

# The Hardy & Beck BMWs

*When it comes to modified production cars,  
anything less is incomplete.*

• Starting with an exceptionally good basic package is not dumb. With any automobile, it increases the chances for the artistic success of performance and comfort modifications. In that sense, Allen Hardy and Hans Beck have been shooting fish in a barrel with their BMW conversions, because BMWs are still remarkably pleasant-driving cars, even in their latter-day cushiness.

For BMW, there's been a softening of the early sportiness in favor of a more luxurious image. The new softness in BMW's philosophy appeals to a larger audience, albeit at the expense of alienating the early faithful, who long for stancher suspensions and more vitamins under the hood.

Experience at their wheels has shown us that the Hardy & Beck conversions don't infringe on comfort or day-to-day practicality. Too many producers of performance equipment have no regard whatsoever for the real world, where cars must do real-world things. That's why the cars from Hardy & Beck are very different.

Some of the components used by Hardy & Beck are from the German BMW tuning firm, Alpina. These pieces can be bought individually, but when they're combined in their intended form as a complete package, they perform near miracles. There are very few sources in the world for truly coordinated performance packages, and not many can boast a reputation for quality, durability, and excellence of design like Alpina's.

On the notion that there was more than a repair market for their Berkeley, California, BMW service facility, Hardy and Beck secured the Alpina distributorship for their

area and immediately garnered more attention for Alpina than it had ever had here before. Having recently changed the name of their business from Alpina/West to Hardy & Beck, Incorporated, the pair has begun to produce some of its own special pieces for the American market. This was necessary because Alpina has been struggling to meet the demand of its own booming European market, and also because some of the German parts are not suited for installation on American-specification Bimmers.

U.S. models carry more weight, distributed differently, so suspensions must vary accordingly. Pieces like air dams have to fit differently because BMW's bumpers and lower body panels are changed for the American market. So, keeping the Alpina approach of all-around performance firmly in mind, Hardy & Beck has gone into the development-and-manufacturing business in addition to its normal fix-it and fix-it-up operations.

In the past year and a half, we've driven a Hardy & Beck-converted Alpina BMW 320i, a 630CSi, and now the latest, a 530i. They're all different, but their purpose is the same: a split personality. They are refined, comfortable sedans, as BMW intended, but on cue they willingly become some of the most responsive boogie machines on the road.

BMW's all-independent suspension contains such generous jounce and rebound travel that some of it can be sacrificed without the bad-road bottoming and nerve-grating discomfort encountered when less sophisticated designs are lowered. A fine touch in the valving of specially built Bilstein shocks and in choosing firmer but not harsh-

er spring rates means the Hardy & Beck cars can be whopped over the worst of back roads with no fear of collapsing the suspension or tearing out the underside. Even with the one-inch-lower ride height and the car full of your best friends or worst enemies, there's no need to worry.

Controlling body roll in the 530i are a larger front anti-roll bar of 26mm diameter, with nylon bushings, and a revised 19mm rear bar. Rear ride height is adjustable at the Bilstein strut. The 320i and 630/633CSi conversions are equipped with heim-jointed, five-setting adjustable rear bars, so owners can tailor understeer/oversteer characteristics to their individual likes.

For the 530i, the Alpina radial-fin one-piece light-alloy wheels are 16-by-7s in front and 16-by-8s in back, compared to stock 14-by-6s all around. The tires, up from standard 195/70HR-14s, are the popular Pirelli P7s: 205/55VR-16s in front, 225/50VR-16s rear.

The P7s, in spite of their width and tremendous adhesion, have a certain softness in their initial response that helped create an on-center vagueness we haven't felt in other 530s. It produced an extremely annoying wiggling instability at high speeds over really bad surfaces. The same basic setup on a 630CSi produced only the tiniest hint of this problem, and the 320i had it not at all. In the case of the 530i, it may have been due to insufficient tightening of the steering damper. We drove the car unmercifully just after an all-night session had gotten the pieces bolted into place for the first time on an American 530i. Given Allen Hardy's thoroughness, the spookiness will almost certainly have been eliminated by the time you read this.

Except for this probably correctable shortcoming in its steering, the Hardy & Beck car was most comfortable in medium to very fast corners, although the typical BMW tendency toward trailing throttle oversteer remains. But the Hardy & Beck 530i did just about everything with precision, belting cleanly past rows of blurring phone poles, grunting firmly down on all fours under sure-footed heel-and-toe braking. It exhibited none of the squat, dive, and pitch of the stock car. It soaked up everything we could throw at it as quickly as it could be thrown. And it lifted the perceived power of the stock three-liter SOHC straight six into a stronger, more useful range because the power could be kept on deep into corners and fed in early coming out the other side.

High-speed stability and fuel economy are aided by an Alpina-type air dam, designed to fit the American front ends and manufactured to marine fiberglass standards by an H & B subcontractor. The exterior is also trimmed with Alpina Deko (decorative) stripes and logos.

The BMW height and tilt seat-cushion-adjustment mechanisms reside under Scheel 401 driving seats. The backrests are adjustable for rake, and the seats are heavily sculpted, contoured, and bolstered. Upholstered in

*Continued*



PHOTOGRAPHY: LARRY GRIFFIN

Photographed at Sears Point International Raceway

A black and white photograph showing three BMW cars on a racetrack. In the foreground, a BMW 6 Series coupe is angled towards the right. Behind it and to the left are a BMW 3 Series sedan and a BMW 5 Series sedan, both facing forward. The cars are parked on a dark asphalt surface with a grassy area and a wooden fence in the background.

The 530i may be the nicest compromise of all the Hardy & Beck conversions. It offers the feeling and visibility of the 320i, and it has more room in the back seat and trunk. The 630/633CSi has the best looks and

But, equipped with the Hardy & Beck package, any of the BMWs will awaken you before dawn with a tingle that moves you to dress quickly in anticipation of the moment the sun spreads over the horizon onto the pavement. That's the time to put the car into the full David Hobbs mode, to cleave the morning air with the lean, artful strokes of creative wheelmanship. And when you're done, you can bring it quietly back to the real world and stop off for breakfast, nobody the wiser.

—Larry Griffin

—Larry Griffin





THE H&B 633CSi

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