

Both the Audi RS3 and the BMW 1M resemble the solution to some very complicated mathematical equation. Not wanting to be left out, it's time for some *TopGear* maths

Words: Ollie Marriage Photography: Barry Hayden





LET'S START WITH A NUMBER. 3.8. On the face of it a small, innocuous number; hardly the answer to life, the universe and everything. No, it's actually better than that, because the word that gives it context isn't litres or spoonfuls, but 'seconds'. And in the context of cars, seconds are snappy, punchy little things, allied to only one statistic: the 0-60mph sprint. In that context, 3.8 is very few, especially since it was achieved by one of these jumped-up junior muscle cars.

But which one? Six cylinders or five? The coupe or hatch? The manual or twin-clutch? Rear-wheel drive or four-wheel drive? The one with a claimed 0-60mph of 4.9secs or 4.6secs? The BMW 1-Series M Coupe or the Audi RS3?

In each instance, the latter. For entirely scientific reasons, the Audi RS3 is good at acceleration: launch is assisted by all four wheels and some clever electronics, it changes gear in 0.nothing. But do figures tell the whole story? Is the RS3 really that much faster than the 4.5secs-to-60mph 1M, and does that automatically make it a better car? No, no and of course not; you can't measure how *good* a car is, because figures aren't warm, three-dimensional, descriptive things – they're cold, stark and, at times, cruel.

