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GE39

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E39

Best car in the world? Probably, and now possibly the best used car in the world – here's everything you need to know about the last car you'll ever need to own

Words: Sebastian de Latour

Photography: David Shepherd/CTP



1995 may not have been an especially important year for you, but it was the year in which BMW would launch what was set to become one of its most successful models, and one of its best. The E39, the fourth generation 5 Series, made its first appearance in the autumn of 1995 and from the off it was clear that BMW was on to a winner. Of BMW's various designs over the years, this was one of the best and it managed to look fresh and new while retaining the all-important BMW styling cues that customers held so dear. The quad headlights were there, along with the kidney grille and the Hofmeister kink, while on the inside the car retained the driver-centric layout that BMW had become so well known for. At the time, the E39 may have seemed like a brave departure from the angular lines of the E34, but this wasn't some wild new look for the brand – it retained the family features and the evolution of the model was evident. The E36 and E38 had already been launched by this stage, so the E39's styling brought it in line with the rest of the range and the models echoed each other in their appearance. Yes, it was bigger, in every dimension in fact, but its styling was so clean, so well proportioned that it looked nigh-on perfect. It was as sensible as its predecessor, but it seemed more mature, more sophisticated, the perfect way to move the 5 Series on. The interior too had moved on, but as with the exterior, it was a subtle evolution of the traditional BMW values and you could see the similarities between the E34 and E39. The centre console and the instruments were all unmistakably BMW but the levels of refinement and the quality of the materials moved things up a level. The dashboard had a matt finish, which not only looked and felt expensive but reduced the amount of reflection on sunny days, while the whole interior had a much smoother design, reflecting the car's exterior design and eschewing the more angular aspects of the E34. Everything had been altered slightly to make it nicer to look at, nicer to touch and nicer to use.

Over its eight years in production, it was crowned as the best car in the world by just about every motoring publication on the planet, and remained at the top of any buying guide you would care to mention. Group tests against all and sundry were shrugged off by the all-conquering E39, the 5 Series always emerging the triumphant victor no matter what it was put up against. Even in its twilight years,

the E39 continued to impress and gave two generations of its main rival, the E-Class, a good drubbing, only being defeated by the latest incarnation and that was at nearly nine years old. Such was its success and so popular was it with the public that even now, three years after production ended and the E60 has settled in, there are many who cannot get on with the new design and favour an E39 over the later car.

The E39 wasn't just a pretty face though, and BMW's engineers had put in a great deal of effort to make significant improvements over the E34. The E39's bare shell was 50 per cent stiffer than that of the E34 and the use of aluminium suspension along with lighter drivetrain components meant a saving of 36 per cent over the equivalent steel parts, which meant a lower kerb weight than its predecessor, despite the size increase. As well as being bigger on the outside, the E39 was bigger on the inside, with a longer wheelbase and more room for front and rear occupants.

Over its eight years in production, the E39 has undergone a number of revisions, with a multitude of engines to choose from which were replaced and expanded following its facelift. The E39 5 Series was initially launched with two petrol engines and one diesel. The entry-level model was the 523i, powered by the 2.5-litre, 170bhp M52 engine, its misleading badging a BMW characteristic, while the next model up was the 193bhp 528i. In 1995, performance diesels didn't yet exist, and derv devotees had to make do with the 525tds, which took its engine from the E34 equivalent. It was neither especially torquey, with 191lb ft, or all that fast, with 143bhp, and it wasn't even that economical, with an average fuel consumption figure of 34mpg, but things would be very different in the not-to-distant future. These three were soon joined by the entry-level 520i, which mustered 150bhp from its two-litre straight-six and then the 5 Series muscle arrived in the shape of the V8-powered 535i and 540i. The 535i badge may have been the same as that of the E34 model, but the engine was all-new and delivered 235bhp and 243lb ft of torque, though the star of the show was undoubtedly the 540i. Its 4.4-litre V8 had the same capacity as its E34 counterpart, and while the E39 also produced 286bhp, this peak was achieved 100rpm lower down the rev range. The 310lb ft that the engine generated was a useful 15lb ft up on the E34 and was produced at a much more accessible

3900rpm, 600rpm earlier. The V8s both had six-speed manual gearboxes as standard, rear air suspension and chromed vertical bars in the kidney grilles – these two were also the heaviest and thirstiest models by some margin, and while the six-cylinder cars had rack and pinion steering, the V8s retained the E34's recirculating ball arrangement due to space constraints. In 1997, the Touring arrived, and looked identical to the saloon, bar the addition of the attractively-designed estate section. The Touring gained a number of practical additions over the Saloon, including a separately opening rear window, as featured on the E34 Touring, which was now easier to use, an optional sliding loading floor and a powered tailgate, which could be opened or closed from the key fob or a button on the tailgate itself. Despite these features, the Touring was very much a case of style over substance and while the load bay was flat, it wasn't especially large when compared to rivals, making the Touring very much what its name suggested – a lifestyle estate for weekends away – rather than a full-on Ikea-mobile. While the 523i and 528i had been the saloon's biggest sellers, Touring buyers turned their attention to the diesel Lump which best seemed to fit in with the car's image.

