

M6 ON EUROPE'S
BEST ROADS

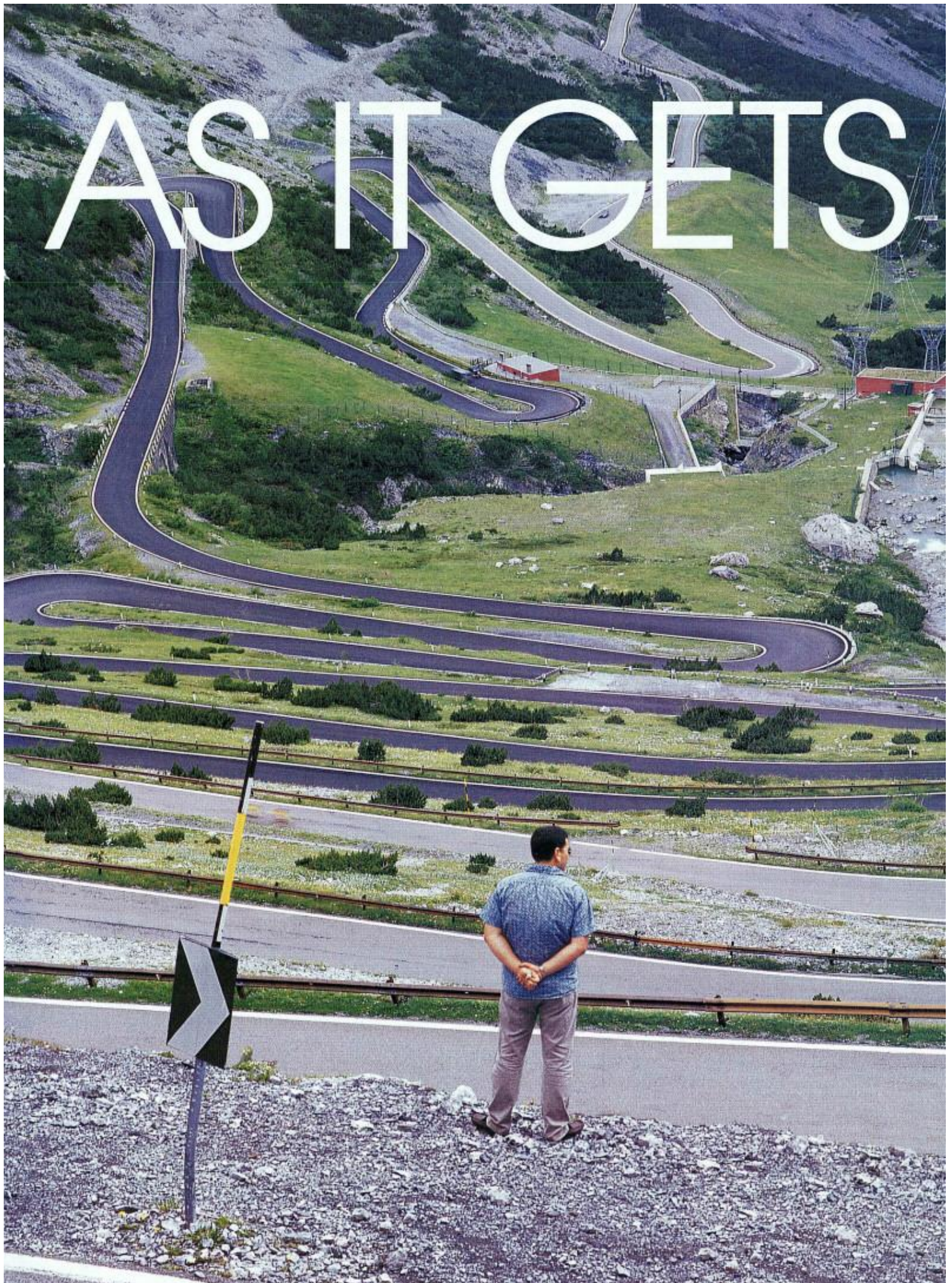
AS GOOD

Trust us. This vision of heaven on earth, the Stelvio pass, *isn't* the best stretch of road in our three-day blast through the Alps in a BMW M6

Story Ben Oliver Photography Stuart Collin



AS IT GETS



I've never felt afraid of a public road before. Not proper fear, the kind whose icy fingers reach down inside your waistband to coldly cup your testicles.