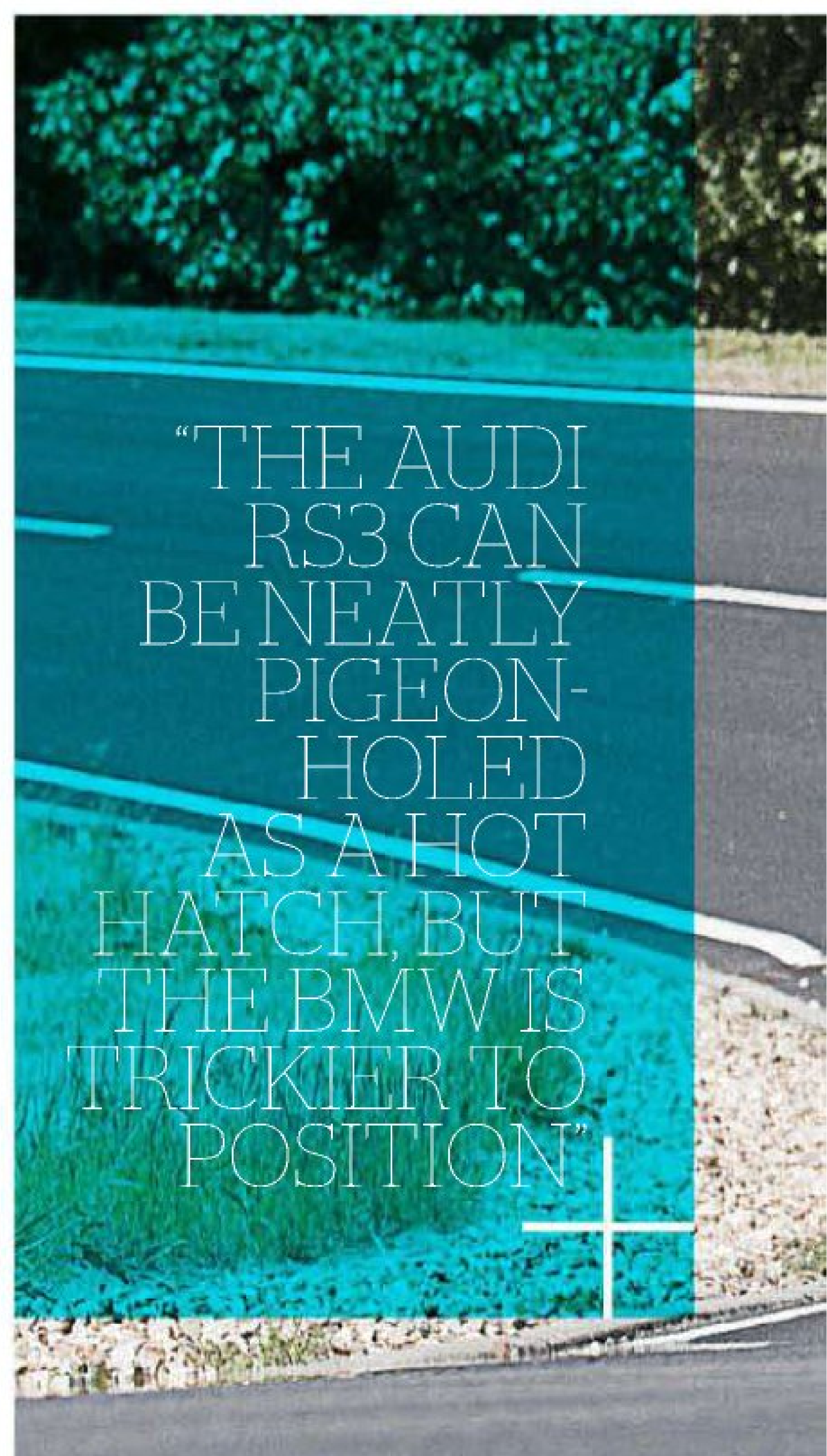
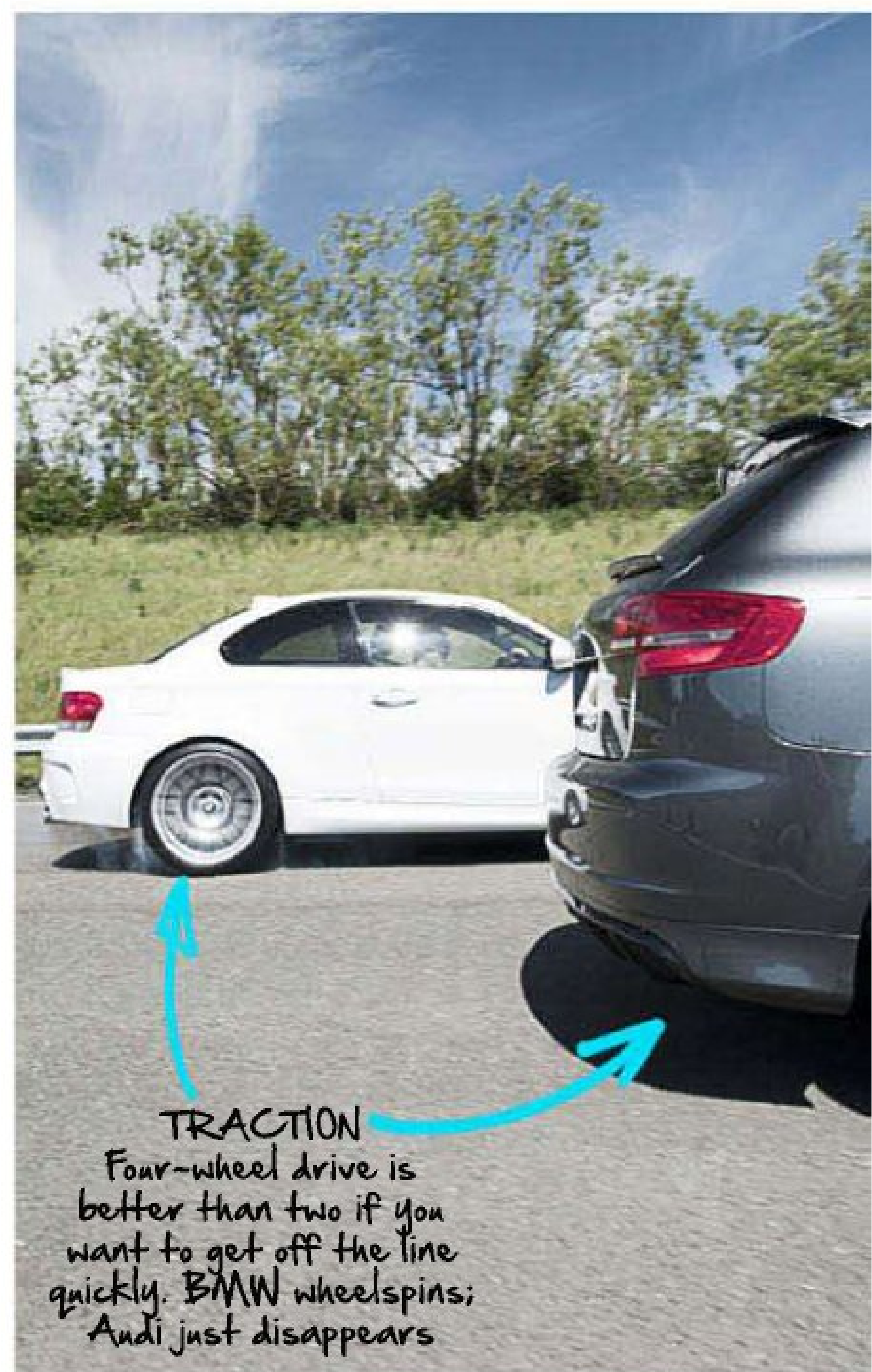
But BMW and Audi obviously believe they play a part – why else would both have produced rival cars with such similar killer stats: bhp, lb ft and so on? So for a little light relief, *TopGear* went to a test track and did some scientific testing, with tape measures and stopwatches and everything.

