

THE THRILL OF DRIVING

evo

TESTED

670BHP MERC-AMG C63

Why it misses the mark

INSIGHT

SYNTHETIC FUEL TEST

The performance car saviour?

NEW M2 & M3 TOURING DRIVEN

WORLD EXCLUSIVE: On the road with 2023's most wanted



PLUS

CIVIC TYPE R

Honda at its brilliant best

PORSCHE 956

Le Mans legend anatomy

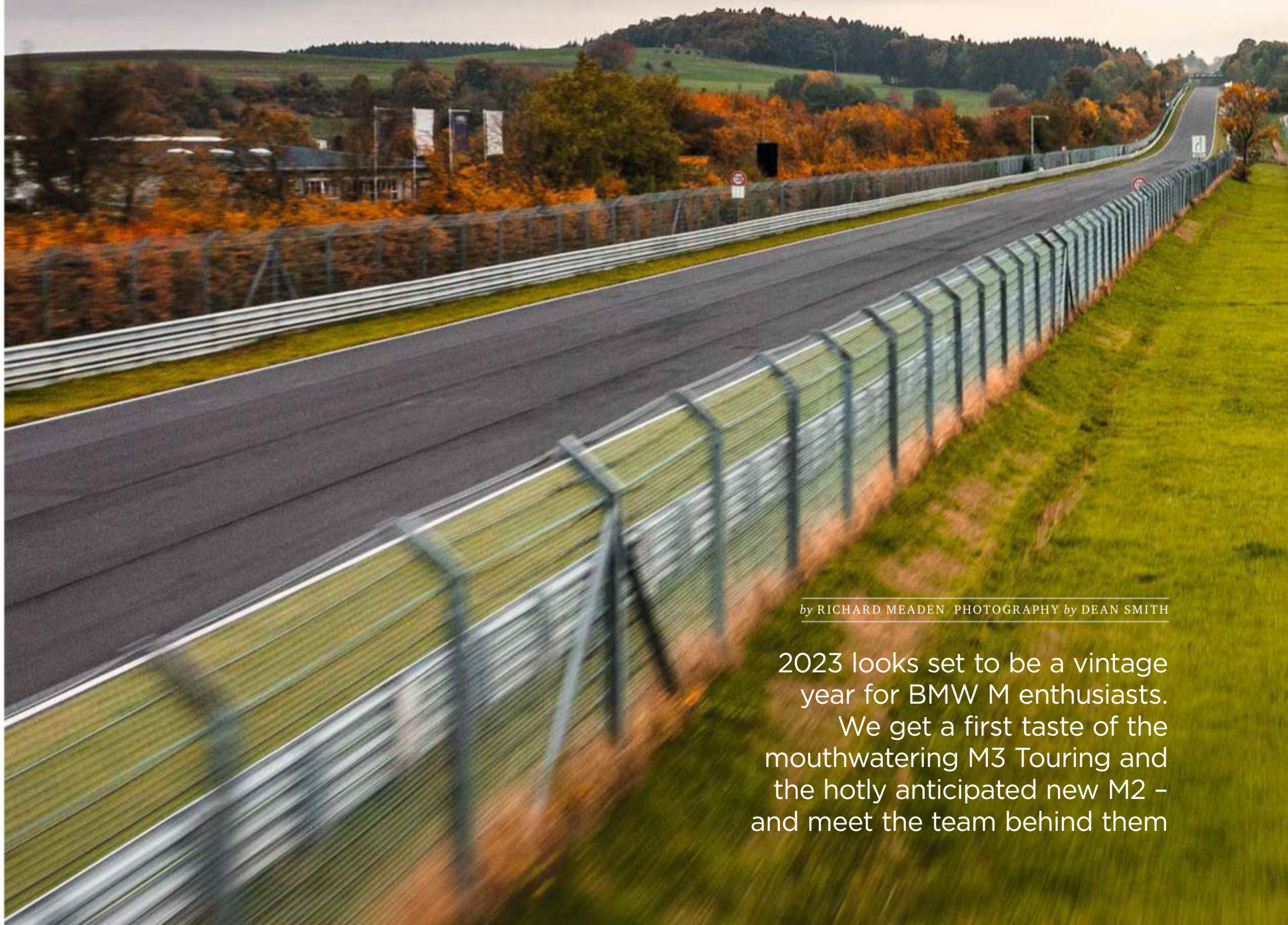
ANDY WALLACE

Mr 304mph's life & cars



FEBRUARY 2023 UK£5.25 US\$14.99 CAN\$15.55

MAG



by RICHARD MEADEN PHOTOGRAPHY by DEAN SMITH

2023 looks set to be a vintage year for BMW M enthusiasts. We get a first taste of the mouthwatering M3 Touring and the hotly anticipated new M2 – and meet the team behind them

BMW





HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT, BMW'S M TEST CENTRE at the Nürburgring sits proudly in the heart of the most famous village in Germany. Almost in the shadow of the iconic castle