rate Servotronic. Predictably, the top-of-the-line A4 runs on wider 17in Avus-style alloy wheels shod with 225/45 R17W tyres.

Most of the design changes are purely functional. The additional air intakes in the front bumper are necessary to cool engine, transmission and brakes, while the gas-discharge xenon headlamps and integrated foglamps are an important safety factor. The



Clear dials in new grey face, lovely quality, shocking electric blue trim



S4 scores highly on desirable detailing

**'The Audi S4 has a twin-turbo V6, 265bhp, masses of torque, four-wheel drive and a six-speed gearbox'**



S4's on a big power trip, but you have to look hard for clues

subtle sill extensions and the modified aprons help smooth the air flow, and while the S4 does without obvious aerodynamic aids, its lower and wider silhouette looks distinctively different from the rest of the A4 range.

The equipment tally is similarly pumped up: you get air-conditioning, sporty seats, electric windows, remote central locking, folding rear backrests, airbags and sidebags, an on-board computer and an adjustable three-spoke sports

steering wheel. Desirable items to be found on the options list are leather, or leather-and-alcantara, trim (as fitted to our test car), a navigation system, car phone, sunroof and metallic paint. Production is limited to 5400 units a year.

This car has two obvious adversaries: one from BMW (the M3), one from Mercedes-Benz (AMG's breathed-on version of the C-class, now with a V8 engine). Five years old now, the M3 is



the classic tail-out, no-holds-barred driving machine. This 321bhp top-notch 3-series is yours as a coupé, a cabriolet or a four-door saloon, and can be had with a clutchless sequential transmission, as here.

And the Mercedes? Badged C43, this latest hot C-class uses a 4.3-litre 306bhp V8 mated to a five-speed automatic transmission. Like the Audi, the C43 comes as the four-door saloon you see here, or a five-door estate.



# BMW's M3 masterclass

**BMW M3:** £38,075, 155mph, 5.4sec 0-60

**T**IME WAS WHEN THE M3 WAS the bargain buy in the supercar basement: almost as fast as a 911, but half the price. But that was before the arrival of the Audi S4, which is not only cheaper, but much better equipped.

Money isn't everything, though. The M3 is still the only proper rear-wheel-driver which has yet to be contaminated by traction control and other computerised active-safety gizmos. And it's the only road car this side of a Ferrari F355 F1 available with a sequential gearshift. BMW calls it SMG (Sequential M Transmission) and it comes to the UK early next year.

It's impossible not to be smitten by that straight-six M3 motor. For a start, the 3.2-litre unit still looks like a real engine, unlike its rivals which have been buried beneath large plastic shrouds. It is also a rare survivor of tuning's old school where polished ducts, expert combustion chamber design and a battalion of handcrafted throttle blades are deemed more important

than chip-controlled overkill. Although the 3201cc engine is not exactly new, it does the business: 321bhp at 7400rpm, and 253lb ft at 3250rpm. That's 15bhp more than the C43 (which has two extra cylinders and an extra 1100cc), and 56bhp more than the S4 (500cc short in displacement, but with two turbos).

