

A flare for *speed*

BMW Motorsport became a serious force on the roads with the E12 M535i. Alisdair Suttie put on his disco dancing shoes to drive one

Photography: Gus Gregory





The first M535i could not be a product of any other era than the 1970s. It uses the simple formula of fitting a bigger engine, spoilers, decent seats, and some proper alloys to a standard saloon. And it is all the better for it.

Don't be mistaken, the E12 M535i has its faults, but nothing you will remember after flooring the pendant pedal accelerator. The bonnet picks up and that fantastic 12-valve straight-six yowls like a tom cat with its tail caught in a food mixer.

The E12 M535i was BMW's first production car to bear the 'M' badge. It was also its first foray into large performance saloons. The M1 had missed the boat as far as Group 5 racing was concerned and was far too expensive to be a serious production car. So the M535i took the Motorsport badge to the masses.

Until the launch of the M535i, the largest car in the 5 Series range was the 528i. The engine for the M535i was already in use in the 635CSi Coupé. The 93.4x84 millimetre 3.5-litre six-cylinder engine sported 12-valves, produced 218bhp at 5200rpm and 228lb ft of torque at 4000rpm. In the lighter 5 Series shell, this engine really had a chance to shine.

Production started in April 1980 and drew to a close just over a year later in May 1981. In that time, a mere 1650 were produced, of which 450 were right-hand drive cars. The chassis numbers of the right-hand drive cars ran from 4148001 to 4148450. However, not all of these cars were destined for the UK. Official figures show 20 of the cars included in this batch of chassis were never imported to the UK, probably finding their way to South Africa and Australia.

A large part of the reason so few E12 M535i's were produced is that the engine was not homologated in the USA. This was not an oversight on the part of BMW Motorsport but a deliberate move. The M535i was only ever intended as a Europe-only model because of racing regulations this side of the pond and the US market's recalcitrance when it came to stiffly-sprung sports cars.

However, this was no hot rod with just a bigger engine dropped in. There were many detail differences between the M-car and the standard 5 Series, all of which added up to an entirely separate breed of car.

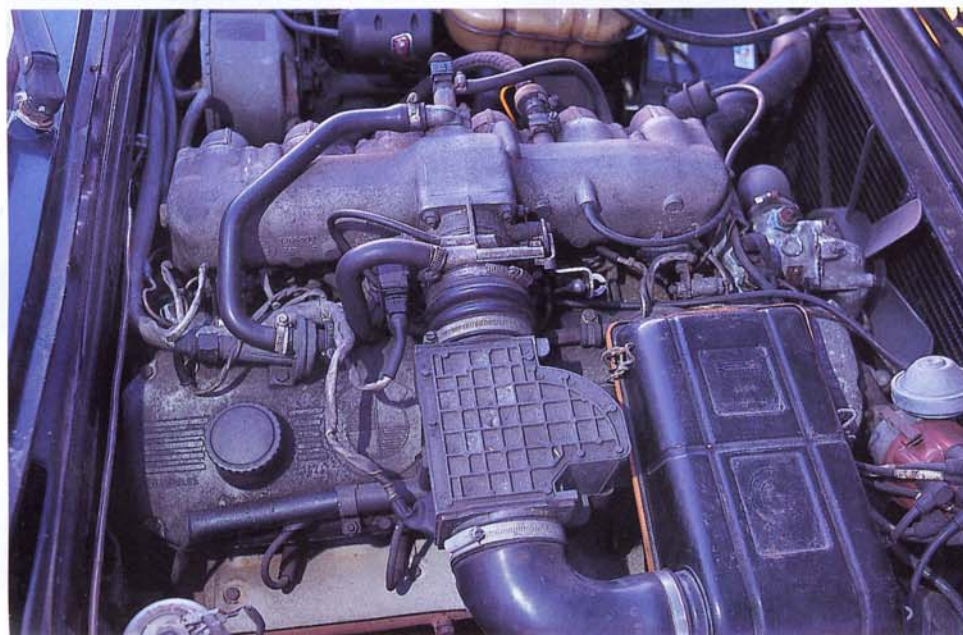
Starting with the bare shell, the Motorsport division strengthened the front and rear bulkheads to make the body more rigid. As the cars were built up, the M535i and the standard cars grew further and further apart. An oil cooler was mounted on the lower front cross member to cope with the increased loads of the new engine.

Suspension was changed to Bilstein gas struts all round to lower the car slightly and sharpen the handling. Thicker anti-roll bars were also used to help control the car at speed through bends. Up-rated ventilated discs were fitted at the front but the standard rear discs were retained.

The differential was changed to a limited-slip item to deal with the extra power of the 3.5-litre engine. Despite the LSD, the additional power of the engine proved too much for the boot floor where the differential was mounted. BMW recognised the problem and supplied a recall kit to rectify it. Most M535i's will have this modification, so it is not a problem for those considering an M535i now.

A big bore exhaust was used in conjunction with the larger engine, exiting in twin pipes to subtly underline the performance nature of the M535i. Another subtle exterior addition were the Mahle alloy wheels.