and a steak-on-a-stone's throw from the famous Pistenklause restaurant, this former BMW dealership is itself one of Nürburg's most recognisable landmarks.

It's not the official home of the M division – that's Garching, on the outskirts of Munich. Still, it's fair to say this smart, 1200m² building, where all M cars are looked after when being subjected to hundreds of laps of the Nordschleife and thousands of road miles on local test loops, is a vital asset and an intrinsic element of M's DNA.

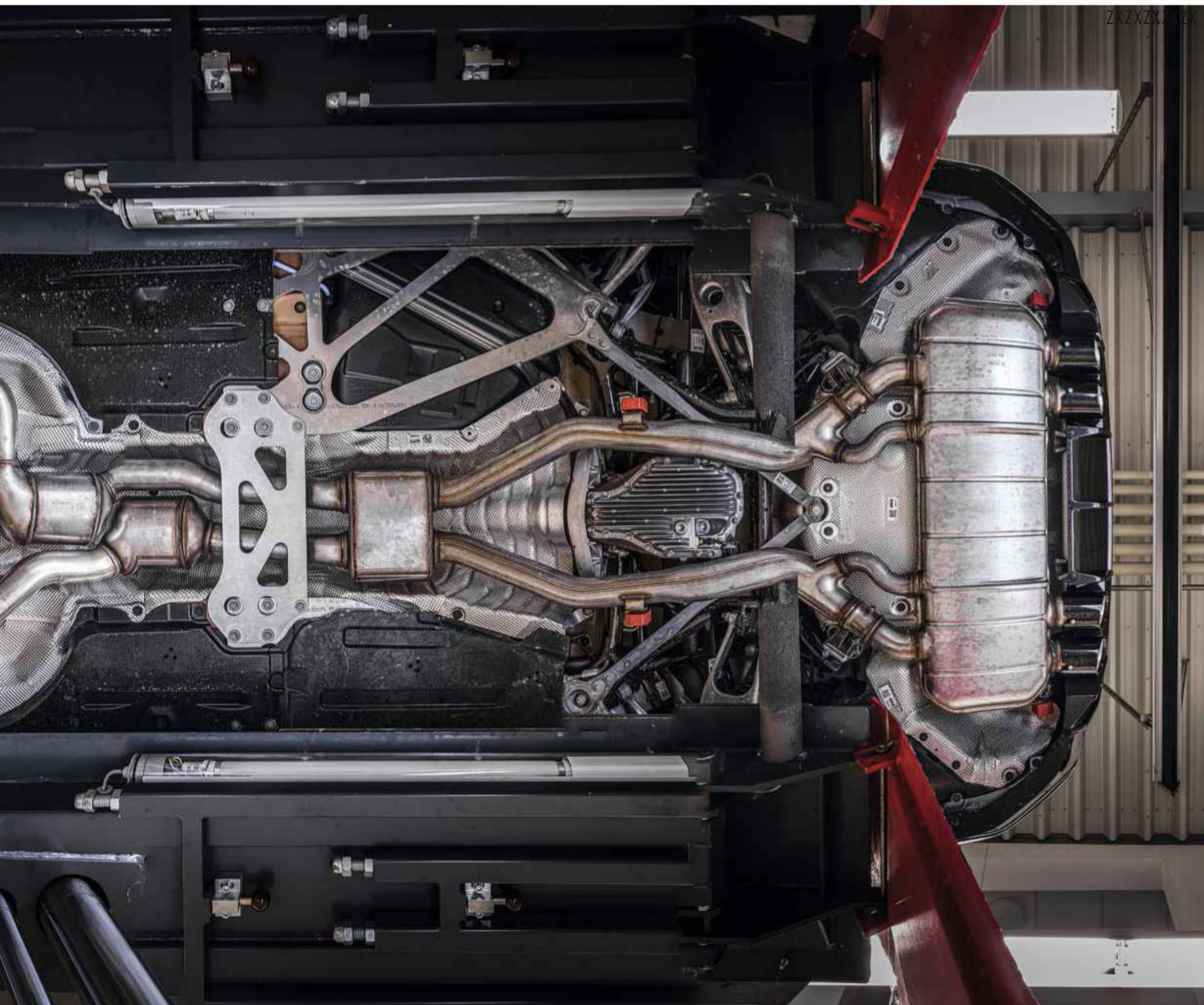
For the test and development team, Nürburg is home-from-home. It's here, as the Nordschleife's famous Industry Pool completes its last week of testing for 2022, that we meet up with four of M's most influential people: Dirk Häcker, M head of engineering; Sven Esch, head of driving dynamics; Klaus Huber, head of functional integration

