

CLASSIC DRIVER

BMW 550d M xDrive: Diesel M5 in all but name?

Lead

BMW's M performance arm is turning to tri-turbo diesel power for its forthcoming 550d M xDrive, the first of BMW's new 'M Performance' badged cars. The new super-saloon rebels not only against the petrol-only tradition of M-badged cars – but also breaks the taboo of four-wheel drive.

BMW's much-respected M-division hasn't exactly hesitated to buck trends in recent years; one only needs to glance in the direction of the [M-powered X5 and X6 SUVs](#) to notice the company's willingness to respond to consumer requirements. Environmental factors also saw the M tuning arm twisted so hard that it resulted in a twin-turbo V8 in the [latest M5](#) to supplant the V10 of its predecessor. And soon, the company will introduce an all-new product range under the 'M Performance' appellation, which will sit below the 'proper' M-badged cars but contain what BMW describes as 'M genes'. The first model spawned will be the 550d M xDrive; as close to a diesel-powered M5 as the company dare venture – for now. "Cars like the M3 and M5 have always had a direct reference to the circuit, so diesel is still not in the picture... Therefore there will continue to be no M3 D or M5 D," says Dr Friedrich Nitschke, President of the M-division.

The M Performance badge won't just equate to big wheels and aggressive bumpers: the new derivatives will receive their own exclusive engine variants. To be introduced at the Geneva Motor Show in March, the 550d M xDrive will use the familiar 3.0-litre six-cylinder diesel engine, with not two but *three* turbochargers – another first for M. It's thought that the third turbocharger will be a small unit which spools up early to assist low-rev launches, with the pair of twin-scroll turbos currently used in the 535d left to supervise further travels of the tachometer.





The reason for BMW engineering the 550d M xDrive to have more enthusiasm lower down in the rev range is explained by Nitschke: “We are targeting our efforts at customers looking for more emotionality and more performance, but who don’t want to forgo the everyday usability of their cars.” This would also explain the ‘xDrive’ part of the car’s awkward name; as with other models in the roundel’s portfolio, this is BMW-speak for four-wheel drive. Though the 550d M xDrive wouldn’t be the first M-badged car with four-wheel drive (again, you can thank the X5 M and X6 M for that), many BMW enthusiasts retain the belief that power should be channelled solely through the rear tyres. However, once you grasp the implications of the car’s 553lb ft of torque, the decision to spread the power starts to make sense. The abundant torque – along with approximately 376 of Bavaria’s finest horses – is sent through BMW’s new eight-speed automatic gearbox.

Further applications for the tri-turbo inline-six diesel engine will include M Performance versions of the X5 and X6, due in the summer. But even though it seems the new range is the equivalent of [Audi’s ‘S’ derivatives](#), it isn’t just intended to be a stop-gap between standard BMWs and the ‘full-fat’ M cars. Nitschke says, “In series in which there is no explicit M-model such as the 1 Series [referring to the F20 generation, as BMW still considers the [1M Coupé](#) to be a ‘proper’ M car], X1 and X3, according to this concept we could offer a particularly powerful petrol engine”. Just as things have started to become a little clearer, Classic Driver has learnt that BMW will also offer the M Performance tri-turbo diesel in this summer’s revised 7 Series – albeit without any M designation.



While many dedicated BMW enthusiasts will no doubt believe that the M Performance badge is nothing more than a further dilution of an M-powered BMW's philosophy, the Munich-based company sees it as a continuation of that employed in the M535i of 1980. Either way, we wouldn't like to be in charge of decisions regarding the naming structure at BMW. After all, if rumours that the 3-door iteration of the new 3 Series will in fact be called the 4 Series materialise, then the performance version will surely be given the 'M4' designation; in turn meaning the iconic M3 coupé would be lost forever. That would surely irritate the enthusiast more than operating all-corner power or refuelling from the black pump?

Photos: BMW

Gallery

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