



## Retrospective Road Test – 1992 BMW E34 520i

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Kieron Fennelly takes the wheel of a 32 year old BMW 5 Series – and rates it as a still-competent classic saloon.

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The 1988-95 BMW E34 was the company's third 5 Series and consolidated BMW's



reputation for this model as the class-leading executive saloon. By the time of the launch of the E34, BMW had three distinct model ranges, the compact 3 Series, the 5 Series and the 7 Series large cars.

Essentially an aero engine builder in Pre-war days, but also maker of what was then the world's most advanced sports car the 328, BMW's plants were all but destroyed during World War 2. Much depleted, the company limped through the 1950s with a bulbous V6 saloon, far too expensive for German buyers, and by assembling the Isetta bubble car which generated turnover at least.

However, when the Quandt family became BMW's major shareholder in the early 1960s, the company picked up its skirts dramatically and never looked back. By 1963, a new BMW saloon, the 1500, was being delivered to dealers. At its heart was an overhead cam 4-cylinder engine in a sharp Michelotti body with all round independent suspension. Vastly more advanced than concurrent Opels, Fords and British mass-produced cars, mostly still wedded to relatively inefficient overhead valve engines, BMW stole a march on its competitors and sustained it in the 1970s - when with its smooth six-cylinder engines and new 2500 saloon it took market share from Mercedes and Jaguar. Within a decade a BMW was regarded as the 'car to have' by the kind of American who favoured European models.

The 5 Series evolved from BMW's large 1970s saloons, and the E34 was launched on a wave of confidence based on its much-admired E28 predecessor. However, the reputation of this model was let down by a ride quality some way short of a Mercedes or Jaguar. The E34 design largely corrected this - the car was longer and the rear axle, though using the same trailing-arm configuration as before, was better located. The E34 also had 50:50 weight distribution which added to stability.

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Four models were sold in Europe, a 4-cylinder 518i and three six-cylinder cars, the 520i, 525i and 535i. The V8 M5 came later. Our test car is the smallest of the sixes, the 520i. In



1992, this cost £22,000 in the UK and roughly as much (plus RoI tax) in Ireland. The Sterling price included BMW's smart cross-spoke wheels, an electric sunroof and a 'computer' - an intriguing push-button device, which despite thirty-odd years still offers simple calculations such as average speed and mileage. It is the only 'exotic' accessory on what is by today's standards a completely analogue car.



It seems that most of these E34s have long been scrapped - the 'How many left?' website, which uses government information, suggests that fewer than 90 are still on the road in the UK. Therefore this is a rare vehicle.



It is impressive that everything still functions on this 75,000 mile example. The central locking operates smoothly as do the four electric windows, electrically adjustable mirrors and the relatively complex ventilation controls - no a/c on this car. But above all it is the deep, cultured rumble of the straight 'six' which will appeal to drivers with petrol in their veins. This is 1991cc version, high tech in its day with twin overhead camshafts and 24 valves and rated at a then impressive 148 bhp, but with 1,430 kg (3,153 lb) to haul, performance was modest. While the 520i would sustain 120 mph on the *Autobahn*, 0 - 60 took 10 seconds. Today in the cut and thrust of city traffic it can be left behind by a hard-driven turbo diesel, but that is to miss the point. The pleasure of driving this BMW is the feeling of engineering quality, everything from the 'clunk' when the doors shut to the weight of the controls and the smoothness (there is no escape from this adjective) with which the engine will rev all the way to its 6,300 rpm cut-out, but changing up between 3,500 and 4,500 rpm usually suffices to keep this E34 abreast of fast traffic.



The clutch is reasonably light and bites at mid-travel, and the manual shift is pleasure to use, though on the motorway you do find yourself looking for the sixth gear which had to wait for the generation after next before becoming generalised.

The big BMW handles surprising well: once used to the large steering wheel (adjustable for height but not rake) and slightly dead zone around the straight-ahead, the driver can enter corners in the BMW confident that in the dry at least it will not under or over-steer itself off the road. In the days before chassis electronics, potent rear driven cars like BMWs were famous for tail slides on wet roundabouts. With this lower-powered version, a sensitive driver is unlikely to get into trouble, but it is a reminder that with any car of this vintage,



the driver carries rather more responsibility than with a 'modern.' The brakes are reassuringly strong, but on this model, BMW offered ABS only as an extra.

The quiet in the plush cabin is impressive: the suspension on this car has been completely renewed: passengers and driver are well insulated from road noise and rough tarmac. Ride is comfortable and the BMW does not lurch into corners. The seats are large and firm in the right places and the cloth upholstery, like the door fittings, shows very little wear.

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The driver sits in front of surely one of the most handsome and clear instrument layouts of any car: two main dials and ancillaries are exactly where you need to see and find them, all to hand except the computer, a curio anyway, which is such a stretch it is best left to the passenger to manipulate. BMWs were famous for their instrument panels and dashboards, both pleasing and practical. Recent trends toward digital dashboards have done little to improve clarity and the replacement of knobs and controls by touchscreens means more eyes-off-road moments for drivers trying to adjust radio settings or operate the fan.



The appeal of this BMW is unashamedly old school yet in thirty years, these cars have all but disappeared. Peruse the classified ads in Britain and only one or two appear, usually discouragingly corroded.

Along with plenty of room for front and rear seat passengers, luggage space is generous too.

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Offering 210 bhp, the 3.5 litre 535i is still sought after while the rare V8 3.8 M5 enjoys almost cult status (reflected in its £30,000+ asking prices) but can be *very* expensive when



it goes wrong. Provided their oil and coolant has been changed regularly, the six cylinder engines last surprisingly well: Ads on German ad sites show a dozen E 34 Five Series examples priced between €5,000 and €15,000. Condition obviously varies, but all are for cars at least 200,000 km, and some with over 300,000 km, behind them.

Its restrained performance means our humble 520i has escaped the attentions of the “drift” crowd; the previous proprietor spent €8,000 on restoring it and that is roughly its value today.







## VERDICT

Elegant, unostentatious classic motoring for an owner who appreciates proper engineering in a practical car.

### Wheels-Alive Brief Specification

BMW E34 520i saloon

Engine:

Six cylinders in-line, twin overhead camshafts, electronic fuel injection, petrol

Capacity: 1991cc

Bore & stroke: 80mm x 66mm

Compression ratio: 10.5:1

Max power & torque:

148 bhp @ 5,900 rpm; 190 Nm (140 lb.ft) @ 4,700 rpm

Transmission:

Five speed gearbox, front engine, rear drive

Suspension:

Front: MacPherson struts, anti-roll bar

Rear: trailing arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar



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Steering: Recirculating ball, hydraulically assisted

Performance: 0 - 60 mph 9.6 seconds, max speed 128 mph

Consumption: 25 - 32 mpg