

Destination: Desolation

BMW 540i Six-Speed

VS.

Jaguar XJR

VS.

Mercedes-Benz C36

VS.

Volvo 850 T-5R

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT KILLEEN

**ROAD
TEST**

We were less concerned with where we were going, than with where we weren't going. Desolation was the real destination.

From Los Angeles, the most accessible slice of nowhere is a few hundred miles northeast, in Death Valley. That destination made for a journey resplendent with great driving, starkly beautiful

scenery, and regrettably, the most uninspired dining imaginable. Still, we were happy with the route and the four European super sedans that would carry us along it.

Our vehicles were reason enough to pack up and leave Los Angeles. Each a factory-tweaked-and-tuned high-performance version of a regular production model, these four represent the current

pinnacle of the sedan (or sedan-like) art. Though we rotated freely among the cars, each member of our quartet had a preselected favorite, a vehicle that he would write about in the capsules you'll find in this story. Editor C. Van Tune latched on to the BMW 540i six-speed during the planning phases of the trip. Editor-at-Large John Pearley Huffman opted for the Jaguar XJR. Senior Editor-





at-Large Jeff Karr affixed himself to the Mercedes-Benz C36, while Senior Road Test Editor Mac DeMere went for the Volvo 850 T-5R wagon.

The T-5R is clearly the wild card in this group. For starters, it costs about \$37,000—far less than the \$50,000-\$65,000 the others go for. Secondly, it's available in sedan or wagon form. Aside from having self-leveling suspension

and carrying almost 100 extra pounds of metal and glass, the wagon is mechanically identical with the sedan. Close enough for us: We couldn't resist choosing the wagon for this comparison. Why go with a mere sedan when you can have the fastest wagon ever offered for sale in America? Besides, with near-identical performance, the test numbers we'd generate would apply to

both versions.

So it came to pass that the four of us set out on a drizzly spring morning, heading no place in particular. Our first checkpoint was the semilegendary Roy Rogers Museum in Victorville, California. There in the shadow of a 40-foot-tall statue of Trigger, the Wonder Horse, we met photographer Scott



BMW 540i Six-Speed

Attitude Adjustment at 6500 RPM



It's dawn, somewhere near a desolate California/Nevada border crossing—100 miles from nowhere and a rolling felony above the speed limit. Ahead, an arrow-straight line of weathered tarmac stretches into the horizon; behind, nothing but freshly scorched two-lane and a couple of dozen frightened javelinas. Even at triple-digit velocities, acceleration in the BMW 540i six-speed is fierce. Bolting a close-ratio gearbox to the potent 4.0-liter DOHC V-8 has transformed what was merely one of the world's best luxo-sport sedans into a rapacious high-performance road burner. It's the next best thing to the recently departed M5 available on our shores. Let Karr bleat about his bucks-up Benz. Pay no mind to the rantings of Huffman and DeMere. The best all-around, all-weather, all-kinds-of-driving car here is the BMW 540i six-speed.

The majority of components that make up the regular five-speed-automatic-equipped 540i remain unchanged in the manual-transmission version. The admittedly aging body lines continue in the familiar shape that's been around since '89, slightly upgraded this season to include body-color rocker panels, additional front fender marker lights, and ellipsoid projector foglamps. Inside, 12-way sport seats replace the less bolstered 10-way buckets of the automatic 540i, while a more sophisticated anti-theft system benefits all 5-Series models. Dual airbags and meaty four-wheel discs with ABS return for the '95 season.

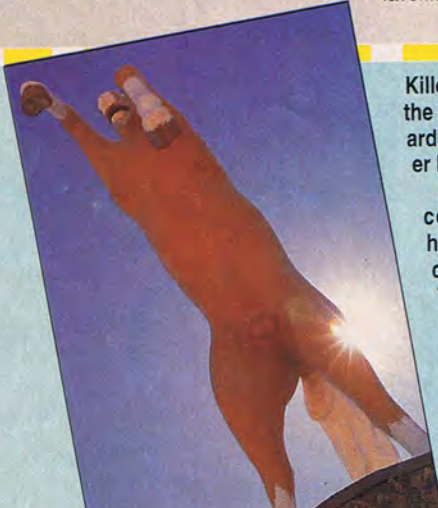
Behold the beast. Under the hood live the high-alloy charms of one of our favorite V-8s: a 4.0-liter DOHC

revver with 282 horsepower at 5800 rpm, and 295 pound-feet of torque at 4500 rpm. Backed by a six-cog Getrag box similar to that used in the \$98,500 BMW 850CSi, the \$48,600 540i is a bargain. Blessed with a low 4.23:1-ratio first gear (compared to the automatic's 3.55:1) and a slightly more aggressive 2.93:1 ring and pinion (the automatic now uses a taller 2.81:1 rear gear set), off-the-line acceleration is brutal. Turn off the optional traction control, and prepare to leave 75 feet of tread marks sizzling on the pavement as you rip 0-60 mph in 6.2 seconds and pull through the quarter mile in 14.8 seconds at 98.1 mph. That's the same 0-60-mph time as the M5 delivered, the quarter mile only 0.2 second slower, but with an impressive 1.4-mph-faster trap speed. Although the shift linkage seems a bit vague, I love this machine. In sixth gear at 60 mph, the engine loafs at a mere 1800 rpm, and it has enough grunt to accelerate smoothly from that velocity without down-

by C. Van Tune

shifting. Unlike most other six-speeds that use a 1.00:1-ratio fourth gear and both fifth and sixth as overdrive cogs, this Getrag unit runs a 1.23:1-ratio fourth and a 1.00:1 fifth, which keeps the intermediate ratios tight. The taller ratios of the automatic help it shed its gas-guzzler penalty for '95, but the six-speed buyer must still pay the \$1300 fee.