So 1M lines up alongside RS3 and instantly wins round one by looking so much cooler. The Audi can be neatly pigeon-holed as a hot hatch, and a plain-speaking, practically-minded five-door one at that, but the BMW is trickier to position, because it's not a hatch. It's just not. It's a two-door saloon, just like the original M3. This is no bad thing – the scalloped sides, balloon arches and low tail give it an attitude the RS3 can only dream of and totally disguise the fact the Bee-Emm is actually longer, wider and taller. Weird, huh?

Of course it's less practical, but does that really matter? Does it? If it does, buy the Audi and be on your way, but surely it's enough that both can handle four people, some bags, have options lists with scope and depth, and feel like they won't let you down either from trim falling off or a failure to start on a cold morning.

They are both habitable, usable, desirable cars, but the point here is that RS and M are both Badges That Matter, and these cars are not designed primarily as passenger-carrying devices. In fact, the more you can do to discourage people from joining you, the better. They'll only be scared when you get carried away. Which you will.

Because 0-60mph in 3.8secs is pretty special and takes no talent at all to achieve, due to the Audi's readily accessible launch control mode. The five-cylinder 2.5-litre single-turbo engine >





A jump start by the 1M gives it an initial advantage, but, with launch control enabled, the RS3 reels it in immediately, the first 100 metres taking 5.2secs. Super-fast gearchanges means advantage Audi all the way to 100mph and beyond



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|-----|----|---------|----|---------|-----|----------|
| RS3 | 30 | 1.4secs | 60 | 3.8secs | 100 | 9.9secs |
| 1M | 30 | 1.9secs | 60 | 4.5secs | 100 | 10.7secs |



RS3 got to the 1/4 mile post in 12.4secs; 1M, 13.0secs



CORNERING FORCE
1.63g

1.48g

Mini muscle car battle



BRAKES

The Audi may have won the drag race, but the BMW had marginally the better braking performance. It pulled a peak of 1.22g under braking, while the RS3 managed 1.14g

| | | | | |
|------|-------|------|-------|-------|
| BMW | 32.1m | 60-0 | 90.3m | 100-0 |
| AUDI | 33.4m | 60-0 | 92.7m | 100-0 |

“BMW HAS BEEN CRITICISED FOR TURBOCHARGING THE 1M, AS THAT JUST ISN'T THE M WAY”





is borrowed from the TT RS, where we like it very much indeed for its power and warbling noise. It's a fraction more muted here, but still exciting and responsive and with a massive mid-range kick. It is great, all the more so because it's cooped up in a hot hatch and has genuine RS pedigree, but it's not as sweet to use, as searingly sharp and potent as the BMW's straight six. Yes, it delivers that startling acceleration figure (and more besides), but that's down to traction and gearbox, not engine.

BMW has been criticised widely for a) using turbocharging for the 1M, as forced induction just isn't the M way, and b) taking the engine in question straight from the flagship Z4. None of that matters. What's important is that this is a spectacularly exciting engine to use, fizzing with energy and enthusiasm, howling through the revs, crackling on the overrun and revving like it's naturally aspirated. Nothing with a turbo that I can think of has ever been this snappy, this focused and eager. It's bloody brilliant.

And you always know where you are with it, because you have a lever next to you that you have to move. Manual gearboxes are starting to seem curiously old-fashioned, but think what they offer – or more accurately, what they demand. They demand concentration; they involve you in the process. The 1M's is a good one – short of throw, loves being punched through the gate and, being mechanical, connects you to the car.

The Audi's twin clutch does all it can to simplify your workload. If you don't want to, you don't even have to pull a paddle, but the flipside of this is that you get complacent, leave it to its own devices and then get caught out when an overtaking opportunity presents itself. So, yes, at the test track, speed of shift matters, but in the real world it just doesn't.