Other add-ons to the bodywork included front



and rear spoilers. The rear spoiler was made of a hard rubber foam material and had the annoying habit of splitting in the winter. Water would be absorbed by the spoiler material and expand when frozen, leaving the spoiler cracked and split.

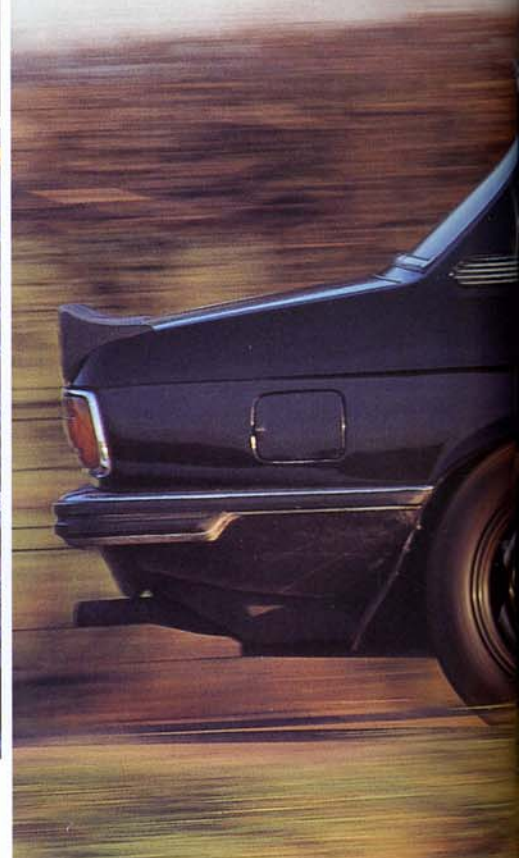
A simple solution to split spoilers was to go for the delete option and do without. However, if the car was to be used for high speed driving, the spoilers were a very necessary aid to stability.

Headlamp washers were the only other exterior clue to set the M535i apart from its more humble siblings. If you were fortunate enough to get a look inside you would notice several other changes compared to the normal 5 Series.

The driver and passenger were treated to Recaro seats with a central armrest. Rear seat passenger made do with a standard bench, although they did get rear head rests. Electric windows and a sunroof took care of the fresh air quota.

The driver of an M535i was continually reminded of the car's performance with an M1-style steering wheel. A 150mph speedo replaced the usual 140mph dial. A dog-leg five-speed gearbox emphasised the sporting nature.

Walking towards an M535i, it appears to be a very large and impressive car. The deep front chin spoiler



and rubber boot spoiler, so typical of the 1970s, give the car a pleasingly sporty look. Open the heavy driver's door and the sporty feel is continued with the grippy Recaros.

There is no fuss to starting the engine thanks to the Bosch L-Jetronic fuel injection. The big six-cylinder engine wuffles away to itself, hunting occasionally for a smooth idle speed. Blipping the throttle to help warm the engine reveals the controls follow the "sports car equals heavy action" school of thought.

Pulling out of slow junctions is a physical exercise. The clutch is heavy and first gear requires a deliberate shove to find its gate. The steering comes with power assistance but still feels heavy and devoid of sensation at low speed. Whether this is due to the sporting bias of the car, the 195/70x14 tyres, or the recirculatory ball steering is not clear. However, it lightens considerably with just a little speed.

Going up and down through the gears is easy enough. The gate was not particularly positive, but that could be due to 'our' test car – fourth gear had lost its synchromesh.

As stated earlier, you soon forget about the heavy controls when you start to exploit the performance

of the M535i. From rest, the car could manage 0-60mph in 7.5 seconds, not bad for a large 17-year-old car. The gearchanges smooth out with spirited driving and the seamless power of the engine makes blasting along fast A-roads a real joy.

Tighter roads show up the size of the M535i and its weight begins to count against it. On twistier roads, the front end scrubs wide with predictable understeer. The brakes performed well enough on these roads but seemed to prefer less frequent use on more open roads.

Cruising at motorway speeds is an effortless undertaking for the M535i. The torque of the engine lets it spin at a leisurely 2500rpm at 70mph in fifth gear. Overtaking is a lazy affair, all the driver does is depress the accelerator a little and the M535i powers past.

The only problem exposed by fast driving is wind noise. The whistling around the top corner of the windscreen could become tiring over long journeys. That said, the basic shape of the E12 5 Series goes back to 1972 and BMW probably did not think it would build one capable of 136mph.

As you would expect from a car wearing the M-badge, the ride is firm but never choppy. Deep potholes on country roads failed to upset it and the car never deviated from a chosen line.

The E12 M535i does have its vices: its looks have not aged well; the gearbox takes time to master; and the major controls can leave you aching in stop/start traffic. But these are all things you can come to understand. What might be more difficult to understand is a growing addiction to the howl of that straight-six in full flight ●

SPECIFICATION – E12 M535i

Engine: Straight-six, 12-valve

Capacity: 3453cc

Max power: 218bhp

Max Torque: 228lb ft

Max speed: 136mph

0-62mph: 7.5 seconds

Transmission: Getrag five-speed manual

Price when new: £13,745 (1980)

the M535i took the Motorsport badge to the masses