That's all well and good; however, a new definition of frustration occurs when you're hightailing it across some Godforsaken stretch of desert (closed off for testing) and run headlong into the invisible hand of the speed limiter at the top of fourth gear (130 mph), only to watch helplessly as your buddies in their Mercedes-Benz C36, Jaguar XJR, and even a five-cylinder Volvo wagon pull away to 150-plus-mph terminal velocities. Aaaaargh!! Finding no



Killeen, who henceforth would shuttle among the passenger seats, looking for the least hazardous combination of horsepower and driver blood-sugar level.

But long before feats of driving prowess could be explored, we had a couple of hours of highway driving ahead of us to clear Los Angeles' humanity overspray. That meant easy cruising on Interstate 15, the main artery that carries California's disposable income to the sucking vortex that is Las Vegas.

Locked on cruise control, we settled in for the duration. Walkie-talkies crack-

led with the first comments on ride comfort. The BMW and Mercedes-Benz were getting the highest marks for ride compliance, with the edge going to the Bimmer and its cushy high-profile tires. The C36 is a little firmer overall, but never approaches harshness.

Of the four, the C36 has the quietest interior, and the highest-quality feel. For comfort, the Jaguar is right in the ballpark, but with pronounced tire noise on some surfaces (slick tar really makes 'em sing), the XJR has a lower serenity quotient than the German sedans. Those wide tires also contribute to another problem: weak-willed directional stability. The



hatchet at my immediate disposal, I had to wait until our next stop to maniacally leaf through the owner's manual for a clue as to which wire would disarm the electronic tyrant. Discovering the booklet devoid of any such nefarious diagrams, I distracted Jeff Karr's attention away from the lunch table and surreptitiously grabbed the keys for the C36. Enjoy your fish sticks, smart boy!

There are no obvious clues to help you spot a six-gear 540i from the outside, for the car wears the same 15x7.0-inch lace-pattern wheels and 225/60HR15 Michelin Green X M+S tires as its 110-pound-heavier brother. Shame on the new lower-speed-rated (but more fuel-efficient) tires used on all '95 5-Series models, because they're what necessitate the 130-mph speed restriction. The 540i six-speed receives special BMW M Sports anti-roll bars, firmer springs (lowering ride height by 0.6 inches), and more aggressive alignment specs to put a sharper edge on the handling feel.

The improvement in responsiveness will be noticeable to 5-Series aficionados, but it's still off the mark of the eclectic M5, mostly due to the 15-inch (rather than 17-inch) rubber and slightly less advantageous weight

distribution (51/49 front/rear versus the M5's 49/51 balance). The 540i's 0.82g skidpad performance and 64.4-mph slalom speed are entirely commendable, but they're still behind the M5's 0.86g lateral grip and blistering 65.5-mph slalom performance.

Okay, this Bimmer isn't as taut as the C36, but that's easily remedied by a set of 16- or 17-inch wheels and tires. What the Bimmer offers that its Black Forest neighbor can't is V-8 power backed by a manual gearbox—a sensation no six-cylinder and an automatic can match. And then there's the driving feel. I'm a big fan of BMW's steering/brake/suspension tuning, which delivers a mouth-watering combination of highway comfort, backroad precision, and high-speed imperturbability. Power-on and power-off oversteer can handily be elicited, but will rarely catch you by surprise. Equally impressive, the braking force from superlegal speeds is second only to a chute deployment. Granted, the AMG-tweaked Benz is a damn fine car, but I like to shift for myself.

I may have to wait until the next-generation 5-Series is released in '96 to get that full-boogie M5 of my dreams, but until then, this hot-rod 540i satisfies my ultrasport-sedan performance cravings like no other production four-door.



All '95 5-Series Bimmers receive a new steering wheel, but only the six-speed 540i models benefit from super-supportive 12-way front buckets. The shifter connects to a fabulous Getrag gearbox that helps drop 0-60-mph times to a searing 6.2 seconds. Wearing a body shape that's now in its seventh year of production, the 540i isn't the head-turner it once was (though for stealthy driving, that's a benefit).