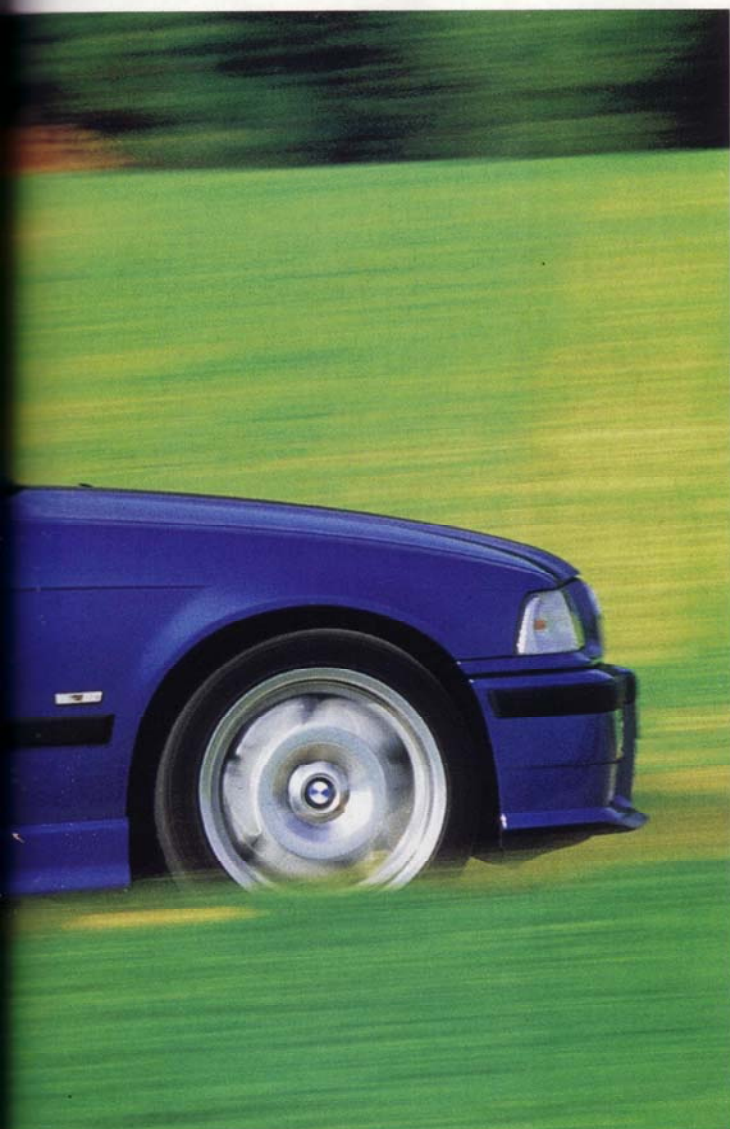
Variable intake and exhaust cams help towards the power production, along with direct ignition, state-of-the-art management that allows an unusually high compression ratio of 11.3 to one and, of course, four valves per cylinder. The thrust is channelled through a six-speed box, controlled either by a conventional lever or that optional sequential shifter.

SMG gives a choice of two driving modes. In E, the economical or automatic mode, the car self-shifts slowly and sometimes unpredictably. This mode is worth using only in stop-and-go traffic, for it's a performance-thwarting device which spoils the M3's agility. Better to stick with the S setting, the sporty, manual mode. You shift up or down by pulling the gearlever back or

pushing it forward, both without having to modulate the throttle. The clutch is operated by hydraulic actuators, which have a hard time in fulfilling expectations of precision, efficiency and speed. That said, an SMG gearchange takes only 0.4sec, thus beating the average human being by 0.1sec.

On paper this is a great idea, but in real life it disappoints. Although the SMG technology is constantly being modified, it still doesn't work nearly as well in the M3 as it does in the Ferrari. Having to reach for the gearlever instead of keeping both hands on the wheel negates part of the potential benefit, and the lever itself is confusing: BMW's own Steptronic (as fitted to certain 5- and 7-series), like the Porsche/Audi Tiptronic, requires a forward dab to trigger an upshift, but it's the other way round here.

Nor is the gearchange execution the best, because the required modulation of fuel feed and ignition can lead to rough upshifts and delayed downshifts. The test car's sticky throttle didn't help, either, making manoeuvring tricky



**M3 looking old now, but still sets the pace. Sequential box (below) needs more work**



**Emotive M badge, flawed overall package**



**'The unrivalled strength of the M3 is its fine chassis. It's a proper rear-driver, yet to be contaminated by traction control'**

on the level and a gamble on gradients. The system automatically selects second and then first gear as the car decelerates to a crawl, which is useful, but there's no automatic upshift when the engine hits the rev-limiter. Clearly there's further work to be done; BMW (GB) says that UK cars will have altered programming.

The unchanged, unrivalled strength of the M3 is its fine chassis. The Z-axis rear suspension is hardly a brand-new design, but it has been honed and improved over the years and still works remarkably well. The same should apply to the brakes, borrowed from the old M5. But despite the massive inner-ventilated compound discs, our steel-blue saloon was not totally immune to a recurrent judder and boom, two phenomena not normally associated with this breed.

Even though it had only done 6000 miles, and even though BMW should by now have got building these things down to a fine art, our test car had badly closing rear doors, rattling front windows, transmission whine under a trailing throttle and, worst of all, a nasty driveline shunt.



