

FACE OFF

In the absence of a screen or even a wind deflector, Marlin's 300 bhp, BMW M3 based and powered Sportster has the sheer grunt to flay the skin on your face, so wear a helmet and enjoy! This thing lives up to BMW's advertising slogan of the ultimate driving machine.

The Marlin BMW-based Sportster is a sensation which is saying something as the original Ford-based version, which remains very much available, is a cracking drive too. So why the switch to BMW?



Two reasons. Firstly, recent concerns about the future availability of the necessary Ford, rear-wheel drive componentry. Currently there's no problem but Cortinas now take some tracking down and Sierras will undoubtedly go the same way. Of course, parts will still be available through Mitchell Cotts Transmissions (See Kit Car July 2003) but they just supply north / south gearboxes and differential units. What about uprights, steering columns, pedal boxes and the host of other useful donor parts? They can be made by kit manufacturers and Ford parts that aren't available can be replaced by those that are. However it all adds to the cost which brings us to the second reason for the BMW 3-series' selection.

We have always been pretty conservative in donor selection. True, Ford has catered brilliantly for all the kit industry's requirements but as it switches to an exclusively front-wheel drive line-up, there has to be a strong case for the remaining rear-wheel drive potential donors and when a car comes with the reputation of the BMW 3-series, what more do you need? It's a car manufactured from 1983 — 1999 which offers both four and six-cylinder engines along with a set of donor mechanical components of bombproof manufacture and dynamic excellence.

It's interesting that Marlin was the first company to create a Sierra-based, single-donor kit and now they've done it again and, if you want to know whether it's a good idea, just look at the number of companies following suit. But the cherry on the cake comes back to cost as Marlin confidently reckon it will generally be cheaper to build a BMW-based car than a Ford-based one. Why? Because just about everything from the BMW is scavenged. The Sportster makes use of the front uprights (modified on exchange), the complete rear suspension system, springs and dampers, braking system (with a replacement servo), steering column (with Marlin rack), engine, engine wiring loom, gearbox, handbrake, radiator and if you like, the wheels and instruments although most will go for new. Against the Ford-based car you save the cost of the rear wishbones, uprights, and coil spring dampers, a replacement radiator and a rear-wheel drive gearbox conversion on a Ford front-wheel drive engine. That's a fair few bob. On top of that, there's the sheer quality of the BMW parts. True, all modern components are top quality nowadays but there IS a reason why BMWs are more expensive than Fords and component and engineering quality is one of them.

So, what has Marlin done with its box of Bavarian hardware? Well first off, in going for the M3 donor you get the complete uprated package of springs, dampers, brakes and of course, the engine. That said, though this is a sublime machine with over 300 bhp to play with, earlier BMW powered, Ford-based Sportsters have been well up to the abilities of talented drivers without recourse to the top of the shop model for a BMW-based car. Marlin paid around £4,000 for the M3 donor but you can pick up a perfectly useable 3-series for well under £1,000, even with a six-cylinder engine which can easily be coaxed into yielding well over 200 bhp and believe me, that's more than enough for most people. Obviously the choice is yours but in making their point concerning the build economics, Marlin wouldn't want you to think it's an M3 donor or nothing.

"Though a bigger car, the driving position is still snug. The car feels taut and utterly confidence inspiring."

The Sportster's chassis is a direct development of the Marlin semi-monocoque that has underpinned the model range for the last twenty five years. With this car, Marlin's Mark Matthews has stretched the wheelbase by 2" and moved the rear bulkhead to create an additional 3" in the cockpit. It doesn't have the heavy steel windscreen surround which traditionally doubled as the roll-over bar but due to the design of the chassis, it's no less strong and rigid without it.

Up front, the double wishbone suspension uses the same pick-up points as the tried and tested, Ford system but substitutes the modified BMW upright. An adjustable coil spring damper unit completes the set-up that doesn't need an anti-roll bar for road use. At the back, the complete

BMW semi-trailing arm and tie-bar system goes in complete with its carrier, coil springs and dampers. Brakes all round are discs from the M3 donor though early 316, 318, 326 and 323 models have rear drums, The only modification is a replacement servo to match braking effect to the dramatically reduced weight of the Sportster.

Then comes the engine and gearbox. There are two 3-series variants referred to in BMW-speak by F numbers. Nothing to do with added flavouring; just mechanical spec. The F36 model was produced between 1983 and 1992 after which the E36 version lasted up till 1999. These are the donor cars you want. Engines range from the basic 1,800, four-cylinder 316 to the more powerful 1,800 in the 318i before the six-cylinder units appear in the 2-litre, 320 and go up through 2.3, 2.6 and 2.8-litre capacities. However, the M3 merits its performance car status with a 3-litre unit developing 320 bhp along with a bucket-load of axle-wrenching, road-ripping torque.