Jag follows the suggestions of ruts and lips as if in a hypnotic trance. Steering maintenance is the order of the day, all day, in the XJR. The comfort tail-ender is the Volvo. Its taut ride keeps you aware of the road conditions better than the Highway Patrol Road Information Hotline; though not outright abusive, most mothers-in-law won't approve. The jounces excite a few minor interior rattles and make the steering wheel vibrate. A good portion of the jitteriness comes from the low-profile 45-series Pirelli P-Zeros. Riding on 17-inch wheels, they give the Volvo a decidedly wicked appearance, but aren't ride-oriented in the least. For drivers

who'd like to sacrifice a little ultimate grip for an improvement in ride, Volvo offers 55-series Z-rated Michelin MXMs on 16-inch wheels as a no-cost option.

In a serendipitous turn of events, we rolled into Baker (Gateway to Death Valley, as the sign says) just in time for a delightful lunch at the Bun Boy family restaurant. A major landmark along this windswept desert interstate, the Bun Boy is home to the World's Tallest Ther-



Jaguar XJR

Supercharged Swashbuckler



I can almost hear the Coventry workers whistling the “Colonel Bogey March” as they assemble the XJR’s 429 body parts, swapping predictions about Manchester United as they bolt the Eaton supercharger up to the AJ16 4.0-liter six-cylinder engine. I’d swear the black-stained maple interior wood comes from trees felled in Sherwood Forest, swiped out under the nose of Sir Guy of Gisbourne (as played by Basil Rathbone). The XJR is a great Errol Flynn of a car: handsome, athletic, and completely, unmistakably British. (But then, character is something Tune, Karr, and DeMere shun anyhow.) It’s also, at 197.8 inches long, 70.8 inches wide, and 4215 pounds, by far the largest car in this test. If any car would fill Death Valley, it was this one.

Traditionally, Jaguar sedans haven’t been aggressive: Their sporting character is muted by delicate detailing. The XJR, however, wears the widest tires ever put under a regular-production Jag: blocky 255/45ZR17 Pirelli P-Zero Asymmetricals wrapped around cast-aluminum five-spoke wheels. From the outside, the tires and wheels do more than any other element to distinguish the sporty XJR from the XJ6 or XJ12 as a true sport sedan, though one editor thought the effect was a “Margaret Thatcher in Reeboks” look. It’s also more distinctively sport-oriented than the C36 or the looks-just-like-another-525 BMW. Finishing a close second in the character-definition department is the wire-mesh front grille within a body-color surround reminiscent of the legendary ’30s blower Bentleys and Jenn-Air ranges. Which is appropriate, because the car is blown and it cooks.

by John Pearley Huffman

Capped by a satin-finish cam cover, the DOHC, 24-valve, all-aluminum AJ16 engine looks like one bank of a P-51’s Merlin V-12 shorn of its propeller. Sitting to the left of the engine, under its own intercooled manifold, the Eaton M90 Roots-type supercharger also looks almost aircraft-quality. Breathing up to 10 psi of boost into the engine, the blower amplifies everything about the engine without affecting its basic temperament and gives the XJR a sound matched by no other car. The supercharged engine’s 322 horsepower and 378 pound-feet of torque are increases of 77 horsepower and 89 pound-feet over the unblown XJ6’s big-six, but the flat torque curve and leisurely rev-up remain.

Surprisingly, the GM 4L80E four-speed automatic behind the engine shifts languidly, in contrast to the crisp shifts of the Corvette’s GM 4L60E. A more aggressive shift program matched to a less aggressive traction-control system would reinforce the sensation of thrust the blown engine can generate. On dry pavement with the traction control turned off, the car hustles off the line with little wheelspin and through corners with authority. With the traction control on, the combination of reduced engine torque and brake application can be frustrating. If the system were any more assertive, the car would come to a complete halt on tight corners and a Burberry tailor would step out of the trunk to stitch the tires into the asphalt.

The XJR accelerates effortlessly to 60 in 6.6 seconds and completes the quarter mile in only 14.9 seconds at a 95.9 mph. To some, that effortlessness equals a lack of thrills, but it’s not all that far off the pace of the 540i or the C36. The prospect of this engine in a lighter car leaves me

momometer—a 134-foot-high wonder so striking, passing drivers have been known to turn their heads to get a better look at it. Some have even slowed slightly—in reverence, no doubt.

Our stomachs distended by Bun Boy chocolate shakes, we drove across town (a distance of about 60 feet) and then shot north on Highway 127. Mostly straight, this narrow two-lane weaves its way past sand dunes and dry lakes, supporting a constant stream of angry, misunderstood truckers rushing great quantities of rock from one miserable dust bowl to another. We had no rocks or gravel with us, but we sped

up in hopes of fitting in, nonetheless. The truckers weren’t fooled.

All of our European assault vehicles treat their front passengers well. Seats were praised—with the exception of the Volvo’s buckets (a bit soft for berserk cornering) and the Jag’s buckets (which didn’t fit anyone quite right). The XJR won’t charm backseaters, with cramped head- and legroom that comes as a rude surprise in a car of such generous external dimensions. This Brit is best as a two-people-plus-trappings motivator.

