

← down in the rev range, thanks to a big torque advantage.

Now to find out how that performance advantage plays out on winding, give-and-take cross-country roads. In front of me, European editor Greg Kable is showing no mercy in the BMW, sweeping through long, smooth bends with a commitment only a local can muster. A hundred yards further back, I lose sight of him now and again, but can hear him downchanging at will on the way into the tighter stuff. The Mercedes' automated manual 'box has made smooth work of town and motorway but doesn't quite rifle through the gears under braking with as much speed as the BMW gearbox. The C63 steers well, though, with laudable positivity and decent feel, giving you bags of confidence.

A short straight, and we close right up on the M3, before diving into a series of long, undulating third-gear corners that are perfect for testing grip and body control. Out in front, the BMW looks taut, level and almost free of roll as we surge left and right. Although you can adjust the gearbox settings on the Mercedes, the dampers are passive, so you can't crank them up to dial out pitch and roll like you can in the BMW. That difference is beginning to tell.

Relative to the fastest back-road machines, there comes a point where the C63 AMG Coupé just gets out of its depth on a testing road. Its Continental tyres are noticeably less grippy than the Michelins on the M3 and its chassis – although admirably balanced, surprisingly supple and well resolved until you really push

it – ultimately provides less control. Trying to push the C63 through corners as fast as the M3 only unearths some steady-state understeer, and I can tell from a hundred yards away that the BMW's driver just isn't having to deal with the same thing.

Worst of all, I can't escape the feeling that – although I can tell he's working hard for it – Greg is simply having more fun in the BMW. And after a quick car swap, the suspicion is confirmed.

The M3's steering may be slightly less feelsome, but it allows you to position the car in corners at big speeds with an accuracy totally absent in the C63. The grip the BMW generates under its front wheels, and the traction it finds at the rear, is nothing short of awesome. Its dynamic responses are instant and consistent.

Add in the lure of that incredible powertrain, kept fizzing by a deeply impressive twin-clutch gearbox, and you're approaching a combination of subjective charm and objective talent – of sheer driver involvement, performance and precise roadholding – that seems as unbeatable in 2011 as it must have 25 years ago.

Greg and I stop by the side of the road to swap thoughts, and immediately begin to question the unanimity of our impressions and the all-pervading obviousness of the conclusion. "The M3's brakes aren't so good, are they? And it's slow below 4000rpm. I just love how comfy and usable the Mercedes feels by comparison. As an everyday driver, you'd have the C-class – right?"

All fair comments. All of them have been used before to try to make a case for an AMG Mercedes to beat a BMW M-car on Autocar's pages – and to my knowledge, none has come closer than this car to doing just that. But when you begin to look for fault in a car that seemed so convincing only moments before, while you were still at the wheel – that's when you know you've found a winner.

It's close – painfully so – but still no cigar for AMG. And it's a victorious, frenetic 600-mile dash back to London for us and the M3. BMW's perennial king of performance coupés is still on its throne. And in spite of the threat of those evil engine downsizers looming on the horizon, long may it reign. **A**

'THE C63 IS ADMIRABLY WELL BALANCED UNTIL YOU REALLY PUSH IT. BUT I CAN'T HELP FEELING THAT THE M3 DRIVER MUST BE HAVING MORE FUN'

The Merc's extra torque and greater power tell on a straight



C63 AMG has the more desirable-looking view from the driver's seat



No doubts over the quality of M3's materials or build, but it's so

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS



VITALS	MERCEDES-BENZ C63 AMG COUPÉ		BMW M3 COUPÉ M-DCI	
	Price	£63,000 (est)	£57,190	
ENGINE	0-62mph	4.6sec	4.6sec	
	Top speed	155mph (limited)	155mph (limited)	
	Economy	23.5mpg (combined)	25.2mpg (combined)	
	CO ₂ emissions	280g/km	263g/km	
	Kerb weight	1730kg	1655kg	
ENGINE	Engine	V8, 6208cc, normally aspirated, petrol	V8, 3999cc, normally aspirated, petrol	
	Layout	Front, longitudinal, rear-wheel drive	Front, longitudinal, rear-wheel drive	
	Power	451bhp at 6800rpm	414bhp at 8300rpm	
	Torque	443lb ft at 5000rpm	295lb ft at 3900rpm	
	Power to weight	261bhp per tonne	250bhp per tonne	
DIMENSIONS	Specific output	73bhp per litre	104bhp per litre	
	Compression ratio	11.3:1	12:1	
	Gearbox	7-spd automated manual	7-spd dual-clutch auto	
	Length	4707mm	4615mm	
	Width	1795mm	1804mm	
AT EACH CORNER	Height	1391mm	1424mm	
	Wheelbase	2765mm	2761mm	
	Front suspension	Three-link, coil springs, anti-roll bar	MacPherson struts, coil springs, anti-roll bar	
	Rear suspension	Multi-link, coil springs, anti-roll bar	Multi-link, coil springs, anti-roll bar	
	Brakes	360mm ventilated/drilled discs (f), 360mm ventilated/drilled discs (r)	360mm ventilated/drilled discs (f), 350mm ventilated/drilled discs (r)	
WHEELS	Wheels	8Jx18in (f), 9Jx18in (r)	9Jx19in (f), 10Jx19in (r)	
	Tyres	235/40 ZR18 (f), 255/35 ZR18 (r)	245/35 ZR19 (f), 265/35 ZR19 (r)	