So, being sorted for Es and other stuff, how does a bit of European, mechanical intervention alter the character of Marlin's machine?

First off, you just look at it. It's gorgeous but also subtly intimidating. It's the way it squats on its 17", 235/SOs, sort of hanging between the wheels. It has that low look enhanced by the absence of a screen. It also does that clever trick of making a traditional design look ultra-modern through the addition of tasteful finishing items including wheels, steering wheel, instruments, mirrors, filler, lights, trim and those Sportster cut-out running boards. And then there's sheer quality. Marlin has always offered excellent quality but Mark Matthews has raised it several notches on this car and not just where it shows. There's not a single bracket, fixing, nut, bolt or washer on the car that could be either better made, fitted or finished and the coat of BMW Daytona Violet paint and contrasting magnolia trim perfectly finishes a fine job.

Climb aboard and though more than adequately spacious for any size of driver, the driving position still feels snug. There's space but not too much. Even so, it does increase the external dimensions to create a pretty big car. The thick-rimmed Moto Lita feels good as does the sculpted gear knob while pedal and gear lever locations, instrument lay-out and mirror settings are perfect. Fire up the M3 and the twin side exhausts thrum to the tickover and as you move off, the initial impression is of a car that feels brand, spanking new. It's got that taut feeling and firmness in the controls that impart confidence as it glides over the bumps of downtown Crediton. It also displayed another asset of the M3 donor in its production car

flexibility that found it perfectly docile in urban traffic with none of the prima-donna antics that highly tuned engines often display when their desire to perform is held in check. Negotiating the tight turns of the small town also alerted me to the car 's size as well as making me feel it could do with a slightly quicker rack than the 3.5 turns Marlin unit fitted. But then I was out of town, across the MS and onto the main A30 surprisingly free of traffic so I gave it a squirt.

"320bhp of 3-litre BMW M-power but you don't need to go for the top donor to create a car that can take more than you."

The Sportster weighs in at 800 kgs so 320 bhp gives it a power to weight ratio of over 400 bhp per ton but more impressive is the delivery. It's an utterly seamless surge of real shove that really starts as the tachometer sweeps through 3,000 rpm and felt as if it would have carried on all the way to the red line at 7,000. Heavens above, this thing is dramatically quick but again, more impressive was its rock solid composure, stability and totally confidence inspiring feel as well as the fact that, no matter how much urge I dared to ask of it, it hardly felt as if it was trying. It just felt so relaxed; a real iron fist in a velvet glove.

The lanes were interesting mainly due to the car's size. Don't get me wrong, it's not huge; only a bit bigger than previous Marlins but a slightly bigger car with so much power and a back end that, despite its high levels of grip, can easily be dislodged with an over-enthusiastic throttle foot needs a degree of caution and concentration to exploit the road when it opens up and to keep it well tucked in when the road ahead is hidden. That said, it's no less entertaining than any capable back road hustler. Indeed, with its blistering acceleration, awesome brakes and huge levels of natural grip, size and caution aside, it's as agile and relentless as a Cruise missile.

The only thing I would urge is at least a wind deflector. It's not that I'm a fairy. I wore the Marlin supplied goggles but when you don't have any kind of screen, you suddenly discover how the front of your car gets so covered in paint chips and dead flies. On dual carriageways there's loads of grit and dust about that gets behind goggles and stings your eyes. Rain and insects hurt when hit at warp factor Nine such that you suddenly appreciate that wind deflectors work and work well.

Any criticisms? None other than the car getting a little skittish on sustained poor surfaces encountered at speed. That said, the ride is so perfect 98% of the time, it was hardly worth a mention. Mark did say the car is proving sensitive to tyre pressures and he was still experimenting

with the front on 16 psi but it remained perfectly controllable and just needed a slight reduction in throttle pressure until conditions underfoot improved.

In summary, the M3 based Sportster is a real gem of a true sports car that ranks alongside the very best. But perhaps what's more important for the BMW crusade is that you don't need to butcher an M3 to achieve a car that will greatly exceed most driver's talent and ability. I remember 1977 and the Liege-Agadir-Liege event on which one of the first BMW powered cars competed. That had a 2.8 straight six with 289 bhp on board and that machine really flew. What's more, driver John Von Schaffenberg could really drive it and he said it had more than he could handle.

This car represents a superb package in its own right as well as leading the way in expanding the donor dragnet to make excellent use of the really hi-tech components that are now available. The Sportster is already a hit and I don't think Marlin is going to have to try too hard to convince people of the merits of a BMW base.

"Though a period design tasteful finishing and faultless quality allows it to carry off the ultramodern look well."

FURTHER INFORMATION

Marlin Cars
Mill Street
Credon
Devon. EX17 1PZ

Tel: 01363-773772

Fax: 01363-773338

E-mail: terry@marlinracing.co.uk

Web: www.marlincars.co.uk - www.marlinracing.co.uk