Other than a few touches to tart up the ambiance, all these cars share interiors with

their less pumped-up production variants. We liked the C36’s interior the most: simple, handsome Teutonic lines, all black, warmed with walnut. The BMW follows suit, though now in its seventh year of production it’s looking a tad dated. The Jaguar had its boosters, too, but not everyone liked the handful of quaint ergonomic oddities and black walnut accents. Volvo’s lumberjacks apparently have been hanging around the same forest, as slabs of burled black walnut can be found in its interior, too. Otherwise, the Swedes have put together a functional passenger cabin, albeit in their traditional boxy style.



hungry for the next Jag two-seater.

Backing up this speed are great anti-lock brakes. The XJR stops from 60 mph in only 117 feet, and with at least 11.5-inches of ventilated disc at each corner, there's enough force here to halt soil erosion along the Pacific Coast Highway.

Nothing short of igniting a JATO rocket strapped perpendicular to a rear fender can make this car oversteer. In real-world situations, the XJR isn't as easy to balance as the Benz or the Bimmer, but it hustles more aggressively than the Volvo. Though it pushes its nose, its turn-in is quick, and its four-wheel independent suspension recovers rapidly. Those talents contribute to a 64.6-mph blitz through our slalom, but may come at the expense of high-speed stability. On the way to its 152-mph top speed, the XJR lacked the directional serenity of the Mercedes or the Volvo and trammed somewhat along road irregularities.



Sumptuous interiors are a Jag tradition, and the XJR's innards have enough wood, chrome, and Connolly leather to bring a wistful, nostalgic tear to the eye of Lusitania survivors. Yet despite the car's size, the interior is somewhere between "intimate" and "cramped" on the space continuum. It's difficult to position oneself in the driver's seat without knocking up against the parking brake, and while there are dual airbags under those wood panels, it would be nice if there were a glovebox as well. The

Harman/Kardon stereo system holds up to six CDs, and packs bagpiper-in-the-back-seat punch, but the controls are imprecise and nonintuitive.

Ford now owns Jaguar, but the XJR remains British—from its mystifying electronic key fob, all along its sculpted flanks, and on to the brilliant silver cat leaping from its gorgeous hood. The effect of the big company's ownership can be seen in improved build quality, more thorough engineering, and the promise of even better cars yet to come. This first sporting Ford Jag reclaims an important part of British heritage: It's a swashbuckler.



Nothing quite matches the beauty or sensory extravagance of a Jaguar's leather and wood-lined cocoon. The XJR's wood is dyed black, and its seats are more aggressively bolstered. The interior is otherwise typically intimate—in the sense that though it's rated for five occupants, it's really only comfortable for four—and the two in back had better own short legs.

At the Death Valley Junction, we hung a left on Highway 190, with the Funeral Mountains rising ominously to our right. By now, we were in the heart of nowhere—just where we wanted to be. With the few tourists clustered around official points of interest, we had our own unofficial point of the interest (the road) all to ourselves on the way in to our night's stop at Furnace Creek Ranch. Sleep is the number-one pastime in Death Valley after dark. In fact, there is no other pastime. So, though we couldn't quite keep up with the locals, we gave it our best shot.

A bit of advice: Never travel with a magazine

photographer. On day two, we were underway before dawn in search of the perfect photo location. Breakfast was omitted to

streamline the schedule, and coffee, already boiled down to a tarlike consistency, awaited us at a run-down mini-mart 120 miles distant. But there was one huge pay-back: roads as vacant as a Playmate's gaze, and at least as beautiful.

All these cars are made to cover the miles at high speeds. While any of them can provide oodles of joy at legal velocities, unspeakable delights await beyond that artificially low



Mercedes-Benz C36

AMG Energizes
the C-Class
Sedan



Ripping across the desert floor, I scan my rear-view mirrors to see C. Van Tune tucked in tightly behind me in his BMW. Squinting against the gathering daylight, he's formulating the opening sentence for his chunk of this comparison, a fawning homage to the BMW 540i. He's reveling in the scene, a moment as close as we'll come here in America to enjoying the freedom of Germany's autobahn. Enough reveling, it's time to annoy the boss.

A simple push of the gas pedal is all it takes. Push and hold, like some kind of perverse morning calisthenics. Feel the burn, Van. Your beloved BMW V-8 is about to be left a ZIP code behind my little six-cylinder Mercedes-Benz.

"It's dawn, somewhere near a desolate California/Nevada border crossing..."—Ha! Now there's nothing at all in my mirrors. It's gonna be a great day.

Here's all you need to know: The Mercedes-Benz C36 is the best car here. Trust me. Forget that it's built on the cheapest platform of the three sedans in our group. Forget that it's got the smallest normally aspirated engine in the bunch. Forget the conservative image of Mercedes-Benz. Remember this: For the money, the C36 is the best performance sedan in America.

Why? Uncompromising versatility, that's why. Developed jointly by Mercedes-Benz and famed German tuner AMG, the C36 offers all the comfort and utility of its C-Class progenitors, yet delivers handling and

horsepower in delightful excess, all while retaining the full Mercedes-Benz factory warranty and dealer support.