# Merc's C43 meisterwerk

**Mercedes C43 AMG:** £41,900 (in Germany), 155mph, 6.4sec 0-60

**A**MG IS TO MERCEDES WHAT the S-badge is to Audi and the M-cars are to BMW. Except that AMG is not part of the big Daimler-Benz empire, but an independent specialist company owned by Hans-Werner Aufrecht. In the past, AMG concentrated on accessories, tuning kits and one-off conversions for rich customers like the Sultan of Brunei. But with the C36 and the E34/36/60, the power brokers from Affalterbach, near Stuttgart, basking in the glory of being Mercedes-Benz's most favoured hotter-upper, began developing and building complete high-performance cars on behalf of the supplier of its raw material.

Their efforts must have impressed the decision-makers in Sindelfingen. After all, they chose to replace the E500, which was assembled by Porsche, with the E50 AMG which was engineered and built by AMG. It was therefore a logical step to let Aufrecht's team do all the work when the time came to supersede the six-

cylinder C36 (of which 5200 were made) with the yet more potent C43, powered by the new 24-valve 4.3-litre V8.

In character, the C43 resembles the bigger, more expensive E55, both of which come to the UK early next year. It's the first time that Mercedes will have offered full-bore V8 versions of the hottest Cs and Es here, apart from a few left-hand-drive old-shape E500s. With its AMG enhancement, the new eight-cylinder motor has all the bottom-end grunt those fat Bridgestones can take, and the ground-hugging chassis is tuned for mastery of all things. By contrast, the four-door saloon body looks pleasantly inconspicuous. Among the few visual giveaways are the restyled bumpers and sill extensions, the attractive monoblock alloy wheels, the twin chrome tailpipes and the lowered suspension.

Inside, the C43 combines sportiness with unabashed luxury. Included in the hefty price are automatic air-conditioning, leather trim, heated and electrically adjustable 'orthopaedic' seats, plus the full AMG treatment with white

instrument faces, sports steering wheel, Kevlar trim and more. Other standard ingredients are the electronic stability programme ESP, extra-wide tyres (225/45 ZR17 front, 245/40ZR17 at the back) and a folding rear seat. There's a catalogue of options, too; our test car came with the most extravagant of all, the so-called 'designo LCP' paint which changes colour according to the sunlight and the viewing angle. It's yours for a cool £4000 or so.

As tuned by AMG, the 4.3-litre V8 differs in several areas from the 279bhp engine used in the E430. It has, for instance, hotter camshafts, a switchable intake plenum, larger-diameter intake ducts and a new exhaust system. The free-flow manifold has been redesigned for reduced back pressure, and it incorporates a pair of ceramic catalysts as well as two large-volume silencers. Together, these measures help increase peak power from 279bhp to 306, liberated at 5850rpm, while maximum torque climbs to 297lb ft, available between 3250 and 5000rpm. This brawny V8 is mated to a five-speed

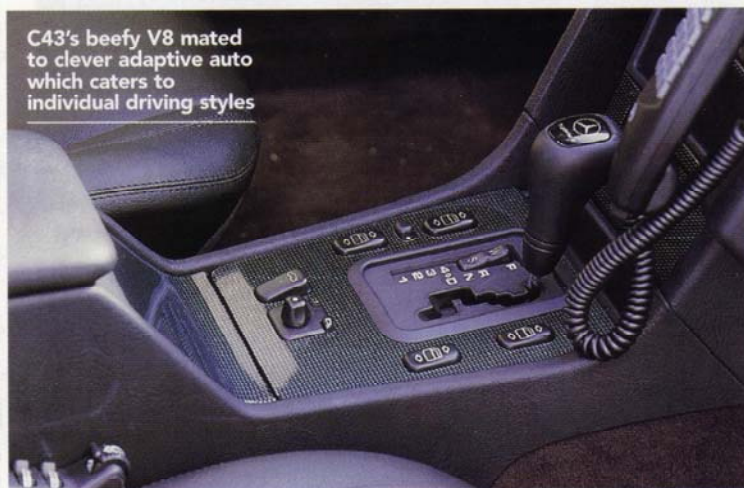


White-faced dials, chunky buttons, dash that feels like it's been carved out of granite

**'The C43 is a fast grand tourer, not a proper sports car. Motorway is its domain, effortless high-speed cruising its strength'**



C43's beefy V8 mated to clever adaptive auto which caters to individual driving styles



Yes, that means 4.3 litres in a C-class. Woah...

automatic, which has an adaptive shift programme (as well as sport and winter modes) to cater for individual driving styles.