Gearbox aside, the Audi is commendably simple. No adaptive dampers or other technical silliness, just two buttons: one for sport mode, the other for traction. The BMW's the same. There's nothing too much to get in the way of you and your fun.

If only the Audi were actually fun. Now, it's not a bad RS car (well, not in the context of the RS5), and it does have some praiseworthy attributes – most notably, its faintly shocking cross-country speed. But do you know what most excited me when reading about it? The fact the rear tyres were narrower than the fronts. Yes, I am a bit weird like that. But my reasoning was sound – I hoped it meant the RS3 would have a less grippy rear end and so would have better handling balance than other fast Audis. No such luck.

The trouble is that to get the 4WD system in, the engineers have had to put the engine a long way forward, which makes it nose-heavy, which in turn dulls its responses and surely makes it understeer, too. Well, yes, but only if you have the space and *cojones* to find out, because on a dry public road, you'll never find out where the limit lies – the RS3 just grips and goes. >



Sure, you might have cause to loosen the shackles of the two-stage traction control, but I guarantee you'll chicken out of cornering speeds before the car does.

The Audi does speed extremely well, both gathering it and maintaining it. What it doesn't do is make that speed exciting. If you want an all-weather bundle of energy and vim, the RS3 is a good choice, but it's a destination car rather than a journey car.

In the 1M, the journey is the destination. Sounds crass, so how about putting it this way: the present is a fleeting moment; after that, everything is memories. And after driving the RS3, it was hard to put a finger on exactly what you could remember about it – the grip, certainly, the power, the fact the ride had more give and cushioning than expected and the irritation that the seat wouldn't go anything like low enough – but after that, my mind started to wander. But days after driving the BMW, I could still recall the exact way it tackled particular corners, how it moved over rough surfaces, entire sections of an early-morning blat were vivid in my head.

Why is this? Hard to say, but it must have something to do with how much detail you get from the car. The Audi is softer, more forgiving – an all-rounder. The BMW isn't. It's noisy on motorways and demands more from you. If you have wobbly bits, they will jiggle. But you never think of the ride as firm or sharp, just that the suspension is telling you exactly what you need to know. And

it will carry on telling you, no matter what sort of road you're on. You can't escape it.

Nor do you want to. This detail is what makes the BMW 1M so special, and yields utterly sensational handling. The front steers, the rear drives (and is deliciously, delightfully adjustable...), there's no corruption through steering or chassis, the weight is centred in the car. It just does what you tell it to, and does it simply, accurately and entertainingly.

It's a bigger-hearted, more boisterous car than the Audi and does a better job of making you feel good when you're in it. Not just by the way it drives, but the snug driving position and touchy-feely Alcantara play their parts, too.

Is it as quick cross-country as the Audi? Probably not, but since when did that matter? I mean this seriously, because despite all the numbers you're poring over here, most are irrelevant. We all know that numbers don't describe a car and that speed matters little. But sensation does. And no amount of binary encoding can replicate that. An inanimate machine it may be, but, boy, does the 1M understand how to animate the driver.

So it's a throwback, then, industrial revolution tech made good? Emphatically not. This should be the future of performance cars: small, light, punchy and, yep, a bit compromised. Personally, I'd have a 1M over an M3, in fact over pretty much every car I've driven this year. It's not cheap at £40k (neither is the RS3), but BMW's only making 450 for the UK. Go get one. Forget 3.8 – settle for 4.5. ■

SPECIFICATION

Audi RS3

Price £39,930/£43,225 as tested
Engine 2480cc, 5cyl turbo
Power 335bhp @ 5400-6500rpm
Torque 332lb ft @ 1600-5300rpm
Transmission Seven-speed DSG, four-wheel drive
Claimed performance 0-60mph 4.6secs (manufacturer figure), top speed 155mph
Economy 31.0mpg, 213g/km CO₂
Weight 1575kg
Power to weight: 213bhp/tonne

SPECIFICATION

BMW 1M

Price £40,020/£45,220 as tested
Engine 2979cc, 6cyl turbo
Power 335bhp @ 5900rpm
Torque 332lb ft @ 1500-4500rpm
Transmission Six-speed manual, rear-wheel drive
Claimed performance 0-60mph 4.9secs (manufacturer figure), top speed 155mph
Economy 29.4mpg, 224g/km CO₂
Weight 1495kg
Power to weight: 224bhp/tonne