Based on Mercedes-Benz's entry-level C-Class platform, the C36 is packed with upgrades. The front brakes are borrowed from the V-12-powered SL convertible, and the rears come from the V-8-powered E420. Faster-ratio steering gear is fitted, as are stiffer front and rear anti-roll bars. Ride height is reduced by a half inch, and though firmer dampers are used, the spring rates remain unchanged. Wide 17-inch wheels are wrapped with gummy Z-rated Bridgestone Expedias. Fresh AMG bodywork from the beltline down gives the C36 a properly intimidating countenance. The front air dam carries foglamps and brake cooling ducts. Including the new side skirts and rear apron, the bodywork is designed to reduce lift at high speeds.

And with the AMG-modified powerplant, speed is what the C36 is all about. Although artificially limited to 155 mph (to calm German tree-huggers), it's supposedly able to reach 170 mph when electronically uncorked. These velocities are well out of reach for the 2.8-liter inline-six that until now was the most powerful C-Class engine. In stock form, that dutiful powerplant makes 194 horsepower and 199 pound-feet of torque. When AMG is through with its hot-rodding tricks, the horsepower goes ballistic, reaching a peak of 268, and the torque multiplies alarmingly to 280 pound-feet.

AMG begins the conversion by completely

by Jeff Karr

barrier. The XJR, with its 322-horsepower supercharged straight-six, holds the spec-sheet high ground. But in the real world, it has to move over 4200 pounds of metal—about 500 pounds more than the BMW, and about 800 more than the C36 and the T-5R. That weight handicap goes a long way toward leveling the field in acceleration contests.

In 0-60-mph testing, the 282-horsepower V-8 BMW does the deed in 6.2 seconds. Equipped with the only manual transmission in the field, it has a distinct advantage in an all-out sprint. The C36, with its 268-horsepower inline-six, follows just 0.2 second behind,



while the pressurized Jag is 0.4 second off the BMW's leading pace. The Volvo's hardworking 2.3-liter turbo inline-five suffers a huge displacement disadvantage, but with 240 horsepower, still manages to scramble to 60 mph in 7.1 seconds.

Run the length of a quarter mile, and the order shuffles slightly as the Mercedes-Benz gathers itself up to log a best of 14.7 seconds. The BMW follows just one tenth of a second back, with the Jaguar trailing by yet another tenth. The Volvo, though still a very fast automobile, can't match this pace: It covers the quarter mile in 15.3 seconds.



disassembling the brand-new C280 engine. Displacement is increased to 3.6 liters with a longer-stroke crankshaft and slightly larger cylinder bores. Short-skirt pistons raise the compression ratio by a half point, to 10.5:1, and the aluminum cylinder head gets a precision porting job. A high-lift intake cam and retimed exhaust cam boost airflow. Throw in some alterations to the engine-management electronics, slip on a free-flowing exhaust system, and you've got the highest horsepower per liter of any engine Mercedes has offered in modern times.

Though the C36 makes tremendous performance numbers at the test track, its real pleasures are recorded by the driver, not by the timing lights. Solid, quiet, always composed, the C36 rolls down the highway with the resolve of a heavier, more expensive E- or even S-Class Mercedes-Benz. Fine compliance barely lets on that this sedan rides on wide rolling stock and tightened suspension. Ease it into a fast sweeper, though, and all that good stuff asserts itself immediately. The C36 tracks



unerringly through dips and bumps, and maintains a nearly neutral handling balance right up to, and past, the adhesion limit. Total grip is a formidable 0.87 lateral g, and in the slalom, the C36 logged a remarkable 68.3-mph run. On the road,

even with the traction control switched off, you can put down huge amounts of power; oversteer is gradual and very readable.

And the straightaways are suddenly shorter. From a dead stop, the automatic-equipped C36 surges off the line fluidly, reaching 60 mph in 6.4 seconds (0.2 behind the BMW), and covering the quarter mile in 14.7 seconds with a terminal speed of 97.2 mph (right on top of the BMW). This sedan has real legs: Without sounding strained, the straight-six is content to run at double the posted speed limit (and more) while passengers relax obliviously in the impeccable interior.

Like I said, for the money, this is the best performance sedan in America. How much money? About \$50,000, without traction control—a bargain.



Of the sedans in this comparison, the C36 has the most commodious interior. Its back seat is spacious, and its leather interior is accented with walnut on the doors and the console. AMG provides the gray instrument panel and new gauge package, as well as the steering wheel. Power sport seats are comfortable on the highway yet keep you snugly in place through turns.

The Swede exacts its revenge when the throttle is held down indefinitely. It's a long, slow climb over 130 mph, but the T-5R relentlessly powers its way up to second place in the top-speed rankings, with a remarkable radar clocking of 153 mph. Yes, a 153-mph station wagon. The C36 wants to go much faster, but with its electronic speed limiter, stops at an honest 155—still the fastest of the group. Just one mph behind the Volvo, the Jaguar XJR bounces the microwaves back to the tune of 152 mph. The least stable of the field, the 4215-pound XJR feels decidedly queasy at this speed. The others are comfortingly screwed down.