As you might expect, the C43 features tauter springs and dampers, a ride height lowered by 25mm – and a wider track front and rear. Also part of the AMG package are a recalibrated version of the recirculating-ball steering box, bigger 17in wheels and four very substantial inner-ventilated disc brakes. The two-piece discs are held together by stainless-steel pins, which act as temperature bridges and prevent warping.

The C43 is more of a fast grand tourer than a thoroughbred sports car with four doors. Its domain is the motorway, its prime strength is effortless high-speed cruising; to borrow an old Jaguar advertising line, it delivers not only pace but also space and grace. There's a major drawback, though, concerning your bank balance. In Germany it costs £5900 more than the model it replaces, £12,100 more than the Audi S4 and £9500 more than an M3, while using more fuel and attracting monster insurance premiums.

# Maximum grip versus big slip

## HANDLING



S4 has magnetic quattro roadholding and narcotically good handling



When the M3 lets go, it really lets go. Fun in the dry, scary in the wet



Over-zealous traction control neutralises C43, but the power is there

**T**HE M3 LOOKS TO HOLD the aces, not least because it's the only car of our trio able to corner sideways to order. But though the M3 is benign and sure-footed in the dry, it loses its tail much more suddenly in the wet, and can be very tricky to catch. That makes it a bad choice for slippery conditions, because there's no traction control.

Smaller and lighter than its rivals, the BMW has beautifully responsive steering with ample feedback and minimal interference. It's quicker to respond than the AMG's helm, if not quite as quick-fire as the S4's (geared at just 2.6 turns lock-to-lock), and it points with reassuring accuracy. Yet this is a very stable car, even when you let all 321 horses out at once.

The roadholding may not have a quattro's magnetism, but the tyres hang on well and the balance at the limit is a delectable dialogue between steering and throttle. From a go-fast, fun-to-drive, explore-your-own-frontiers point of view, the M3 is the car to beat.

On real roads, though, the S4 squeezes ahead of the M3. And this marginal lead increases if the road turns wet, because the S4 stays neutral where the M3 has already started to slither. Of course the S4 has its limit, too, but it arrives with a subtlety which lets you dial in speed adjustments in small, safe doses.

The S4 is a natural understeerer, but you can rein it in by reducing throttle opening and steering lock. Voilà – now the Audi is ready to execute a perfect powerslide. With all four wheels in drift mode, the S4 strikes an intriguing balance between slip and grip, while remaining totally controllable and deflecting no more than a tame angle from the intended direction of travel. The Audi's steering is the lightest in this group, and not as communicative as the BMW's, but it suits the S4's personality. While the M3 calls for active interplay at the wheel, the 4wd Audi is at its best if you apply small steering inputs and keep mid-corner corrections to a minimum.

You'll feel more vertical body movements in the S4 than in the M3, but it's a side-effect of the added compliance that's part of the Audi's

more forgiving character. And though the S4's brakes aren't the most powerful (this accolade goes to the C43), they're so beautifully weighted and so perfectly balanced that late braking becomes habit-forming. This is a wonderful car for bad days.

And the C43 AMG? It has all the ingredients of a handling champ: big, brawny V8, sophisticated chassis, wide tyres. But it also has ESP, or Electronic Stability Programme. Another interpretation would be Eliminates Sporty Performance.

ESP employs a handful of sensors to keep that fat rear end from unruly behaviour. The limit deemed safe by the chips may be appropriate for the tall, under-tyred C180, but it's nonsense for the AMG. With the warning triangle flashing furiously, the electronic throttle and the brakes interfere long before their act is due.

Even with ESP switched off, the electronic traction-control system (ETS) remains active and prevents the rear wheels from lighting up by



SMG compromises M3's poise

applying the brakes. As a result, the Mercedes indulges in early and determined understeer, spoiling both the cornering speed and the driving pleasure. It's made worse by steering that's too heavy and slow to inspire the driver. The brakes are truly impressive, however, and the ride's absorbency is remarkable. It suits this high-performance office on wheels perfectly. There's huge talent lurking in the C43's chassis. It just needs a little more teasing out.