But I feel it on the Susten pass. We've just emerged from a cloud, but I wish we'd stayed in it so I don't have to look at what I'm about to drive up. The empty road, its bright-black tarmac streaming wet in the rain, jinks and dips ahead but mostly climbs hard and diagonally up the sheer face of the mountain. On one side is square-cut rock face, on the other the square root of fuck all for thousands of feet.

Occasionally the road disappears after a hairpin but appears again about a hundred feet higher, climbing relentlessly towards the top and another cloud, where it is snowing. We could slow down of course, and take it at an amble. But that would be missing the point.

THIS OUGHT TO BE THE BEST THREE days' driving of my life. After several late nights spent with piles of maps I reckoned that was how long it would take us to work from the Austrian Tyrol to the French Riviera, following the line of the Alps. You don't have to head for areas of geological violence to get great roads, but it does help with the view. The route links 15 specific, spectacular stretches which cut back and forth across the mountains, each one

the perfect setting for every supercar driving fantasy you've ever had. Some you won't have heard of, but others are required pub knowledge for any car enthusiast. You can spot the very best ones; they're preceded by the definite article, like 'the' Grossglockner and 'the' Stelvio. Even if most of your motoring is done on 'the' M25, you need to be able to discuss them confidently.

Not that I feel particularly confident as I plot the route and run Google image searches on the roads we'll be attempting. Two things are clear. I'm going to need some cooler sunglasses. And I might just need to be a better driver.

STATIONARY IN THE NEON-LIT CAR park under BMW's Munich HQ, its droopy nose jutting out from a neat row of 5-series like a dog's from a kennel, the M6 doesn't look like the tool for the job. Doesn't sound like it either, starting from stone-cold with a rough, broken sounding dieselly idle that would have sent me straight back to the airport if I hadn't already bought the new M5.

It looks a lot better on the road. I'm out to load my bags and can see that the light-saving

alloys, the red flashes on the sticky P-Zero Corsa tyres, the four pipes and the venturi that puncture the back, and the purplish smudge of M badging on the boot and wings.

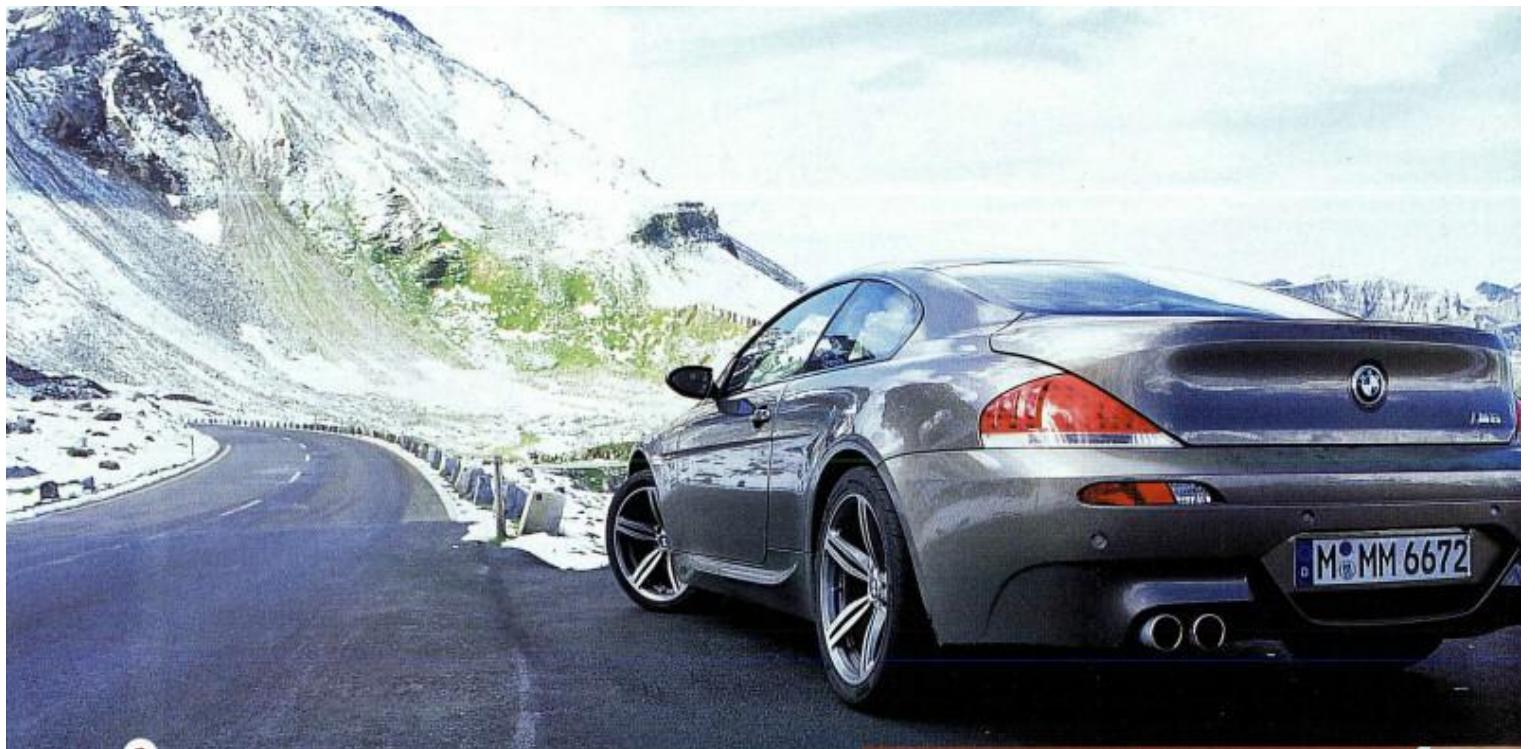
People have asked whether BMW can really justify the 80 grand the M6 is likely to cost when it arrives in the UK, but the cabin will convince most of them; the seats are in soft nappa leather and so is pretty much everything else, other than the suede headlining and the classy black lacquer on the centre console. It feels a world away from a 118d and worthy of comparison with a DB9 at £107,000. Unlike the Aston Martin, the BMW has room for adults in the rear seats and allows you to put more than the contents of your pockets in the boot.

