

[Joy Ride]

# GERMANY'S FIVE-STAR PERFORMERS

THERE ARE A LOT of desirable high-performance German four-seaters on the market: several Mercedes AMGs, almost everything from BMW, multiple Audis, even Volkswagens. In my opinion, however, the granddaddy of them all is the BMW M5.

I owned the last-generation M5. It was my idea of a family car (I had just had a baby and was determined not to go the minivan route). My M5 ate tires for breakfast, and the dealer experience was appalling, but each time I drove the car I was transported to a higher, faster, better-engineered place.

And so, fair or foul, the current M5, bless its 500-horsepower V-10 soul, is the mental benchmark against which I assess all other German coupes and sedans. That seems like an unfair hurdle for the latest entry into the club, Audi's new S5, which arrives in the U.S. in November. At roughly \$55,000 (as tested), it's half the price of the BMW and offers two-thirds of the M5's power.

Audi, however, is serious about the S5's performance credentials: It will first be available in stick shift only; the automatic will arrive five months later. Walter de'Silva, the S5's designer, calls this "the most beautiful Audi I've ever designed."

He may be right: The roomy coupe is at once curvaceous and hard-lined in a chiseled, athletic sort of way. On that note, one of the S5's most memorable features is its face: LED running lights under the headlights look like alien eyeliner. The low-slung, meaty grille and front air

intakes speak to the oxygen needs of the beast within: Audi's extremely competent 354-horsepower 4.2-liter V-8.

When the lipstick-red S5 landed in my driveway, both of my children ran to it, drawn by the electrifying color and shape. I couldn't stay away either; I was a magpie for the glint of the trick brushed-aluminum side-mirror housings. The second I climbed into the cockpit, I felt at home—a really sophisticated home. Of all the Germans, Audi is my favorite for interiors. It takes great care to make sure each sound is precise, each touch point pleurably tactile. Then it layers in a dollop of chic: White stitching accents the black-leather gearshift pouch. Fine rings of chrome edge every black knob. The center information screen tilts slightly toward the driver (something I wish the M5 had). The rear seats accommodate two adults (really), sport four cup-holders, and have the easiest car-seat latches I've ever encountered.

Driving the S5 was as impressive. The clutch and shifter sprinted smoothly from the get-go. Oh, and

yes, it did get up and go: The S5 has 325 foot-pounds of torque, 85% of which is available from 2,000 rpm; the rest kicks in by 3,500 rpm—which is when the engine really begins to belt out its husky growl. The car's four-wheel-drive system gets every drop of power and torque to the ground (through some big 19-inch Dunlops) without hesitation. I actually

preferred the S5 off the line to the M5, which in the SMG paddle-shift version lagged a second before launching.

On the S5, I could come up with only a few nitpicks: The car was so much fun to drive that in the first two gears I kept running it up to redline (7,000 rpm) and hitting up against the rev limiter; at least for Southern California's wide-open roads, I'd like taller gearing. The MMI—that's multimedia interface—struck me as too complex at first, but I found its computer-mouse-like control knob fairly easy to master after a few tries. And the overall ride is compellingly comfortable, so much so that I wished I could get more direct road feel. But that slight rubber-between-the-joints feeling is a characteristic of all Audis; either you like it or you don't.

At the end of the day, the handsome Audi S5 was a competent and pleasurable experience. Okay, it doesn't have a button like the M5's that takes you instantaneously from 400 to 500 horsepower. And the side seat bolsters don't bear-hug you like pinball paddles in tight turns. But by choosing an S5, you can remain \$40,000 richer, money you'll need for the gas—and the speeding tickets. Yes, I speak from experience.

—Sue Zesiger Callaway

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## AUDI S5

PRICE (as tested): \$55,000

ENGINE: 4.2-liter V-8

0-60 MPH: 5 seconds

POWER: 354 horsepower

TORQUE: 325 foot-pounds at 3,500 rpm

## HIGH PERFORMERS

The new Audi S5 (top); and BMW's classic M5

## BMW M5

PRICE (as tested): \$96,000

ENGINE: 5.0-liter V-10

0-60 MPH: 4.5 seconds

POWER: 500 horsepower

TORQUE: 383 foot-pounds at 6,100 rpm