## KEEPING THE FAST SHOW ON THE ROAD

CHASSIS	AUDI	BMW	MERCEDES
Front suspension	Four links, coil springs, anti-roll bar	MacPherson struts, lower wishbones, coils, anti-roll bar	Double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar
Rear suspension	Trapezium arms, transverse links, coils, anti-roll bar	Long and short lateral arms, coils, anti-roll bar	Double wishbones and toe-control links, coils, anti-roll bar
Steering	Rack and pinion, power-assisted	Rack and pinion, power-assisted	Recirculating ball, power-assisted
Turns, lock to lock	2.6	3.1	3.2
Brakes, front/rear	Vent disc/disc, ABS	Vent disc, ABS	Vent disc, ABS
Tyres	225/45 R17W	225/45 ZR17 front 245/40 ZR17 rear	225/45 ZR17 front 245/40 ZR17 rear
<b>DIMENSIONS</b>			
Length/width/height (mm)	4483/1733/1396	4433/1710/1370	4487/1720/1387
Wheelbase (mm)	2607	2710	2690
Fuel-tank capacity (gal/ltr)	13.9/62	14.3/65	132.9/62
Kerb weight (kg)	1510	1460	1570

# High carbonfibre diet

## INTERIORS



Retina-troubling trim contrasts with sober functionality of Audi dash



Fake timber and over-abundance of switches mar M3's cabin

**W**E DON'T MIND THE blue-and-black seat trim of the Audi, the light-grey hide of the M3 (even though it reflects in all eight windows), or the austere welcome-to-the-coal-face interior of the Merc. But someone should tell the designers that a sporty car's driver environment need not be dominated by acres of fake Kevlar or carbonfibre. Nor, as was the case with our M3, should it be swathed in timber that barely makes the grade for a low-rent chest of drawers.

Ergonomically, certain areas of these three cars also conform very much to yesterday's standards. The clumsy steering column adjuster in the Benz, for instance, is even less practical than the daft foot-operated parking brake. The Audi still has the reddest instrument lighting in the whole car industry, its centre console houses more blanks than active push-buttons (it's five to four, until you start ordering extras), and the column-mounted light switch must surely have been designed by the Prince of Darkness himself.

The BMW must have the worst headlights ever fitted to a 156mph car. It also has the smallest door mirrors, as well as more push buttons on the centre console than even a sober finger can hit. No fewer than 58 tiny plastic switches have been crammed into an area the size of a large fly swat. This may be a welcome distraction during the occasional traffic-light interlude, but at other times the overcrowded layout can be downright dangerous.

All three cars have excellent front seats, however. But only those of the Merc are heated, electrically adjustable, fitted with pneumatically inflatable cushions and trimmed with leather (two-tone, if you insist). The C43 also offers the widest seat adjustment range, the biggest cabin overall, the most comfortable rear bench and the most generous equipment. You sit relatively high up

in the S4, and the centre console is unnecessarily bulky, but the Audi is now at least as well made as the Mercedes, it is slightly quieter at all speeds, and it has the biggest boot (by a very small margin).

The car from Ingolstadt features two turbochargers, yet it lacks a boost gauge. You get the luxury of two shift indicators in the BMW, one in the main instrument binnacle, one next to the gearlever, and the Mercedes comes with a host of innovative high-tech details variously labelled Speedtronic (a cruise control that goes up or down in 5mph increments), Assyst (an electronic service interval display) and Brake Assist (automatically increases brake pressure during panic stops). It is also the only car here equipped with a remote-control boot-lid release, remote-control fold-down rear headrests and a practical centre console with integrated armrest and oddments space.

All three cars have four doors, but entry to their back seats is not particularly easy. The rear passenger compartment of the M3 is slightly smaller than the C43's, which is about on par with the S4's. There's a difference in seat quality though. While the bench of the Audi and the Mercedes offer a shape that complies vaguely with the human anatomy, the second row in the M3 is hard, flat and uncomfortable.

The Merc comes with air-con and electric seats, but the Bose radio and CD player are optional. Audi also relies on Bose for stereophonic sound, and will charge you extra for power-operated memory seats but not for the automatic air-conditioning. Our M3 came with electric seat adjustment (extra, but much more desirable than the standard four mechanical levers), an amplifier and speakers by Harman Kardon (extra, and worth it), and automatic air-con (extra, but a must). With this lot, the M3 gets very expensive.