But just like the DB9 it is supernaturally fast. Four minutes after exiting the car park I am heading for the Austrian Alps at a restricted 160mph on derestricted autobahn. Yes, I know I should let the engine warm through first but the car just does it on its own, in full auto mode and without the Power button engaged, the tacho needle licking lazily up and down as the 'box short shifts through its seven ratios. Might not need all three days. ↘

1 Daytrippers in BMWs have been coming to the Grossglockner for 70 years. Not all were wearing lederhosen

2 The toll costs you €26, or about £18. Well worth the price of one pair of Calvin Klein undies

3 Get up early in the summer months for the dream combination: empty roads and daylight



3

ROUTE 01 AUSTRIA

CAR'S FAVOURITE ROAD IN AUSTRIA

GROSSGLOCKNER
 ● Get there early to avoid the tourists (but not the toll). Road is fast and open for an Alpine pass and takes you alongside glaciers and sharp white peaks, with easy overtaking and plenty of places to stop. The side road to the Edelweiss-spitze might be Europe's most spectacular - take it. Elevation: 2505 metres

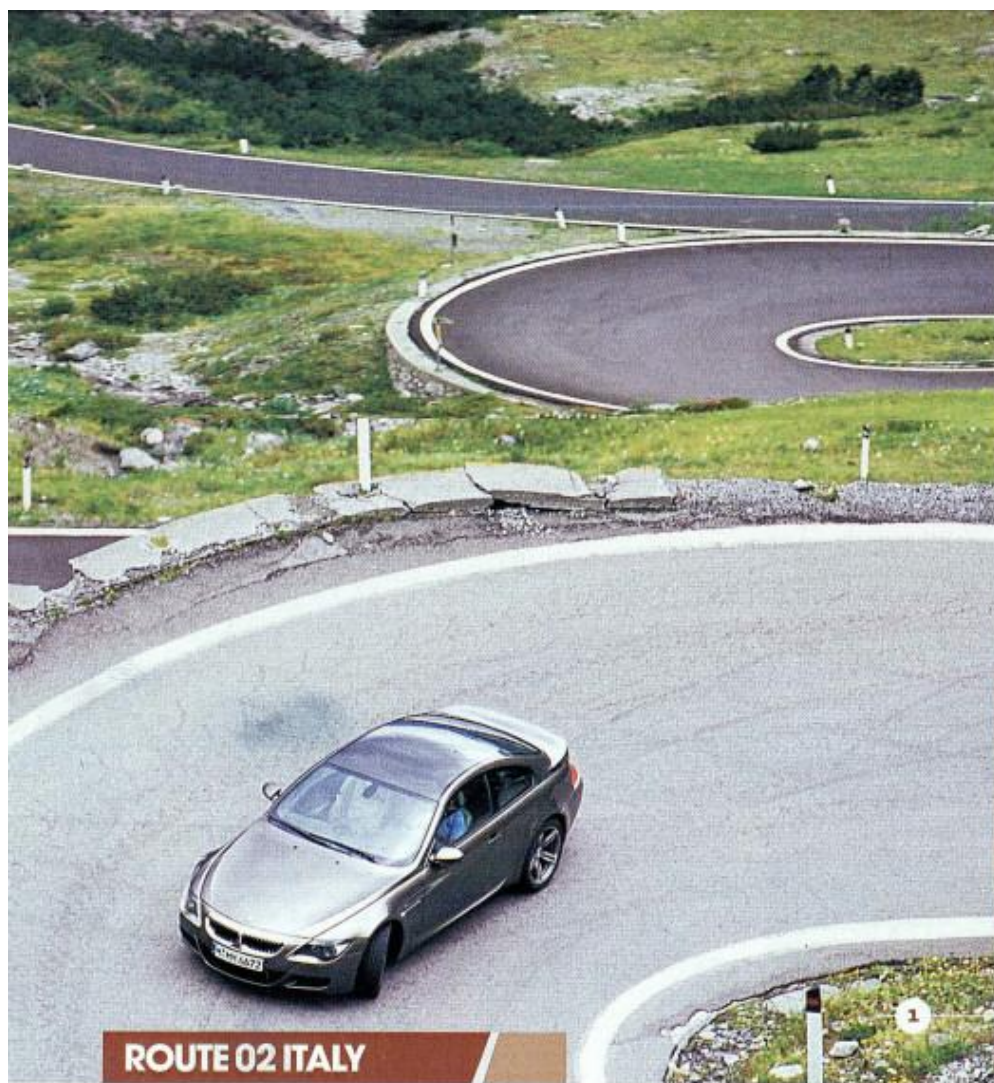


ILLUSTRATIONS: DAN HILLIARD

- RADSTADTER TAUERN** B99 Radstadt to Mautendorf
- TURRACHER HOHE** B95 Predlitz to Pattergassen
- GROSSGLOCKNERSTRASSE** B107 Winklarn to Bruck
- GERLOSPASS** B165 Mittersill to Schitters
- BRENNER PASS** A13 Innsbruck to Brenner

2





ROUTE 02 ITALY

CAR'S FAVOURITE ROAD IN ITALY STELVIO PASS

● Your mind's-eye picture of the perfect Alpine pass is the Stelvio; the eastern approach has 48 continuous hairpins scored into the side of a mountain. Hard work, but worth it. As the second highest pass in Europe it can be closed by snowstorms in summer. Links with the Umbrail near the top. Elevation: 2757 metres



JAUFENPASS SS44 Vipiteno to San Leonardo

PASO DI STELVIO SS38 Prato al Stelvio to Bormio