driving dynamics and driver assistance, and Peter Schmid, team lead, functional integration driving dynamics.

This isn't your usual in-and-out press trip. Instead, we'll be hanging out with the M guys for a few days, chatting all things M and getting a sense of what makes them tick. Oh, and while we're here we'll be driving the long-awaited M3 Touring and brand new M2 coupe, the former in undisguised production-ready form, the latter in final phase development and cloaked in the psychedelic swirls worn by all yet-to-be-launched prototypes.

We could have flown out to Germany, but we elect to drive. Not the best decision when there are two blokes clambering atop the UK's busiest bridge, but if you're going to thumb your nose at a Just Stop Oil protest you might as well do it by driving an X5 M Competition to the Nürburgring.

In many ways the X5 M is a perfect illustration of how the M division has had to morph to reflect the changing fast car landscape. It doesn't feel like that long ago (OK, it's quite



a long time ago) when we were bemoaning the E36 M3 and how it had deserted the purity and motorsport pedigree of the E30 in pursuit of mainstream success. Subsequent E46 and E90 M3s proved our resistance to change was somewhat misguided. Now, with M's model portfolio extending to all four corners of the BMW range, including the aforementioned super-SUV and familiar M2/M3/M4/M5, but also EVs such as the i4 M50, iX M60 and i7 M70, M is a far more diverse and complex proposition.

Such rapid and radical change is unsettling for traditionalists, but even I can accept that the Darwinian adaptability is a challenge the entire automotive industry must grapple with. Much as we might want M-cars to be immune, the days of homologation specials and naturally aspirated petrol-powered screamers is long gone.

The trip to Nürburg is an ideal test of the X5 M. Loaded to the gunwales with photographer Dean Smith's camera kit, plus his,

Above and left: M3 Touring features extra underfloor bracing to maintain stiffness of saloon. M-people (from left to right) Sven Esch, Klaus Huber, Peter Schmid and Dirk Häcker

mine and editor Gallagher's overnight bags, it nibbles on a small portion of France before chomping through Belgium and Germany with imperious ease. We might not all feel comfortable with the brutish swagger of these immense and immensely powerful super-SUVs, but when you've got big miles to cover on fast roads they're undeniably effective and impressive. A fact underlined on our return journey, when we storm the autobahn on the X5's 186mph speed limiter.