Yes, but what about the BMW? Rolling on tires that carry a mere "H" speed rating, the 540i's speed limiter pulls the plug at just 130 mph. Of course, a reasonable case can be made for why 130 mph is more than enough for any sane individual. But in the battle of top-speed bragging rights, the BMW doesn't even fire an opening shot.

It does have the most engaging powertrain on this road, however. The 4.0-liter DOHC V-8 has a creamy texture and a stirring exhaust note. The next highest reading on the gratification meter comes from the Mercedes-Benz. Surprisingly torquey, the inline-six works won-

derfully with its four-speed automatic transmission to deliver power on command. Passes are effortless, and except for the characteristic six-cylinder cadence, you might swear a V-8 is under the hood. The Jag's supercharged inline-six is nearly as pleasurable. The supercharger whine has charm, but though power is certainly abundant, the car can't match the quick reflexes of the lighter BMW and the Mercedes-Benz. With a torque peak that hits at just 2100 rpm, what the Volvo has is available instantaneously. On the road, it often feels more responsive than the XJR, though ultimately the Jaguar is the quicker car.



and performance tires, a modified computer chip, a restyled front spoiler, a more powerful audio system, and a subtly restyled interior. The T-5R retains the 850 Turbo's impressive list of standard features, from a remote keyless entry system to power glass sunroof, and adds each item from the Turbo's option list: traction control, sport suspension, leather upholstery, and several convenience items.

Replacing the 850 Turbo's 16-inch wheels are a set of "titanium gray" cast-aluminum 17-inchers, which are a half inch wider than the stock 6.5-inchers. Pirelli P-Zeros, size 205/45ZR17, offer crisper initial turn-in and increased grip despite being no wider than the 850 Turbo's 205/50ZR16 Michelin MXMs. The suspension is otherwise unchanged from the 850 Turbo's sport package. The only modification made to the turbocharged, intercooled, 2.3-liter DOHC 20-valve inline-five involves its engine management computer. Volvo hackers altered the programming to permit overboost in very limited situations. The extra forced air, up to a peak of 10.9 psi from the normal top number of



9.5, is available only in second and higher gears at above 5100 rpm, and then only for 30 seconds at a squirt. This raises the peak dyno reading to 240 horsepower at 5600 rpm (up from 222 at 5100). The new programming makes little real-world difference: The engine doesn't reach 5100 rpm until past 65 mph in second gear, and, in third gear, not until past 100 mph. In fourth, the tach doesn't hit 5100 until you take the car to "ever been behind bars?" speeds.

Surprisingly, even with the changes, the T-5R's 0-60-mph pass was 0.1 second slower than the 7.0-second run we recorded with a '94 850 Sportwagon Turbo, while its performance in the quarter mile was near identical to the '94's 15.3 seconds at 92.8 mph. The five-speed manual, available only in Europe, would help the T-5R dip into the mid-6s for its 0-60 time. Only 1000 '95 T-5Rs—850 sedans, 150 wagons—will be available in the U.S.; another 4000 will be sold world-wide. So, if you think a 153-mph station wagon fits your needs, grab one soon.



The Volvo's side-impact airbags are buried under outside edges of the front seatbacks. In a severe side crash, a sensor ignites the propellant—a combo similar to the percussion cap and blackpowder charge of a Civil War musket—and sends the bag tearing through the seat seams. The T-5R's audio upgrade over standard 850 Turbos is a separate 160-watt, four-channel amplifier. The spoiler that graced our preproduction prototype won't see showroom floors.

have an instantaneous effect on attitude in the turns. Switch the traction-control system off, and you can dial in the amount of oversteer you want. Leave it on, and you can still get trailing-throttle oversteer at will, but under power, the back end stays in line. The 540i isn't idiot-proof, or even the best in measured handling tests, but it is the most fun when you're on a deserted racetrack with nothing to run into.

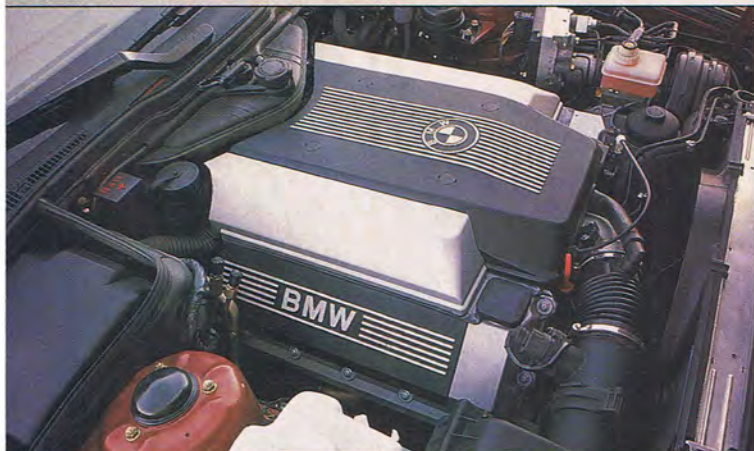
With its neutral handling balance and extremely predictable cornering behavior, the C36 gets around the track with remarkable speed. It's not nearly as responsive to cowboy antics as the BMW, but it's far more stable and

