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performance car

Attack of the Thriller Saloons

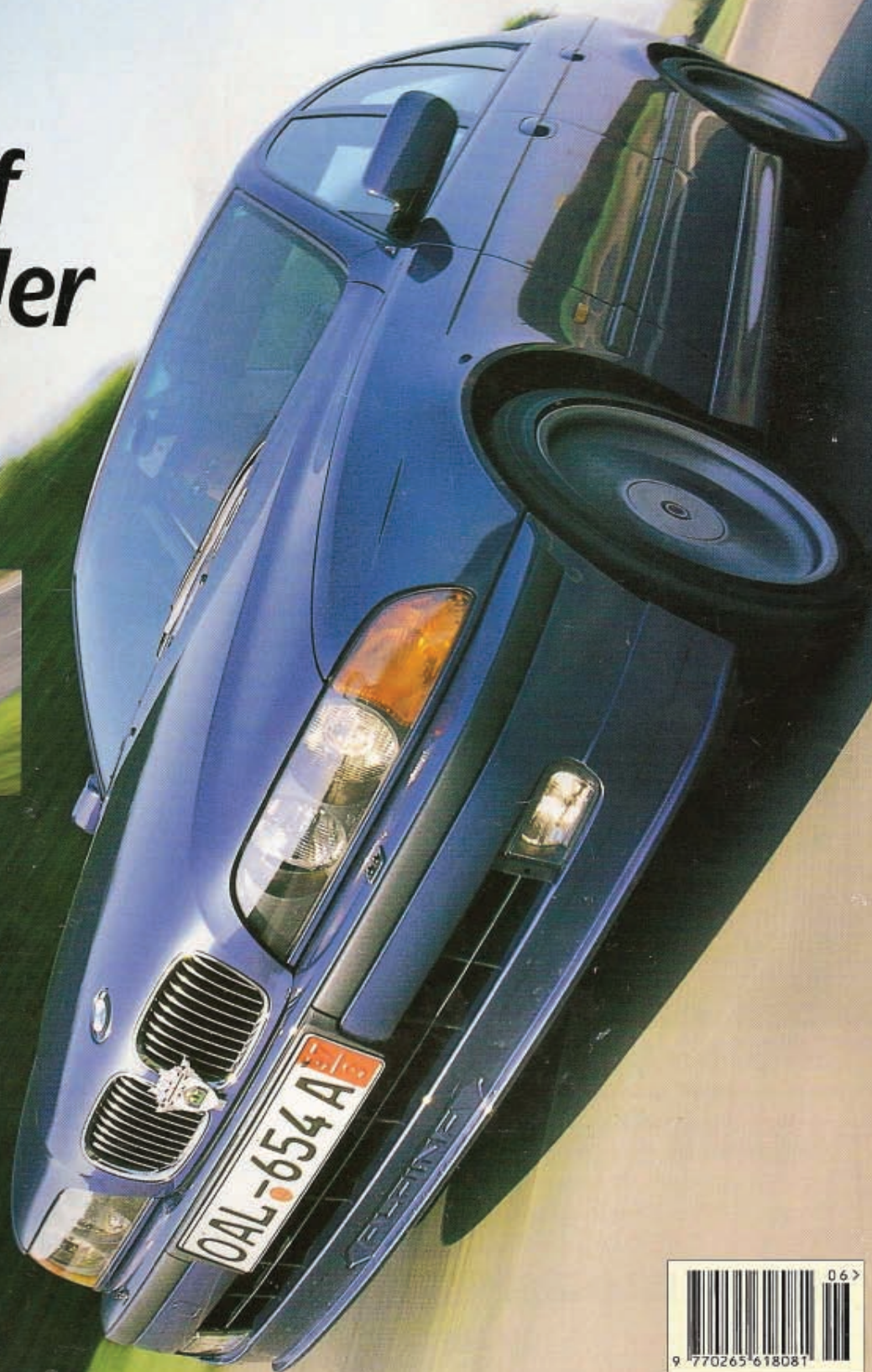
340bhp monsters

Alpina B10

and Audi S8



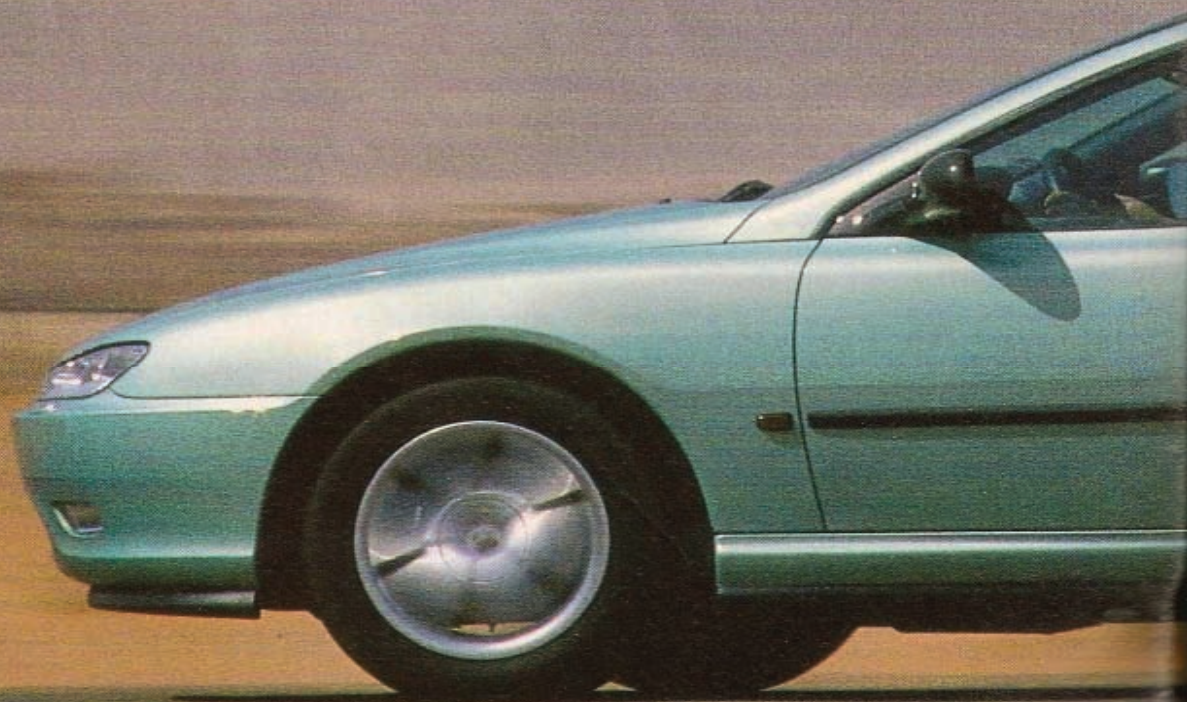
- Gorgeous Peugeot 406 Coupé
- 240bhp Audi A4
- Prodrive's new Impreza Turbo tackles Kielder Forest
- Le Mans: what it's like at 250mph



French Confection

Pictures: Christian Martin, L'auto-journal

PEUGEOT TAKES THE DELICIOUS CHASSIS AND SMOOTH 3.0-LITRE ENGINE FROM THE V6-POWERED 406 SALOON AND COVERS THEM IN GORGEOUS BODYWORK BY PININFARINA. RESULT: THE 406 COUPÉ



In certain lights and from certain angles, Peugeot's classy looking 406 Coupé has more than a hint of the Ferrari 456GT about it. Hardly surprising perhaps, because both cars were styled at Pininfarina, the Italian design house also responsible for the 406 saloon and the 405 before that. The comparison can only be flattering for Peugeot, because the most important criterion for any new coupé is that it looks fabulous, and on that count the two-door 406 seems to be a surefire winner.

Despite being a genuine four-seater, it also looks like a genuine coupé – elegant, slender, sexy – so won't suffer accusations of being merely a saloon minus a couple of doors, a criticism often levelled at the BMW 3 series Coupé. There's a clear Peugeot family resemblance, but the more you look at the Coupé the more you realise how different it is to the 406 saloon. In fact, there's not a shared body panel or light cluster; the only common components, on the outside at any rate, are the door handles.

It's an altogether different story under the skin, where the Coupé inherits the saloon's underpinnings lock, block and camshafts. That's not something to hold against it, mind, because the 406 has one of the best front-drive chassis around, and while its 2.0-litre four-cylinder engine isn't the sassiest of powerplants,

the recently launched 24-valve quad-cam 3.0-litre V6 is a corking bit of kit. Another shared component is the fascia moulding – to produce one unique to the Coupé would cost a small fortune – but Peugeot has given the instruments silvered surrounds and replaced the wooden trim strips with hi-fi grade grey plastic, in an attempt to make the two-door's dash look a bit special.

The grey trim strip on the passenger side has 'Pininfarina' stamped into its coarse-grained surface; not only did the company design the Coupé, but it is building it too, under licence in Italy. That's a glamorous connection for anyone planning to buy a Coupé, but it does mean that supplies of the car are likely to be tight, as Pininfarina's factory hasn't got a huge capacity. And as British dealers have already had more than 3000 serious enquiries (for a car about which up until now only a few scant details have been released), be prepared for a substantial waiting list.