We arrive in the evening and head straight to the Agnesen Hof, a rustic hotel situated in Barweiler, just ten minutes from Nürburg. It's a discreet and homely place, and regular quarters for the Garching-based M guys when they're working at the Test Centre. It's good to see them all sitting around one big table, sharing a few beers and a bit of banter over a hearty dinner. It's reminiscent of a big *evo* group test, only without the lewd jokes about Dean's mum.

All too often we join events where everything is managed, but this is refreshingly real, the conversation free from script or agenda, the spirit welcoming and open. You always hope a brand such as M is staffed by true enthusiasts, but this is the proof.

It's easy to spot Häcker. He's the senior figure in both age and rank, but he also shines with the energy of someone who truly loves his job. Spend time in his company and you know he revels in the responsibility of leading such a legendary outfit. His professional glow is reflected in his team, who have a comfort and ease between them that's rooted in respect and founded on the friendships forged between motivated, like-minded colleagues.

Häcker is very much the paternal figure of the team. It was he who brought Esch and Huber on board. Many years before, he also signed them off as qualified Nürburging test drivers. He used to race motorbikes and was for many years a taxi driver – specifically BMW's legendary M5 'Ring Taxi'. They all go back a long way. For Häcker this is vital to the M division's operational agility and key to the consistency of the cars it produces.

'I have over 500 people working for me at M,' he says, 'but the core management team is no more than ten. All of them arrived at M after I was appointed. I knew Sven and Klaus from earlier times at BMW and brought them into M within six months of me starting. To make the right cars you need the right team. We work well together and there's no discussion outside of the group. For the most part we are united in what we want to achieve and finding the best way to achieve it. We'll argue over some things, but only because we are all passionate.



In the end we all know what we need to do.'