1998 saw the first major changes in the engine line-up, with revisions to existing engines and the addition of a number of new powerplants. The biggest news was the arrival of the 530d, which saw the first public appearance of the near-legendary M57 engine. Most car manufacturers had been working on direct-injection diesels, which boasted a 20 per cent increase in efficiency when compared to the older swirl chamber design, but BMW's efforts would overshadow anything that the others had put together. With 193bhp, the 530d matched the 528i for power but its torque peak of 302lb ft put it in the same ballpark as the 540i. On paper, its performance figures were all but a match for the petrol equivalent, but in the real world the vast reserves of torque made it seem much faster, and it was far more economical than the 528i and the old 525tds. More importantly, it was incredibly smooth and refined, a first for diesel and it suddenly gave buyers a real option to petrol. Early 1998 also saw the addition of the four-cylinder 520d and the 525d – both turbocharged and both taking advantage of the new direct injection technology, this meant that buyers could benefit, no matter what their budget,



The 530d is nearly as fast in a straight line as the 530i, more economical and the vast reserves of torque make it an effortless way to travel



and enjoy the diesel revolution. All petrol engines gained double VANOS and there was a major reshuffle in terms of power outputs and badging. The 520i's engine grew to a 2.2-litre, which meant 170bhp and 155lb ft of torque, while the 523i became the 525i – peak power was now 192bhp, but it now produced its 181lb ft of torque 450rpm earlier than before. The 528i became the 530i which meant power was now up to 231bhp and torque had risen to 221lb ft: figures that put it a whisker away from the 535i – this in turn gained an extra 10bhp which meant it now had 245bhp and torque also increased to 255lb ft, chopping 0.1 seconds off the 0-62mph time. The 540i's outputs remained unchanged, but the addition of the double VANOS meant that both peak power and torque were produced lower down the rev range, at 5500rpm and 3600rpm respectively. In addition to all this, BMW made its Steptronic gearbox available as the automatic option on all models, bar the 520d which could only be had as a manual.

The next major change would come in 2001 when the E39 would receive its facelift, which amounted to a number of cosmetic changes – the smallest of these were the widening of the of the chrome strip around the kidney grilles and the change from square fogs to a round design. The bigger changes involved the front and rear lights – the latter adopted Hella's Celis clusters, which employed LED strips that replaced the regular rear sidelight bulbs, creating illuminated strips that

stretched across the width of each cluster. The front received forward-facing indicators with chrome side inserts, projector headlights and, most importantly of all, the angel eye halos that have proved so popular.

Equipment levels on the cars were reasonable, without being overly generous, but any sensible buyer will have specced the essentials, so it won't be too much of a concern these days. Early cars came in either regular or SE flavour – all cars had ABS, traction control, twin airbags and an alarm while SE meant air-con, alloys, fog lamps and OBC. The 540i added a six-speed manual gearbox, M Sport suspension, electric suspension control and rear air suspension. Options included an automatic gearbox, which later became Steptronic, the M Sport suspension and PDC. When the Touring was launched, the trim levels were revised, and all cars gained driver and passenger head airbags, SEs received a multi-function steering wheel while 540is got DSC III. In 1998, both the 535i and 540i received Dynamic Brake Control and in 1999 the first Sport models were launched. The most desirable E39 trim, Sport, meant an aero kit, Sport suspension, Sports seats, Sport wheel, 18-inch alloys, brushed aluminium-look interior trim and Sport kick plates. When the E39 received its facelift, trim levels were again revised and the ES (Edition Sport) model was introduced for the 520i and 525d. This took some equipment from the Sport and some equipment from the SE and was the cheapest variant available other than the basic-spec

model. There were also five limited edition models produced, with each one available in a special colour – Avus blue, Aegean blue, Midnight blue, Champagne and Champagne II.

On the road

One of the reasons that the E39 proved so successful was down to its exceptional driving dynamics, which meant that no matter which engine option you went for, you'd still be able to experience the car's exceptional balance and all-round abilities. This is without a doubt one of the reasons why the E39 was so often labelled as being the best car in the world. The sweetest handlers are the six-cylinder models – the relative lack of weight over the front wheels and the use of rack and pinion steering means eager turn-in and precise steering with plenty of feel, allowing you to get stuck into the back roads with vigour. While the regular cars may be far from sporty, the suspension allowed for a compliant and comfortable ride but at the same time managed to stave off excess body roll. Drive a petrol 'six and a diesel back-to-back and you can feel the extra weight in the nose, but it's not enough to spoil the fun – it's only the V8s that suffer, partly due to their engine weights but also due to the recirculating ball steering. It's not terrible, but it does rob you of some steering feel, making the car seem more aloof, but it's a minor point when you balance it against the performance.



All cars came with a manual gearbox as standard, which is so good that it's a shame that the vast majority of E39s were specced as autos. The manual 'box features a lovely, smooth gearchange, with a well-weighted action and a perfect throw, allowing you to power through the 'box when the mood takes you. The auto is an excellent 'box in its own right, offering up creamy smooth, nearly imperceptible shifts as it shifts up through its five ratios. If you're happy with an auto, then what you really want is one of the later Steptronic-equipped cars – while this was a still a five-speed gearbox, you could throw the lever across to a separate plane which then allowed you to shift up and down through the gears by nudging the gear selector. It's not as good as a manual, but the extra control over the gears is a welcome addition and makes the automatic experience more involving.