Staying with Pininfarina for a sec, the company designed not only the Coupé's interior, but the front seats too. The seats are actually built by Recaro, to Pininfarina's specification, and are wonderfully comfortable, thanks in part to the fact that their internal springing has been tuned to match the springing rates of the suspension. As well as electric adjustment and automatic memory settings, the front seats move forward automatically when the seat back is tipped to allow passengers into the rear; they then waft magically ➤



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'An Alfa V6 may sing a sweeter tune, but the 406 is reciting from the same hymn sheet'





406 Coupé is roomier than most, particularly for rear-seat passengers. Pity they'll grow old waiting to get in – those electric runners take an age to move the seat. Seats are very comfy; apparently their springs are tuned to the same frequency as Radio Four, or something

back to their original position. Volvo's C70 coupé has a similar system, and given that a conventional manual mechanism is lighter, cheaper, and quicker to operate, one can't help wondering why they bother.

Still, back-seat riders will derive brief entertainment from the gimmickry; they will also doubtless be pleased they've got a fair bit of room to stretch their legs too. The very tall might have a grumble about the headroom, but for a coupé it verges on the generous. Ditto the boot.

That's the passengers happy; what about the driver? Have no fear, because you'll be smiling too. They say little things please little minds, but I defy you not to be impressed by the way the side windows automatically lower slightly when you pull the door open, then pop back up when you shut it behind you. It's to ensure the (frameless) side glass fits as snugly as possible against the rubber door seals; yes, BMW coupés have had this feature for years, but it's still a novel touch.

When you crank up the V6 for the first time it growls enigmatically for a moment, like a gentleman boxer issuing a polite threat, then settles down to a purring idle. This 3.0-litre unit (no messing about with mimsy 2.5-litre jobbies), which Peugeot shares with Citroën and Renault, is all-new and produces 194bhp at 6250rpm and 197lb ft of torque at 4250rpm. It's a near-silent

companion when you're cruising on the motorway, but finds its intoxicating – though not overpowering – voice when you rev it harder. An Alfa V6 may sing a sweeter tune, but the 406 is reciting from the same hymn sheet.

As you might guess from those power and torque outputs, the V6 is a gutsy little number. A mere stroke of the throttle pedal is all that's required to send the Coupé rushing forward from even the lowest engine speeds and its mid-range eagerness makes it a formidable, yet easy-going, performer in most everyday situations. It's pretty hot at the test track too, posting a 0-60mph time of 8.0secs and with a claimed top speed of 144mph. But what's so nice about the Coupé's character is that you don't have to rev it mercilessly the whole time to make rapid progress.

Your pace across country is greatly aided by the all-round excellence of the chassis. Grumble if you must at how the suspension bumps and thumps over ▶



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more severely ruffled surfaces, but afterwards remember to marvel at how isolated you are from the road for the other 90 per cent of the time. Peugeot's reputation for ride quality continues to shine brightly with the Coupé.

There's a similarly bright glow radiating from the Coupé's handling. Over-light power steering tarnishes the shine slightly, but otherwise it's the perfect picture of finely balanced composure. The chassis switches serenely from left to right lock as you scythe through a series of fast corners, and provided you stay within the (high) limits of its roadholding, its movements are graceful and hugely satisfying to the keen driver.

Maintain this state of grace and you'll be hard pressed to tell which end of the car does the driving, so neutral is its handling; it's also free of the torque-steer and other assorted front-end twitchings



Peugeot had to keep the 406 saloon's fascia, but chrome rings around the dials give the Coupé a filip (strange word, filip)

which can afflict powerful front-drivers.

Force the tyres to relinquish their grip and the nose makes the first move, pushing out wide yet ever-eager to duck back into line if you ease off the power. Don't be too abrupt about coming off the gas though, because as with all Peugeots there's a sting in the tail if you're not careful. It's called lift-off oversteer.

High prices – starting at £19,480 for the entry-level 2.0-litre model and rising to £25,780 for the V6 SE we've driven

here – aren't likely to prevent the 406 Coupé from becoming a raging success. Pretty enough to seduce the heart, practical enough to satisfy the head, and quick and able enough to put up a decent fight against its rivals, demand is likely to far outstrip supply. Up until now Peugeot hasn't managed to persuade many people to splash out on its dearer products – remember the last time you saw a 605? – but we reckon plenty of people will pay well over the odds to have a 406 Coupé. ①

