

# \*\*\*New flyer from Germany\*\*\*

## Newcomer from BMW Motorsport M535i

### Five full of fight

Those old shoe-horn specialists in Munich are at it again. And this time it's the Five that learns to fly/Georg Kacher

FROM THE BMW MOTOR SPORT division, in the wake of the M1 supercar, comes a new model - the M535i. It's a normal four-door Five Series saloon but with suspension and trim tuned to Motor Sport standards and it packs the 3.5litre L-Jetronic in-line six powerplant that normally can only be found in the biggest BMW saloons and coupes. The extremely smooth 3.5litre unit delivers 218bhp at 5200rpm and maximum torque of 229lb/ft at 4000rpm. And it turns the M535i into a rocket which, according to official figures, accelerates from 0-60mph in 7.4sec and will reach a top speed of 140mph. Although my test car came complete with a rather massive optional nasal air dam and an ugly rubber lip on the bootlid, the standard version is indeed a wolf in sheep's clothing; even though it is the second fastest BMW (beaten only by the M1), the basic M535i looks just as plain and inconspicuous as a 518.

When you climb behind the small leather-rimmed steering wheel it is

apparent why the Five Series is often regarded as the most attractive model range from Munich. The driving position is simply excellent, the visibility good, the seating especially good in the M535i (which has four individual Recaro bucket seats) and the ergonomics are perfect.

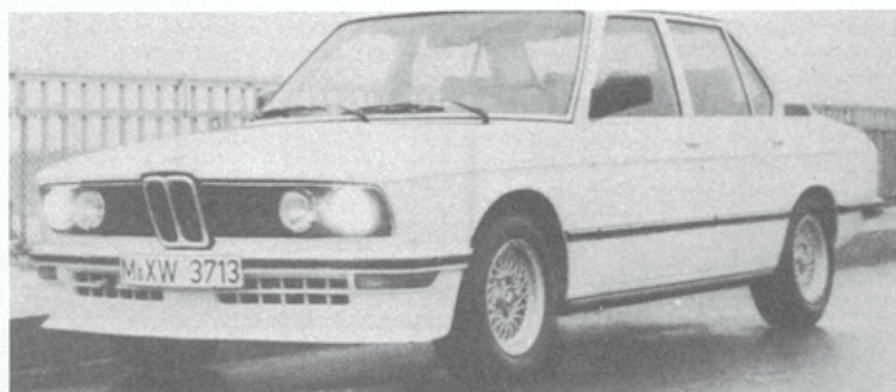
Fire it up and the big six-cylinder engine is not quite as quiet in the M535i as in the bigger saloons and 635 coupe: here is a very distinctive exhaust note. The first thing I noticed after having got used again to the Porsche-style pattern of the five-speed Getrag gearbox was the vastly improved precision and smoothness of the M535i's transmission compared with the last 635CSI I drove. The lever moves quickly and silkily, and what is more, the pattern makes sense with first seldom needed (but dropping in easily) and with the well-spaced ratios of the top four gears benefitting from the more convenient H-pattern. On the road an economy-orientated driver obeying the law will use mainly fourth and fifth gear. Gliding down the autobahn at 85mph will have the needle of the rev counter below the 3500rpm mark. You may, however, accelerate up to 70mph in second or, when needed, change down into third at about 95mph.

I must admit that I was a bit sceptical when I took off in the M535i on a nasty, rainy morning. I remembered that the 635CSI was fun in the wet but there was a lot of drama involved as a result of which driving it soon became more tiring than one expects from a big and expensive tourer. The M535i is another cup of tea. You can of course let the tail hang out in low gear, but even when pushed hard there

is not nearly as much need for opposite lock as in the 635CSI. The M535i is just plain fast, and it covers long distances quickly and effortlessly thanks to the beautiful blend of steering, brakes and suspension. The steering is perhaps the biggest advance over the lesser models. It is neither overly light or dead or heavy but extremely precise and quick. In the handling, the M535i feels reassuringly taut instead of slightly nervous. The brakes are also beyond criticism; four ventilated discs get exactly as much servo assistance as they need to achieve the best compromise between response and sheer efficiency.

As soon as I had passed the outskirts of Munich the rain mixed with snow and the flimsy wipers barely managed to keep the screen clean. The motorway was crowded and - with aquaplaning a hazard - not much fun so I decided to try secondary roads. Here the M535i is at its best; fast, safe and - believe it or not - sufficiently comfortable. It is fast enough through most sorts of bends except for hairpins where the fat 195/70VR14 Michelins let go early despite the standard limited-slip differential. Anywhere else the M535i just goes where you point it. Most corners can be taken in third or fourth gear since there is always enough power on hand to stabilize things should a bump or a patch of water or mud let the car run a bit wide.

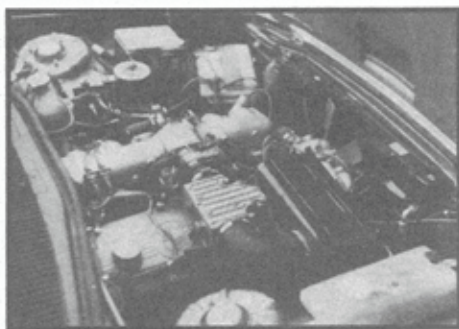
It is safe as well since its limits are not only high but also predictable. Unless the driver forces the tail to break away by sharply accelerating in first or second gear, the M535i will stay neutral up to very high speeds. And long before the car actually lets go, it will warn the driver: first



the steering gets slightly lighter as more power is applied to the rear wheels, then you have to reduce the lock as the M535i swings from neutral to a progressive oversteer, and in the end, when the rear goes right out, there is enough time for easy and smooth correction at the wheel.

And the M535i is comfortable. The comfort does not so much originate from sumptuous seats or soft suspension settings but from the total relaxation one feels when going fast - and even in the wet. With stabilisers front and rear, Bilstein shock absorbers all round and relatively stiff springs, the M535i is well equipped to tackle corners at above average speeds, and yet this does not mean that it is unacceptably uncomfortable below 50mph or around town. It certainly does not like level crossings or tram tracks, but on most other bumps and humps the suspension travel is adequate to keep major intrusions away from the occupants.

Does this Motor Sport wunderwagen have no faults at all? There are only few I can think of. The brakes could do with improved splash plates to avoid pulling to one side in the wet, something should be done about the windnoise, and there should be a more efficient ventilation system



*Test BMW 535i (top) wears optional chin spoiler (with another - out of sight here - on the tail) but in basic form it's an out-and-out wolf in sheep's clothing. Injected 3.5litre engine gives 140mph*

and more precise heater controls. But apart from these modifications which we shall perhaps only see in the shape of the upcoming MkII Five Series models, the M535i is a car of a piece. Its greatest asset is its overall balance - and its economy. The test car averaged 22mpg, but sticking to the speed limits in fifth gear should bring it close to 30mpg. Due to technical difficulties the M535i will unfortunately not be available in rhd form in the near future. But no one can stop you buying one in Germany, where the list price is £10,370 excluding VAT. That is only about £200 more than BMW in Britain ask for a 528i, and even when one adds import duty and car tax, the M535i is still a damned good excuse for a BMW fan to combine his next visit to Bavaria with the purchase of a new car.