With so many different models to choose from, it's hard to know where to start. First to go are the 520i, 520d and 525tds – as far as getting a taste of the 5 Series experience goes, all three can offer you executive motoring on a relative shoestring and all three are fine automobiles in their own right. However, the 525td is too unrefined and too slow, the 520d only has four cylinders and is slower than the 525tds and the 520i is equally underpowered and is barely more economical than its more powerful six-cylinder-engined counterparts. You'd do well to spend a little more to get a slightly more powerful Five to get the most from the experience.

The V8s weren't especially popular when new, partly because of the price and partly because they may have seemed somewhat excessive, but they make a great secondhand buy. This is mainly thanks to the fierce depreciation which means that today the cheapest V8s aren't any more expensive than the six-cylinder models. The 535i made some sense initially but when the 530i was introduced, the two extra cylinders and 15bhp couldn't justify the £5,000 price difference. Now, however, it's a great way to get eight cylinders under your bonnet and 245bhp with plenty of torque means brisk progress, at the expense of petrol. V8 models came with generous equipment levels, so you're getting a lot of car for your money, but for a little more money you can have a whole lot more car with a 540i. Genuinely fast and silky smooth, the 540i has all the same V8 charms as the 535i but with even more clout – 60mph in a shade over six seconds is not to be sniffed at and the 540i will reach its 155mph limiter with vigour. The difference in fuel economy between the V8s is negligible and if something's worth doing, it's worth doing right, so the 540i is the best choice if you want the ultimate Five. Don't expect too much of a driver's car though, as the extra weight and less involving steering make the 535i and 540i better suited to long-distance cruising than a B-road blast.

The rest of the range is so good and caters for just about every need that it's hard to cut it down any further. The 523i, 525i and 525d are all extremely capable cars – the petrols have enough

power and torque to make the E39 experience exciting, while rack and pinion steering means you won't feel left-out when the roads get challenging. The 525d is both economical and fairly quick to boot, making it perfect for those who do a lot of miles but don't need the extra performance of the 530d – there's almost nothing in it in terms of price, mind. And so we're left with the three best models in the E39 range – the 528i, the 530i and the 530d. All three are quick, all three are involving and all three are great to own and drive. The 528i is one of the best ways to buy a great 5 Series and will pretty much cover all bases, but if you can afford a little more, then the 530i is easily the best all-round E39 money can buy. The engine is as sweet as you like, it really will do everything you need and just a little more. The only negative that comes to mind is that if you plan on doing a lot of miles, then the fuel economy may be an issue – it's not bad, but as an auto and with a healthy dose of city driving, you might find yourself at the pumps more than you'd want. The 530d is the answer to all your problems, offering great fuel economy and the serious torque means that effortless progress is just a flex of your foot away. Being a turbo diesel, it's easy to get more power out of it with a simple performance upgrade. Price is the only thing you have to take into consideration, as the cheapest 530ds are more than the equivalent 530is, meaning you could save yourself some money buying a petrol which would cover your fuel expenses for years to come.

History

1995: 523i, 528i and 525tds launched, available in standard- or SE-spec. 520i and V8-powered 535i and 540i added later in the year.



1997: Touring launched, available as 520i, 523i, 528i, 540i or 525tds – the latter proves the biggest seller. Spec levels revised slightly – head airbags now standard, SE receives multi-function steering wheel and V8s get DSC III.

1998: First major revisions to the line-up. 530d launched, and later in the year 520d and 525d go on sale. All petrols now have Double VANOS, 520i grows to 2.2-litre and puts out 170bhp, 523i becomes 525i and has 192bhp, 528i becomes 530i with 231bhp. Automatic gearbox option replaced by Steptronic with manual shift function, though not available for the 520d.



2000: Facelift for all models – wider chrome strips around kidney grilles, round fog lights, Celis rear-light clusters with LED strips and revised headlight clusters with forward-facing indicators, projector headlamps and angel eyes. Sport model introduced – this included an aero kit, bigger wheels, Sport seats and Sport suspension. ES model also introduced which combines equipment from both Sport and SE. 530d now has 193bhp instead of 184bhp.



Front

Headlights misting-up is a common problem – check that the rubber drains on the back of the units are attached properly and turn on your high beam for about 10 minutes to dry the lights out.

Dust in the inner light covers is also a common problem and simply a result of the headlights' poor design and there's nothing you can do about it.

A faulty rain sensor can be cured by getting the sensor reset, or it's possible that a new sensor or screen will be needed.