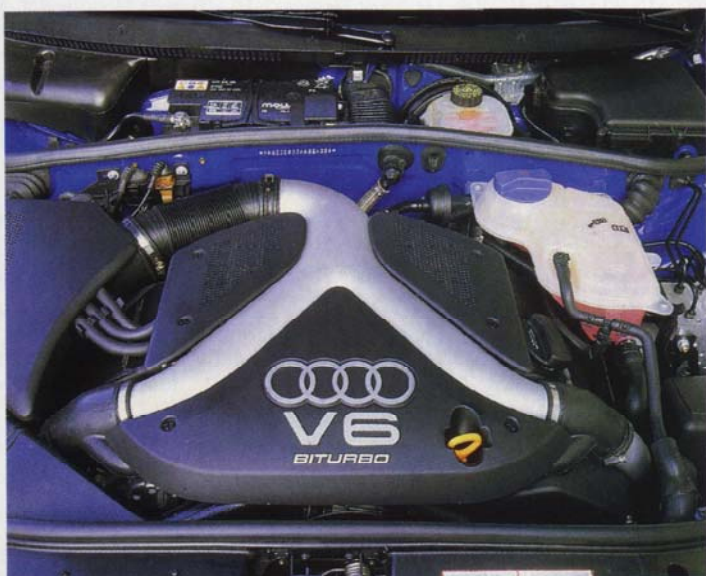
Welcome to the coal-face - Merc is solid and practical, if doom-laden

### MEASURING UP

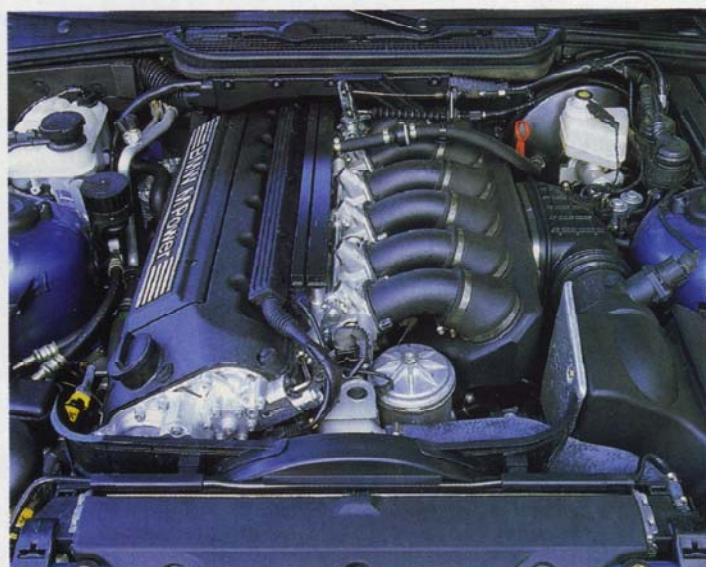
	AUDI	BMW	MERCEDES
<b>CABIN DIMENSIONS (mm)</b>			
Front headroom (max)	940	990	1015
Front legroom (max)	1060	1070	1155
Rear headroom	910	890	915
Rear kneeroom (min)	560	620	570
Rear shoulder room	1320	1360	1415
Boot capacity (litres)	440	300	430
<b>STANDARD EQUIPMENT</b>			
Airbag driver/passenger	Yes/yes+side	Yes/option	Yes/yes+side
Air-conditioning	Yes	Option	Yes
Alarm/immobiliser	Yes/yes	Yes/yes	Yes/yes
Automatic transmission	No	Option (sequential)	Yes
Central locking	Remote	Remote	Remote
Cruise control	No	Option	Yes
Electric windows	Four	Four	Four
Electric mirrors	Yes	Yes	Yes
Headlamp wash	Yes	Option	Option
Heated seats	No	Option	Yes
Radio/cassette	RDS	RDS	RDS
Rear seat split/fold	Yes/yes	Option	Yes/yes
Seat height/tilt	Both, combined	Yes/yes	Electric
Steering reach/rake	Yes/yes	No/yes	Yes/option
Sunroof	Option	Option	Option