delivers superior measured handling performance. The Mercedes-Benz pulls a 0.87 lateral g on the skidpad (versus 0.85 for the Jaguar, 0.83 for the Volvo, and 0.82 for the BMW). It also smokes them all in the slalom, with a speed of 68.3 mph (compared to 66.0 for the Volvo, 64.6 for the Jaguar, and 64.4 for the BMW). It even annihilates 'em with a 60-0-mph stopping distance of 107 feet (up against 115 for the Volvo, 117 for the Jaguar, and 124 for the BMW). If you don't like the Mercedes' near-perfect handling manners, you can turn off the traction control and force it into lurid oversteer. The C36 tolerates this adolescent behavior, but

it doesn't encourage it. After all, on public roads a tidier approach to driving is mandated. That's the sort of use the C36 was designed for, and what it's best at.

Look at the handling numbers and you'll scarcely believe what Jaguar has accomplished with the XJR. This is a very big car, but it doesn't act like one. It has formidable grip in the turns and stops on a 10-pound note with pence to spare. A visceral thrill ride it's not, however. Understeer caps cornering speed, and nothing you can do with the throttle, brakes, steering, or traction-control switch can kick the tail loose to move the balance

POWERHOUSES



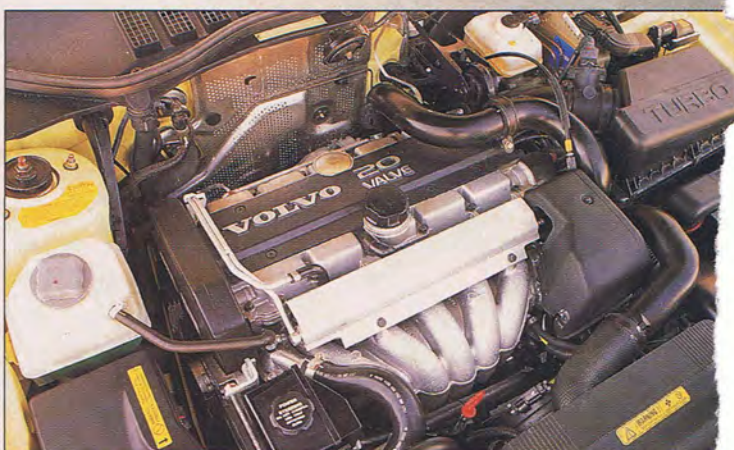
This is the same sweet 4.0-liter/282-horsepower DOHC V-8 that motivates regular 540i models, but its attitude is noticeably more aggressive with a new close-ratio gearbox. However, if you're a lover of clutchless cars, prepare to get amorous over the available five-speed automatic.



The XJR's 4.0-liter/322-horsepower DOHC engine celebrates Jaguar's inline-six tradition and revives the grand heritage of blower Bentleys. The supercharger is an Eaton unit similar to the one used in the Ford Thunderbird SC.



Although based on the C280's 2.8-liter inline-six, the 3.6-liter monster that powers the C36 is a whole different animal. Peak power jumps by 74 horses, and torque swells by 81 pound-feet.



Producing 240 horsepower from its mere 2.3 liters, the Volvo's DOHC turbocharged inline-five is the mighty-mite of this muscular match-up. The T-5R brings a hot computer chip and extra boost.

back toward the ideal neutral. Except for the obvious absence of torque steer, the XJR feels for all the world like a front-drive car. This isn't a problem on the street, but it effectively stifles racetrack merriment.

Of course, there's one real front-drive car in this mix, the Volvo 850 T-5R. While its MacPherson front struts don't exhibit the suspension refinement of the more expensive (A-arm equipped) cars here, it gets around the track with good speed and plenty of aplomb. With this kind of power, torque steer crops up regularly, but it's easily managed. It does complicate the steering feel, however, making the T-5R more difficult to place in turns when the power is on. The traction-control system only comes into play at speeds under 25 mph, so on the track, the inside front wheel has a tendency to spin frantically on corner exits—showy, smoky, fun, but inefficient. Likewise,

you can choose any cornering attitude you like as long as it's understeer. The Volvo isn't sloppy about it, though, and by slightly widening your cornering line or easing up on the gas, the front tires hook up again.

All too soon, it was time to begin the long trek back to Los Angeles. With careful planning, we devised a route that added hundreds of extra miles to the trip, took us through high-desert cultural centers such as Nipton (population: seven, including the donkey), and even allowed for a dinner stop back in Baker, under the neon glow of the World's Largest Thermometer (current temperature, 52 degrees Fahrenheit). Over soggy french-dip sandwiches and gut-bombing chocolate shakes, we reached a consensus about our four contenders.