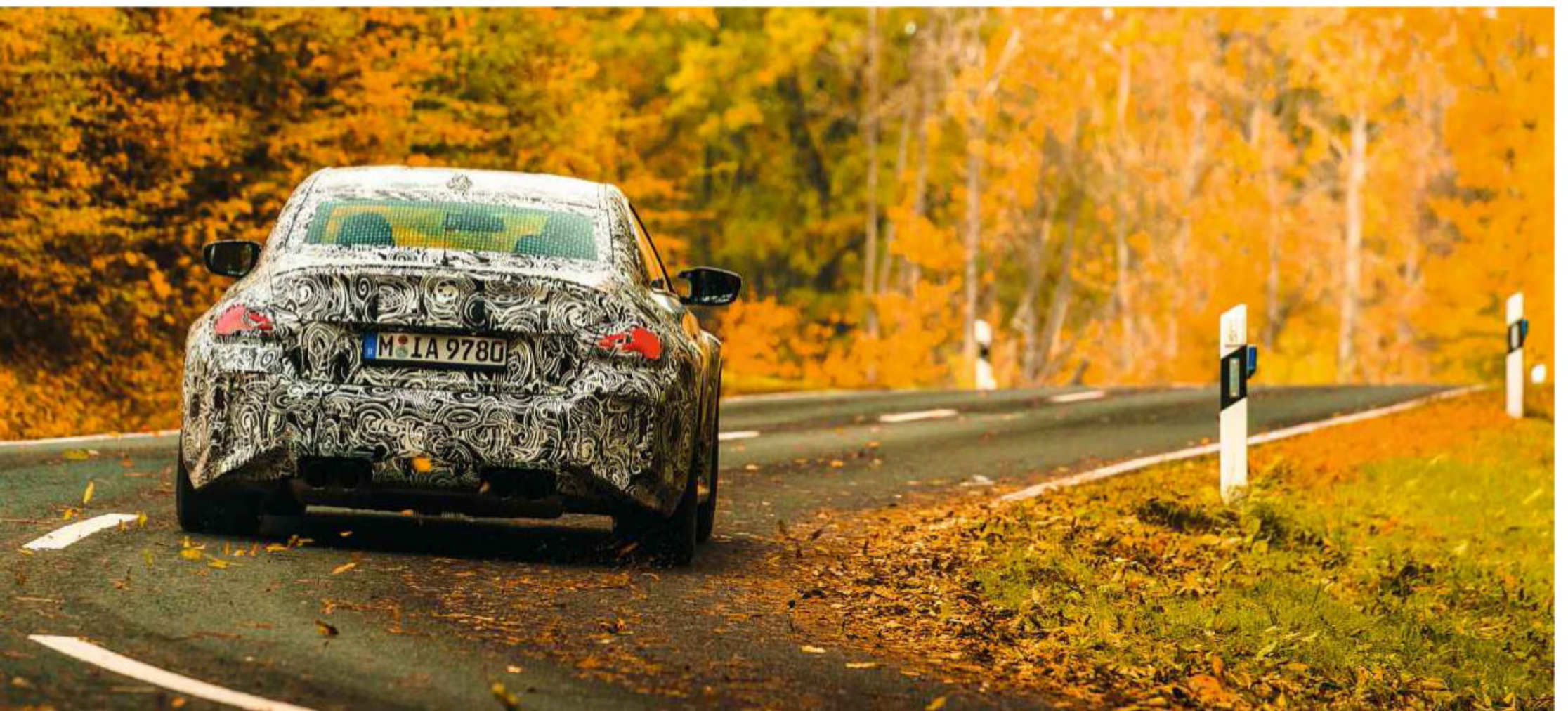
History is important to Häcker. The fact that he is part of something of such significance is obviously a motivation, and the Test Centre, which opened as a dedicated facility in 1991, is clearly emblematic of M's connection to its past and the Nordschleife.

'Before the Industry Pool was created, BMW used to test cars during tourist sessions and base itself at this place when it was still a dealership. This was a long time ago, but even then it was clear the Nordschleife was a unique place to develop cars. That M has enjoyed so much racing success here over the decades only makes the connection stronger.'

The M3 Touring is a prime example of the M division's autonomy, Häcker assembling a cadre of key players to covertly work on a full-size, fully functional mule, which was then presented to the BMW board. It's the kind of project people like us love, not least because it demonstrates an instinctive enthusiasm for ideas that don't slavishly follow prescribed product strategy.

For Häcker it's an essential part of how M operates, and what leads to the creation of special cars like the Touring. 'We call them submarine projects; working below the surface, out of sight. We have the ability to show what our dream looks like without involving anyone outside of M, but we can't do everything, so there are limits. We also have

**'THE NEW M2
PUSHES INTO
ITS LIMITER
AT JUST SHY OF
180MPH. THIS
THING IS A
ROCKETSHIP'**



to consider the whole offering, so it has to make sense and be deliverable, but I think with a good idea you have some chance to get a positive decision from the board. This is what we did with the Touring, taking bits from here and there, working with colleagues in Garching and building our vision to show the board.'

The big Bavarian cheeses clearly know a great car when they see one. I mean, just how badly do you want an M3 Touring? If you're anything like me, you want one *baaaaadly*. Which bodes well for BMW, because it's fair

to say Audi has enjoyed majority ownership of the fast estate car niche for many years. With AMG subsequently claiming squatters' rights, this new Touring needs a buzz about it to really upset the apple cart.

It certainly has all the ingredients of a great fast estate. Coupled with the intrigue and novelty of being the latest in a select and sporadic line of M-badged estate cars, the M3 Touring is poised to be one of 2023's hottest new cars.