# Saloon car superpowers

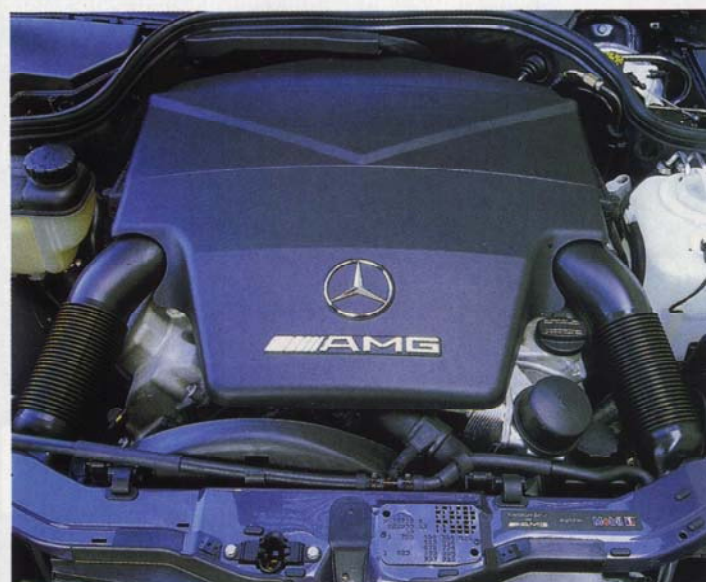
## PERFORMANCE



S4's 265bhp twin-turbo V6 least powerful but most usable in real world



Mighty M-power BMW has 321bhp, massive thrust above 5000rpm



AMG C43 packs 4.3-litre 306bhp V8. It's grumbly, growly and hungry

**S**TRANGE TO RELATE, THE least potent car in this test always proved a little faster than its two rivals. Not only is the Audi quick off the mark, it is also quick in the higher gears, and its urge to storm ahead goes well past the 125mph mark. Its twin-turbo V6 is less dependent on high revs than the BMW engine, and builds up torque early thanks to the tumble-and-swirl intake manifold, the adjustable intake camshaft, and of course the turbos.

Even better, turbo lag is totally absent. The two rotors, which spin at up to 180,000rpm, seem able to boost the charge air pressure in complete synchronicity with the rising revs. BMW's straight-six may be unbeatable above 5000rpm, and the Mercedes V8 may ultimately offer more top-end grunt, but in the crucial 2000 to 4500rpm range that matters most in the real world, the Audi leads the pack.

Its six-speed gearbox's ratios appear long-legged on paper, but the acceleration-biased final-drive ratio redresses the balance and ensures the S4's top speed is reached in sixth gear. The only drivetrain-related drawback concerns the rubbery shift action and the coarse clutch pick-up. Audi has promised to eliminate both faults before production starts in November.

If it's a surprise that the Audi doesn't suffer from throttle lag, it's even more of one to discover that the AMG does. If you let the revs drop, reinstating the torque always takes a little longer than expected. Add the excessive pedal travel, the hesitant kick-down action and a soft bite from the torque-converter, and you'll understand why the C43 doesn't feel as responsive and alert as its rivals.

This relaxed reaction to throttle inputs is just one facet of this engine's unstressed character, an engine which produces over 253lb ft

all the way from 2000 to 6000rpm. Red-lined at 6500rpm, the 4.3-litre V8 is not as eager to rev as the S4's motor (a 6900rpm ceiling) or the M3 unit (7400rpm), but it spins just as sweetly and when unleashed it growls with a deep, hungry voice. The five-speed automatic costs a full second in the 0-60mph acceleration run compared with the assembled opposition, but it suits this car so well that few people would pine for a manual instead.

Stick the transmission lever of the M3 in E, though, and the BMW instantly drops out of the running. Even in S, it doesn't do justice to its horsepower advantage. The gear-changes don't feel right, they don't sound right, and when you're sandwiched between the S4 and the C43 it's clear that they don't let the car perform right either.

With the conventional six-speed box, the oldest car in this group would still be a contender for first prize, but the SMG spoils the party. The jerky clutch action, accompanied by a brief but distinct suspension of forward thrust, is as unacceptable as the engine's unwillingness to co-operate with the capricious transmission. A 321bhp 24-valve straight-six that misfires, pinks and runs only on three or four cylinders during gearshifts is hardly state-of-the-art. We can only hope that BMW's latest bout of reprogramming will fix the glitches.

The outright performance doesn't suffer much, admittedly, and neither does the fuel consumption. In our hands, including a high content of autobahn driving at 100mph-plus speeds, the M3 SMG returned a best of 21.7mpg and a worst of 14.9, which compares to 20.0 and 14.8mpg for the S4, and an outrageous 16.0 and 11.0mpg for the truly hedonistic V8 C43. The tank capacity is an identical 62 litres for all three cars.