Number one on the majority of score cards is the Mercedes-Benz C36, a car



TECH DATA

GENERAL				
	BMW 540i Six-Speed	Jaguar XJR	Mercedes-Benz C36	Volvo 850 T-5R
Importer/manufacture	BMW of North America, Inc., Woodcliff Lake, N.J.	Jaguar Cars North America, Mahwah, N.J.	Mercedes-Benz of North America, Montvale, N.J.	Volvo Cars of North America, Rockleigh, N.J.
Location of final assembly plant	Dingolfing, Germany	Coventry, England	Affalterbach, Germany	Ghent, Belgium
EPA size class	Compact	Compact	Compact	Midsize
Body style	4-door, 5-passenger	4-door, 5-passenger	4-door, 5-passenger	4-door, 5-passenger
Drivetrain layout	Front engine, rear drive	Front engine, rear drive	Front engine, rear drive	Front engine, front drive
Airbag	Dual	Dual	Dual	Dual and front side
Engine configuration	V-8, DOHC, 4 valves/cylinder	Inline-6, supercharged, DOHC, 4 valves/cylinder	Inline-6, DOHC, 4 valves/cylinder	Inline-5, turbocharged, DOHC, 4 valves/cylinder
Engine displacement, ci/cc	243/3982	243/3980	220/3600	142/2319
Horsepower, hp @ rpm, SAE net	282 @ 5800	322 @ 5000	268 @ 5750	240 @ 5600
Torque, lb-ft @ rpm, SAE net	295 @ 4500	378 @ 3050	280 @ 4000	221 @ 2100
Transmission	6-speed man.	4-speed auto.	4-speed auto.	4-speed auto.
Base price	\$48,600	\$65,000	\$49,800	\$37,095
Price as tested	\$51,720	\$65,980	\$53,450	\$37,555
DIMENSIONS				
Wheelbase, in./mm	108.7/2760	113.0/2870	105.9/2690	104.9/2664
Track, f/r, in./mm	57.9/58.9/1475/1496	59.1/59.0/1500/1498	59.2/58.4/1497/1478	59.8/57.9/1519/1470
Length, in./mm	185.8/4719	197.8/5024	177.4/4487	185.4/4709
Width, in./mm	68.9/1750	70.8/1798	67.7/1720	69.3/1760
Height, in./mm	55.0/1397	53.1/1339	55.6/1412	56.9/1445
Ground clearance, in./mm	5.5/140	5.1/129	5.0/127	6.2/157
Mfr's base curb weight, lb	3693	4215	3432	3387
Weight distribution, f/r, %	51/49	52/48	54/46	60/40
Cargo capacity, cu ft	13.0	11.1	11.6	37.1
Fuel capacity, gal	21.1	23.1	16.4	19.3
Weight/power ratio, lb/hp	13.1	13.1	12.8	14.1
CHASSIS				
Suspension, f/r	Upper and lower control arms/semi-trailing arms	Upper and lower control arms/upper and lower control arms	Upper and lower control arms/multi-link	MacPherson struts/multi-link
Steering	Recirculating ball, power assist	Rack and pinion, power assist	Recirculating ball, power assist	Rack and pinion, power assist
Turning circle, ft	37.7	40.8	35.2	34.5
Brakes, f/r	Vented discs/vented discs, ABS	Vented discs/vented discs, ABS	Vented discs/vented discs, ABS	Vented discs/discs, ABS
Wheel size, in. material	15 x 7.0 cast aluminum	17 x 8.0 cast aluminum	17 x 7.0/17 x 8.5 cast aluminum	17 x 7.0 cast aluminum
Tire size mfr. and model	225/60HR15 Michelin Green X M+S	255/45ZR17 Pirelli P-Zero Asymmetrical	225/45ZR17/245/40ZR17 Bridgestone Expeda S-01	205/45ZR17 Pirelli P-Zero Asymmetrical
PERFORMANCE				
Acceleration, 0-60 mph, sec	6.2	6.6	6.4	7.1
Standing quarter mile, sec/mph	14.8/98.1	14.9/95.9	14.7/97.2	15.3/92.9
Braking, 60-0, ft	124	117	107	115
Handling, lateral acceleration, g	0.82	0.85	0.87	0.83
Top speed, mph	130	152	155	153
Speed through 600-ft slalom, mph	64.4	64.6	68.3	66.0
EPA fuel economy, mpg, city/hwy.	14/23	15/21	18/22	19/26

that does everything brilliantly. Paying \$53,450 might sound like a lot for a modified C-Class sedan, but you can feel every penny of that goodness in this machine. Close behind is the BMW 540i, with its tremendous V-8 and lovable handling. Due for a major redesign in '96, the current 540i nonetheless provides a fine driving experience. Jaguar's XJR is a formidable road car, but its disconnected steering, curious interior packaging and \$65,980 pricetag keep it out of the top slots. The Volvo 850 T-5R, though lacking the substantial feel and refinement of its pricey competition, delivers tremendous perfor-

mance on a comparatively shoestring budget. If price is a serious consideration, the Volvo (in wagon or sedan form) is the clear choice here. But as we gaged down the last of our evening repast, it hit us that nobody who could seriously consider this quartet is going to be counting pennies. For them, the wisest course of action is to get in line for one of the roughly 1000 C36s Mercedes-Benz plans to import in the next three years.

One other thing hit us as our fetid feast settled like anvils in our craws: Next time we go for a romp in the desert, we're bringing our own food.

MT