If your headlamp washers are dumping water around your wheels rather than actually spraying any on your headlights, remove the wheel arch liner and it's likely that you'll see a hose that has

SPECIFICATION

**520i/520i/523i/525i/
528i/530i/535i/540i/
520d/525tds/525d/530d**

ENGINE

Capacity: 1991/2171/2494/2793/2979/3498/4398/
1951/2497/2497/2926cc

Bore/stroke: 80x66/80x72/84x75/84x84/84x89.6/
84x78.9/92x82.7mm

Compression ratio: 11:1/11.1/10.5:1/10.5:1/10.2:1/
10.2:1/10.0:1/10.0:1

Max power: 150/170/170/192/193/231/235(245)/
286/136/143/163/184(193)bhp

Max torque: 140/155/181/181/207/221/243(255)/
310(325)/207/192/258/302lb ft

DIMENSIONS

Length/width/height: 4775/1800/1430(1440)mm

Track front/rear: 1515/1530mm

Wheelbase: 2830mm

Tank capacity: 70-litre

Weight: 1410/1495/1420/1420/1440/1540/1610/
1630/1490/1480/1595/1625kg

BRAKES

Front: Discs, servo assisted, ABS

Rear: Discs, servo assisted, ABS

CHASSIS

Suspension

Front: Double-pivot MacPherson struts

Rear: Multi-link axle with trailing arms,
twin transverse upper links

Steering: Rack and pinion, recirculating ball in V8,
power assisted

Gearbox: Five-speed manual, six-speed manual in
540i, optional five-speed auto/Steptronic

WHEELS

Front: 6.5x15, 7x15, 7x16-inch

Rear: 6.5x15, 7x15, 7x16-inch

PERFORMANCE

0-62mph:

10.2/8.8/8.5/7.8/7.5/7.1/7.0(6.9)/6.2/10.6/
10.4/8.9/7.8 seconds

10.4/8.9/7.8 seconds

Top speed:

137/140/142/148/147/155/155/
155/128/131/136/143mph

Economy:

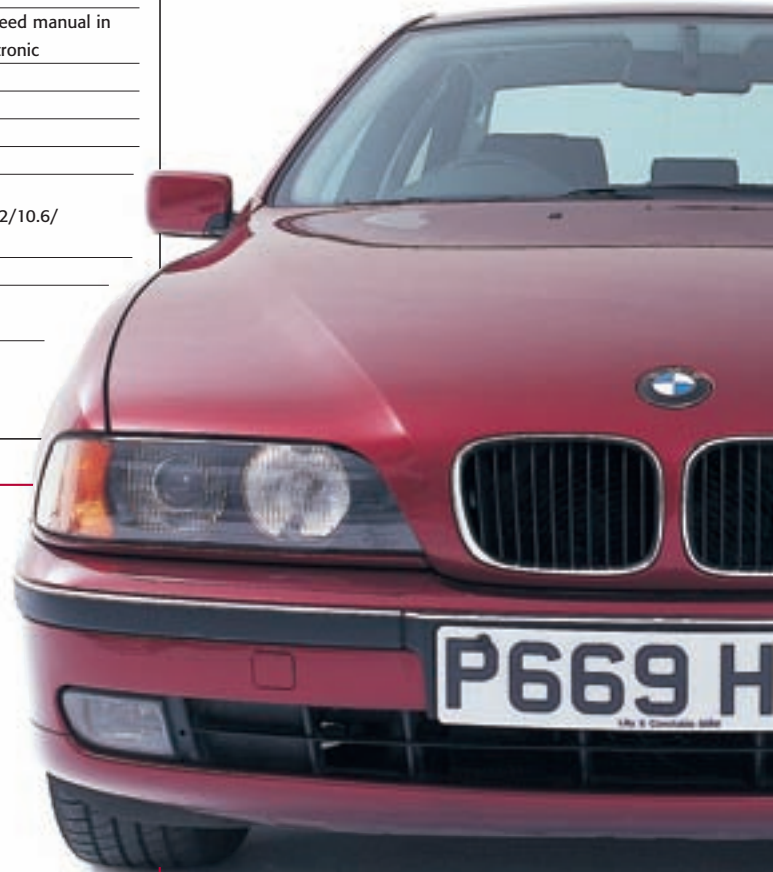
26.7/30/26.7/30/26.2/30.4/
21.4/20.6/46.3/34/39.8/37.7mpg

Buying one

There's so much variety that you really don't have an excuse for not finding your perfect partner.

Whichever model you're interested in, there's plenty of choice, though as we mentioned earlier, the smaller-engined variants aren't worth going for as they won't be that much cheaper than the other cars on offer and they'll struggle to cope with the E39's weight. Things start getting interesting from the 523i and 525i, and both of these will give you a great driving experience, but we'd look at getting either a 528i or a 530i which are easily the two best all-round models in the whole range. If you want a diesel, forego the under-engined 520d or the 525tds and look at a 525d or 530d. The 525d is a great all-rounder and will appeal to those who want a frugal yet capable car, but if you want to push the boat out then the 530d is certain to exceed all your expectations. The 535i and 540i are very tempting as they offer a lot of car for the money, and in theory only the fuel bills will be bigger than those of the other models. If something goes wrong with the engine, though, you could be faced with some hefty bills and the extra weight and recirculating ball steering dull the driving experience a little.

Make sure you get a car with leather and if you want to play it safe, an auto 'box as well. Worthwhile options include climate control, PDC, bigger alloys (as most cars came with 16s as standard) and at least a single-slot CD player. On later cars the Sport is without doubt the best model to buy, just make sure it's got the standard aluminium trim and not optional wood, xenons are a worthwhile investment and sat-nav is a nice addition, though don't pay through the nose for it. Full service history is essential and an extended warranty is always a good thing to have, though it's not that common, so be prepared to wait if you want that extra safety net.