One of the very few undisguised cars in the Test Centre, the Touring looks absolutely sensational. I know we all

'YOU HOPE A BRAND SUCH AS M IS STAFFED



got our lederhosen in a twist about the G80's grotesquely oversized 'kidneys', but with some time to get used to it, this current generation of M3 and M4 is a very striking thing. If anything, the Touring body suits it best, its longer roofline and glasshouse, plus those fabulous blistered rear arches nicely balancing the blocky frontal treatment.

The nuts and bolts of the Touring are straightforward, at least if you're familiar with the M3 xDrive. There's some additional bracing under the floorpan – adapted from the M4 Convertible's because it too does without a rear

bulkhead – to add rigidity and a dedicated suspension tune to ensure the Touring carries its payload and manages its altered weight distribution and centre-of-gravity as convincingly as its saloon brethren.

'It was always our goal to make the Touring drive at least as well as the M3 saloon,' explains Sven Esch. 'When you're driving you don't feel the "backpack" so you'll easily forget it's an estate. At least until you look in your rear-view mirror!'

Practicality is clearly the Touring's trump card. With 500 litres of boot space rising to 1500 litres when the rear

BY TRUE ENTHUSIASTS. THIS IS THE PROOF'



seats are folded down, and a rear window that can be opened independently of the tailgate, the real-world appeal of this car is off the scale. That is if your real-world budget stretches to the starting price of £80k.

It's probably down to the BMWs I cut my teeth on, but I don't associate the brand with four-wheel drive, especially when it comes to M-cars. This suggests xDrive has a way to go before it permeates our subconscious like quattro, but there's no question it's the perfect partner for the M3 Touring. Partly because it challenges Audi's notional monopoly of all-weather performance, but also because the subtle shift in the way an xDrive M3 makes progress compared with the rear-drive model feels so, so right in this application.

Yes, we're testing on home turf, so the Touring feels perfectly at one with these smooth and gently sinuous Eifel roads. It goes like stink, as you'd expect with a smidge over 500bhp under your right foot, but there's an ease and rightness to the way this car rides, scribes a cornering line and puts its power down that bodes very well. It certainly feels no heavier than the M3 saloon, reacting with clarity and precision.

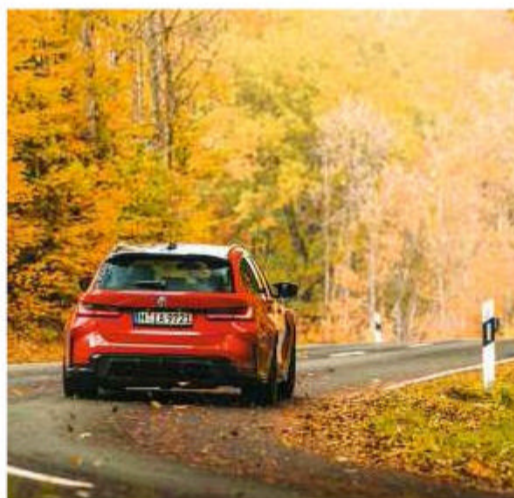
If you've spent enough time around earlier generations of M3, you'll know they have form when it comes to certain derivatives being palpably but inexplicably better to drive. Speak to Jethro Bovingdon and he'll wax lyrical about the E92 M3 saloon and how it trumped the coupe for rightness. In the same vein, the G80 M3 Touring could well prove to be the sweet spot of the M3/M4 range.

THE NEW M2 DOESN'T ENJOY THE M3 Touring's novelty factor. Instead, it faces the challenge of following one of M's most celebrated models of recent years. The car we're driving is a late-phase test car, so it's close enough to the finished article to draw some meaningful driving impressions.

Since our visit the car has been shown undisguised, but even wearing its camouflage it's clear that while blockier than the model it replaces the new M2 has a pleasingly muscular physique and plenty of road presence. The interior of this car is also partially shrouded, but the large landscape infotainment screen is a dominant feature.