## 100 PERCENT REAL MEAT

POWERTRAIN	AUDI	BMW	MERCEDES
Engine	2671cc 30V dohc twin-turbo V6	3201cc 24V dohc in-line six	4266cc 24V dohc V8
Bore/stroke (mm)	81.0/86.4	86.4/91.0	89.9/84.0
Compression (to one)	9.3	11.3	10.0
Power (DIN/rpm)	265bhp/5800	321bhp/7400	306bhp/5850
Torque (DIN/rpm)	289lb ft/1850-3600	253lb ft/3250	297lb ft/3250-5000
Specific output	99bhp per litre	100bhp per litre	72bhp per litre
Power-to-weight ratio	175bhp per tonne	220bhp per tonne	195bhp per tonne
Transmission	Six-speed manual, four-wheel drive	Six-speed sequential, rear-wheel drive	Five-speed auto, rear-wheel drive
<b>ACCELERATION (sec)</b>			
0-60	5.5	5.4	6.4
<b>SPEEDS IN GEARS (mph)</b>			
First	36	38	43
Second	66	65	71
Third	101	97	110
Fourth	129	132	155
Fifth	155	155	155
Sixth	155	155	-
<b>FUEL CONSUMPTION (mpg)</b>			
Test, best/worst	20.0/14.8	21.7/14.9	16.0/11.0
Urban	17.9	16.7	-
Extra-urban	32.5	37.7	-
EC average	25.0	25.7	24.1

# VERDICT

■ AUDI S4  
■ BMW M3  
■ MERCEDES-BENZ C43 AMG

## 3rd

Wonderful car, dodgy transmission. Best handler on a dry road, but pricier and ultimately less sure-footed than the S4

## 1st

Great engine, great chassis, great drive. Less challenging than M3, but just as rewarding. Faster and cheaper, too

## 2nd

Power, poise and pedigree in abundance. Safe, comfortable, competent but puritanical. Thirsty and expensive, too

**T**HE EXPECTED DEAD HEAT DIDN'T happen. These cars might seem obvious rivals, shadowing each other on pace (huge), price (hefty), pose value (considerable, if that matters) and overall solid-hewn desirability, but the reality is different. Their broadly similar goals are reached by widely differing means.

The M3 has long been a favourite, and it still outhandles its rivals with ease on the right roads. But the optional SMG transmission relegates the car from front-runner to also-ran. Would the non-SMG version have fared better? The M3 still scores in the suspension, steering and engine departments, but it isn't especially well-made by current standards and it's no longer the value for money it once was (in the rarefied world of the not-quite-supercar, at least). The whole 3-series range is about to be replaced, too. All this relegates the BMW to last place, despite its diploma in power oversteer.

The Mercedes is second, though it might

have been third had the M3 been fitted with the standard six-speed box. There are two things fundamentally wrong with the C43: it's too thirsty, and its electronic watchdogs are too puritanical for their own good. Its high price is against it, too, even given the generous specification. The AMG edition simply isn't worth the extra cost over an Audi S4.

That said, the Mercedes is strong on self-assurance, driving pleasure and its maker's trademark blend of comfort and safety. When we changed cars during this test, people would always fight for the Audi and the Benz, never for the BMW. The combination of a growling V8, a smooth automatic transmission and a capable, comfortable suspension system makes a compelling case for those who don't depend on their daily dose of opposite lock (which means most people, to be fair). The C43 is also a refined long-distance cruiser and an acceptably roomy four-seater; it's the number-one choice here for speed-addicted senior

managers who crave an easy life.

This leaves the Audi. It's a bit worrying, really: another new Audi, another winner. But this time it's especially good news, because it shows that the team from Ingolstadt has put driver involvement back on the top of its priority list. This car is like a drug: in the S4, fast driving becomes second nature, and the more you relish the speed the more you want to push the limits of the car's adhesion and your own courage. Unlike the safe and secure C43 at one extreme and the hell-raising M3 at the other, the S4 is as forgiving as it is inspiring. It opens up a new dimension of ground-covering ability.

True, it doesn't ride too well, and the transmission needs work, but in the end the mid-size Audi with the giant turbocharged heart steams straight to the top. It gets ahead through a hefty dose of technology; Germans might say *Vorsprung durch Technik*. Would make a good advertising slogan, that. 🚗