Engine

540is have been known to misfire, usually caused by the use of low-grade fuel and not allowing the car to warm-up properly before driving it hard. Don't scrimp when it comes to petrol, possibly even buying super unleaded to keep the engine happy.

Both the water pump and fuel pump are weak points – the plastic impellers on early water pumps can fail.

As long as the car has been serviced regularly and received regular oil changes, then high mileage shouldn't be an issue. Wear and tear will always occur, so various components will need replacing, but the internals will be in fine fettle.

Serious overheating and copious amounts of steam coming from under your bonnet could well mean a cracked expansion tank. Luckily, you can buy this separately from the radiator and it'll cost you £38 plus VAT from a dealer.

The biggest worry you can have when buying an E39 is the dreaded Nikasil problem. Early engines used Nikasil in the cylinder liners, which reacted with certain ingredients in petrol causing it to corrode the cylinder lining. Symptoms include poor starting, a rough idle when cold, increased oil consumption and eventually the car refusing to start altogether. A compression test is the best way to see what's going on with your engine – low compression means big problems. The cars that were affected were six-cylinder models from 1996 to 1998 and V8s manufactured from 1996 to mid-'97. Most cars will have been fixed under BMW warranty, and you can check whether a car has had the corrective engine surgery performed by handing over the VIN to a dealer. There are,

however, some cars that will still be running fine without any work and these are the ones to be careful of as they may well be on the verge of some major problems. Do your homework and you've got nothing to worry about.

If your alternator is playing up, giving over voltage, then the easiest thing to do is to get it reconditioned. Removing it is an easy task in itself, with information readily available on various forums, and it should cost no more than £60 to get it reconditioned and as good as new.

A tappety noise is likely to be the result of poor quality oil or the wrong viscosity – make sure you stick to the recommended type, but take a look at forums to see if other E39 owners have found something that works better.

Power steering fluid reservoirs often leak – the standard hose clips are regarded as being the problem.

Viscous fan couplings can also fail, which causes the engine temperature to increase when in traffic, so keep an eye on the gauge.



Back

Tourings often suffer from faulty rear wipers. The most obvious cause may be the wiper motor but it could also be a missing connector pin within the motor assembly or a poor electrical connection. If the wiper arm is extremely stiff, you need to pump a load of oil into the little hole in the arm where it attaches to the glass – move the arm around by hand and then add some more oil. Eventually the arm should free up.

If the PDC isn't working, check the fuse. It's also worth cleaning the sensors, putting the car in reverse and checking each sensor to see if it makes a ticking or clicking noise which indicates it's working correctly.

You can easily upgrade to the later Celis rear lights, though a few minor modifications will be needed to ensure they fit correctly and you'll need to ensure that the kit your buying includes the LED modules, as they run lower voltage and your OBC will think you've got a blown bulb otherwise.

Interior:

A faulty hedgehog (heater resistor) will cause your ventilation blower to stick and can also cause battery problems, so if you have any fan problems, this is one of the most likely culprits and it will need changing.

Noisy air-con with a failed-bearing sound could mean imminent fan problems, while faulty air-con could also mean a faulty relay or a clogged-up system, but you might also need to get the system re-gassed or, in a worst-case scenario, you might need to get the compressor replaced, which isn't cheap.

A funny smell from the air-con and a lack of cold air means that you need to get the system re-gassed, a service offered by many garages and specialists.

Heater buttons can be bought individually from the internet or as a set from your dealer for £17.96 plus VAT. It might be cheaper to buy one, but if one button goes, then the others are sure to follow.