We head out of the Test Centre towards the now familiar road loop, but this time we continue onto a nearby stretch of lightly trafficked autobahn. The way the M2 builds speed is hugely impressive, running through the gears with undiminished vigour until it pushes into its soft speed-limiter at just shy of 180mph. This thing is a rocketship.

The rest of our drive is rather tame by



comparison, but the M2 – this example is fitted with the standard H-pattern manual gearbox – remains engaging and brilliantly satisfying. The engine has such a lusty delivery you can just flex the torque in a high gear and surge effortlessly past slower traffic, but the 3-litre straight-six also has a richness of character and appetite for revs that's unusual in modern turbo engines.

You definitely sense the new M2's M3/M4 underpinnings. It feels more substantial and mature than the old M2, but the shorter wheelbase, 19in front and 20in rear wheels, stiffer front springs and softer rears (which work with dampers developed for the M3 Touring) give the new M2 its own dynamic fingerprint. It feels energised and agile, but also four-square and planted. There's plenty of grip to lean on and traction to squeeze into, but with an underlying sense that there's fun to be had when you push beyond those lofty limits.

Not that hooning is part of the development programme. At least not around here, as Esch explains: 'When we do our road testing we don't go over the limits. For me you should be able to feel all the things that are important at road speeds. When we have found a set-up we like we move to the bumpier roads. Then we go on the Nordschleife. If we make changes to improve track handling we then go back on the road to cross-check and make sure we haven't lost anything. This is the advantage of having

‘THERE'S NO QUESTION xDRIVE IS PERFECT FOR THE TOURING. IT FEELS SO RIGHT’





a test centre in this area. You can do so much in a short time. People tend to think if you come to Nürburg then you're mostly driving on the race track, but we do more miles on the road.'

It's no secret that rather than looking around for rival cars to benchmark, the new M2 used the old M2 CS as its point of reference. That's a luxury you can afford when you have the confidence of knowing your old car was pretty much as good as it gets. And it shows in everything the new M2 does. The power delivery feels more solid and with less of a spike in boost, but that's to be expected given the headroom left for a new M2 CS further down the line. For much the same reason there's no carbon brake

option, but the cast iron stoppers have plenty of power and progression so you can smoothly and intuitively blip-shift your way down the gears. It's a quality piece and no mistake.

As for the future? Häcker has high hopes and plenty of optimism that M will remain a brand dedicated to drivers: 'Politics and regulation can dictate what is forbidden, but the customer will decide what is the right product,' he says. 'I believe we will continue to have customers for sports cars and M-cars, just as I believe there will be room in the future for these kinds of cars. Personal transportation and general mobility is a challenge all car makers have to face, but for me cars should not be rolling



**‘HÄCKER HAS
HIGH HOPES
THAT M WILL
REMAIN
A BRAND
DEDICATED TO
DRIVERS’**

Google systems. We are in the business of delivering the emotion of driving.

‘It’s no secret we are working on complete electric cars, but we aren’t making an EV and then sticking an M badge on it. We consider what will make it an M-car from the first design and prototype phase.’

Häcker believes there is huge potential in electric motors that goes way beyond enormous power. For example, the team are exploring the use of a quad-motor powertrain (one for each wheel) that will also use the motors for braking instead of standard discs. ‘The speed and precision of the modulation, not to mention the increased regen offers huge potential,’ he says, ‘and with next-gen software

control and integration of steering, braking, traction and torque vectoring we have all the tools to achieve the right dynamic feeling in the car. A true M car.’

Does the internal combustion engine feature in Häcker’s vision of the future? For now, yes. ‘I like the combustion engine, and we are working on new generation engines,’ he reveals. ‘The weight of today’s EVs is much too high, and there’s work needed before battery storage can cope with the kind of charge and discharge rates our four-motor concept requires. And, of course, it all comes down to what the customer wants. Electric M-cars should meet the expectations of demanding M customers. As both an engineer and an enthusiast, I find the future fascinating.’ ✕