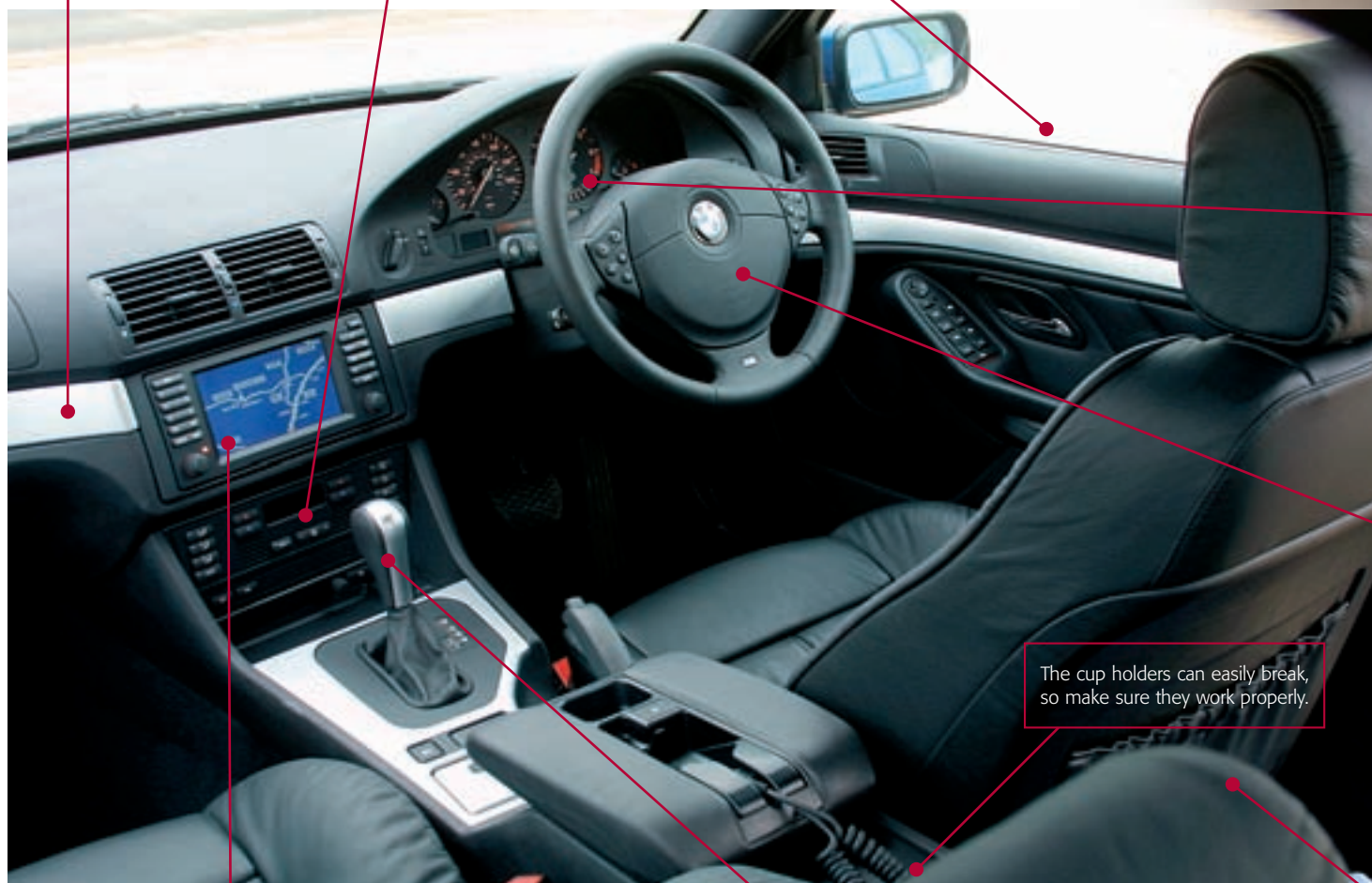
The climate control buttons can sometimes crack, so check them all to make sure they look to be in good condition.

If you don't like your car's interior trim, you can easily get hold of a different kit and swap the bits over as the old ones simply pull out.

If the driver's window refuses to open but all the others work from the same controls, it could either be the motor or rainwater leaking on to the circuit board in the door, causing the fault.

Uneven tyre wear is likely to be caused by worn bushes and ball joints, so get these checked out. Rear ball joint failures as are common problem.

If your car has self-levelling rear suspension and one side drops down, the cause is more than likely a leaking air spring. These rubber bags take the place of regular springs and can split, causing air to leak out. These can be easily, though not especially cheaply, replaced by your dealer.



The cup holders can easily break, so make sure they work properly.

If your car has the MkIII widescreen sat-nav monitor then it's a simple plug-and-play swap for the MkIV DVD-based sat-nav system, which boasts faster map access and more information per disc. You can find these readily on the internet.

The standard stereo on the E39 isn't particularly good and uses Nokia speakers – replacing them with component speakers from the likes of Alpine and adding a Basslink will make a huge difference to sound quality.

When it comes to Bluetooth, cars fitted with early UFL modules don't have the voice control function. This can be activated using retrofit coding, with the 610 module being the last one that was freely codeable and that was for phone functions only. Dealers now charge approximately £300 for the coding and it may well be simpler to buy a later UFL.

While we can't condone it, there are plenty of leads available which will allow you to watch the TV while on the go. You can also buy digital tuners giving you access to all the freeview channels.

A number of owners with manual cars have reported that when warm, the gear lever becomes stiff and stops self-centring – this is nothing to worry about and the gearbox will still function normally.

Another problem that has been experienced by a number of owners is a fault with the automatic gearbox where the car refuses to move or rev past a certain point while in D, but switching to Steptronic mode will allow you to drive normally as long as you change gears yourself. It may be possible to continue in D by switching the lever across as long as you don't come to a stop or the problem will resume. The gearbox uses a crankshaft sensor to calculate the torque converter speed, so if this becomes faulty it is likely to be the cause, but a faulty rear-wheel sensor may also be to blame.

Manual transmissions will often make noises while idling when warm – this is normal.

Check your handbrake, as they often don't work as well as you might expect and will need adjusting.



If you want to lower your car without ruining the ride, a popular choice are Eibach springs, which drop your ride height by 30mm at the front and around 25mm at the rear and will also improve the car's handling.

If your electric mirrors aren't folding, then you'll either need a new motor or the mirror control module might be broken. If you've got auto-dimming mirrors which no longer dim, then you'll need to get the glass replaced, and that's not cheap.

Faulty ABS sensors will cause your ABS light to come on – there's a sensor in each wheel at the back of the disc, so it's a case of finding the broken one. It could also be the wires that are attached to these which could be worn. The front wheel bearings are also a weak point and may need to be replaced.

A faulty OBC with a pixillated display is a common problem, and there's no cheap or reliable fix other than getting it repaired – a service people are offering on the internet – or getting a new display, though this isn't cheap. Some facelift cars have low OBC while some have high OBC, which was standard on facelift 540is – the way to tell the difference is that low OBC has a separate 'doors open' indicator, while high OBC features a wide display with alphanumeric warnings.

If you start experiencing all sorts of bizarre and seemingly unconnected electrical gremlins occurring at once, such as radio problems, the airbag light coming on and the electrically adjustable steering wheel moving of its own accord, then you've probably got a faulty ignition switch. A new one will stop all that. You might not know, but the V8s have a neat soft-starting feature, whereby rather than having to hold the key in the start position before the engine fires, you simply need to twist it to 'start' once and let it go, the starter motor activating and disengaging itself with just one twist of your key. A vibration through the steering wheel at 50-60mph is often due to a combination of out-of-balance wheels and several tired bushes at the front end.

If your airbag light keeps coming on it's likely to be the passenger seat occupancy sensor or the sensor wires – get both changed just to be sure of curing the problem. If you fancy some heated seats, you can buy aftermarket retrofit kits as dealers no longer sell these – try www.heatedseatkits.com. Despite the well-put-together interior, the plastic seat trim is a weak point and can come loose or snap.



Should I buy...? Petrol or diesel?

Another tough choice. If we're talking earlier cars, it'll have to be petrol, as things didn't get interesting on the diesel-front until the arrival of the 530d and, to a lesser extent, the 525d. The 525tds may have been popular with the Touring crowd, but by today's standards it falls short of the mark – stick with a 523i or 528i. Once the 530d appeared, however, things got more complicated as it is nearly as fast in a straight line as the 530i, more economical and the vast reserves of torque made it an effortless way to travel. On the other hand, the 530i had one of the finest petrol engines money could buy, smooth, powerful and it just loved to rev. Looking at the market now, diesels command a higher resale value, but this is good news if you don't do many miles as you can easily save a few thousand pounds by getting a petrol. The market may love the diesel, but don't forget how good BMW petrols really are.

manual is an equally good gearbox, a pleasure to use and it will always provide the more involving driving experience and you'll get more enjoyment out of the petrols with a manual, as well as better fuel economy. There are fewer manuals around but don't expect to see rock-bottom prices as most E39s are similarly priced, regardless of gearbox. Because most people will be looking for autos, trying to sell a manual could take some time and you might find that people will make you some silly offers. On the other hand, there might be people desperate for a manual who will be willing to pay a good price. We'd play it safe with an auto, but don't let that stop you if you really want a manual.

Manual or automatic?

Buying an E39 without leather or an auto is almost market suicide, but it's not as simple as that. The auto is easily the more desirable transmission, it's a very good gearbox as well, especially the later Steptronics, and it's very well suited to the relaxed nature of the diesels. The



What's out there?

On the cheap

1998 R reg, 520i SE: High mileage, metallic China blue, grey cloth, manual, MoT September '06, alloys, air-con, fsh. £1,995.

It's a manual, it's got cloth seats and it sounds like it's been to the moon and back, but this is the cheapest E39 that we could find. SE-spec means a few mod-cons, the exterior looks pretty tidy and the full history offers some reassurance. If you're desperate to own an E39 and you haven't got a lot of cash, here's your next purchase.

Money no object

2003, 53-reg, 530d SE: 29k miles, silver, black leather, sunroof, air-con, CD changer, xenons, 18-inch alloys, service pack, fsh. £25,900.

You'd have to really want an E39 for this kind of money, but this is a fine example. It's a good colour, both inside and out, it's an auto, it's got one of the best engines and the xenons and CD changer are must-haves, especially for this kind of money. No surprise to see full service history, though the addition of the service pack is a welcome bonus. Too much really, but no doubt a perfect E39.

Tempting

1996 N reg, 540i: 85k miles, green, 16-inch alloys, leather seats, fsh, auto, air-con, M Sports suspension, rear air-suspension. £3990.

A 540i for under £4k? Now that's value for money. Not too much given away about the spec, but V8s came with a fair amount of toys as standard and it's got the essentials like the auto and leather. Low mileage for the year, backed up by a full service history means it should be in fine condition. Shame it's not in the best colour and has small wheels, but you'll struggle to get more motor for your money.

Best buy

2001, 51-reg 530i Sport: 35k miles, Titan silver, auto, CD changer, climate control, cruise control, black leather, PDC, rain sensor, xenons, fBMWsh. £13,990.

Another tough call, but we've gone for this silver 530i as you'll save a few thousand over a diesel version and you certainly won't regret the decision. It's got a low mileage, good colour, highly desirable Sport-spec and some sensible extras make this the perfect E39. There's also a full service history and it's a facelift model – this car wants for nothing and neither will you. Worth every penny, and when the time comes to move on, this will return a tidy sum.



Something special

The E39 has never been racing, has never been turned into an art car or a vehicle that will save our planet. It has, however, been the subject of some pretty outlandish experiments by the various tuners, and here are some of the wilder sides of the E39. Hartge was one of the first companies to try its hand at modifying the E39, though its earlier efforts lacked the wildness of its more recent cars. Its H5 2.8 was a breath of fresh air, with 230bhp courtesy of almost £5,000 of engine work in addition to a subtle body kit, larger wheels and revised suspension. In 1998, tuners became more adventurous, MK Motorsport fitted a Vortex supercharger to the 540i, which resulted in 430bhp and a hefty 457lb ft of torque. In 1999 we featured the most extreme E39 so far, MVR's 6.1-litre V12-powered 5 Series. Based on a 550i and with a custom interior, paddle-shift gearbox,

full body styling, 18s and updated suspension, the MVR 6.1 packed a 438bhp punch backed-up by nearly 458lb ft of torque, making it the wildest E39 the world had ever seen. Mosselman also tried its hand at tuning the E39, coming up with a standard-looking 540i that concealed a 378bhp supercharger conversion, which also gave 406lb ft and meant 0-62mph in a swift 5.8 seconds and a 176mph top end. Hartge stuck with increased displacement for the next of its E39s that we featured, a wild-looking 540i Touring which had its engine enlarged to 5.0-litres and now produced 350bhp and 376lb ft – Hartge claimed a mere 5.1 to 62 along with a 174mph top speed. The last modified E39 we featured was LSV's supercharged 540i – with 410bhp and 423lb ft it was fast, but nowhere near as wild as some of the car's that came before it, but as swan songs go, you couldn't complain.





Wild engine conversions and aggressive styling make properly modified E39s something to lust after



Extras

1:43 scale

E39 5 Series Touring, black
(BMW part number: 80 42 0 301 607)



1: 87 scale

E39 5 Series Saloon, silver
(80 41 0 137 981)

E39 5 Series Touring, Biaritz blue
(80 41 9 421 516)

Books

BMW 5 Series: The Complete Story
(2005, The Crowood Press Ltd, £14.99)

BMW 5 Series Service Manual
(2003, Robert Bentley Inc, £99.95)

*BMW 5-Series 6-Cylinder Petrol: '93 to '03
Haynes Service and Repair manuals*
(2005, Haynes, £17.99)

Inside knowledge E39 owner Russell Jones

Having sold my 1992 325i Coupé to a friend, I bought my E39 528i in November 2004. I'd been to look at a number of E39s within my budget, all of which seemed to be Oxford green and most had Sand interior which was not to my liking – only one had black interior, but I found that overwhelmingly dark. I eventually found my 1997 Glacier green version with an Aubergine interior.

The car drove very well from cold on two separate test drives, however, I was very wary of the engine block being Nikasil, as a number of 328 owners on our own website (www.e36coupe.com) had experienced the Nikasil issue. Thankfully the block on the E39 had already been replaced. The on-board computer display within the instrument cluster appeared to be pixillated, but messages displayed were still legible, so I went back the following day and did the deal on the car.

When I got the car home, some 40 minutes drive through traffic, I noticed a rattling sound that appeared to be coming from the gearbox area. I was slightly put out by this, but as the gear changes seemed to be fine (albeit rather notchy between first and second and second and third), I was not too concerned.

While the upholstery was in good condition, the car did need a couple of bits of plastic trim that had snapped or been broken. The large plastic trim around the side of the driver seat had snapped. This seemed to be poor design in my opinion, as the seat cushion doesn't offer sufficient support while getting in and out of the car, so placing your weight on this plastic trim piece is almost inevitable (the passenger seat trim has also broken since). I'd also noticed that the front camshaft oil seal was leaking rather badly, so I took the car to Vines (Redhill) and had the seal replaced.

All was well with the car, except that as the weather was warming up, the rattling had got worse. To cut a long story short, I ended up having a new gearbox and clutch fitted. The difference was instantly noticeable with much smoother gear changes and no rattling. However, the absence of the gearbox rattle highlighted another familiar sound of a worn wheel bearing, so I had both front units replaced. For a few months, motoring was relatively trouble free. A light steering wheel shimmy was traced to a slightly buckled alloy wheel, which was a relief, as I had assumed it was due to worn track control arm bushes (another common fault). The cruise control was faulty, although I traced this to a poorly fitted switch on the clutch pedal.

The standard stereo speakers are also fairly poor for what is supposed to be a luxury saloon, but these are easy to replace with aftermarket items. I changed the alloy wheels to 17" BBS split-rims, upgraded the front and rear lights, replaced the standard suspension springs with Eibach Sports to give the car a much more aesthetic, lower stance as well as to improve the handling, I modified the inlet manifold and throttle body and remapped the ECU.

As with any car, the E39 has several weak points, however, once these are sorted the E39 is a great car to drive. Even on stock suspension the car handles well, considering it's size, and I find the 523i and 528 to be good performers as well as returning a reasonable MPG. The E39 has to be one of the best value saloons on the market if you are looking for a well-equipped and dependable car. In standard guise, the E39's looks can be somewhat uninspiring, but a few cosmetic upgrades can easily rectify this.

The E39 gave two generations of its main rival, the E-Class Mercedes, a good drubbing