PASO DI GAVIA SS300 Bormio to Ponte di Legno

WE START THE NEXT MORNING. THE passes that run across the Alps have had various pivotal roles in the politics, economics and wars of Europe; building them required megalomaniac vision, engineering genius and a disregard for human frailty. For car obsessives the names of the passes link to racing and testing; with Germany's car industry concentrated just to the north and Italy's just to the south of the Alps, they've been coming to these roads to break records or break prototypes since the first years of the car.

Our first two roads lead us south away from Salzburg through central Austria towards Slovenia. The Radstatter Tauern was a hillclimb venue in the '20s; it leads on to the Turracher Hohe where Ferdinand Piech brought the Volkswagen board in January 1978 to drive the first Quattro prototype over one of Europe's steepest roads in the snow to persuade them to put it into production. It worked.

Neither feels like much of a challenge in an M6 in mid-July. Both roads top out at around 1700 metres above sea level, 1000 metres lower than some of the passes we'll reach later. But it still feels energising to be driving on fast, well surfaced, empty, spectacular roads that someone else's taxes have paid for. Both start with long, flat stretches through *Sound of Music* valleys before climbing through tighter rocky gorges to well kept ski resorts at the top; photographer Stuart Collins and I get into the habit of stopping at the top of every pass to

check the view and get a few lungfuls of sharp, clean Alpine air before driving down the far side as fast as we can.

At the end of the Turracher I want to turn around and do it all again the other way; the views and the gradients usually work better in one direction than the other. But the Grossglockner is next; it promises to be one of the best roads on the trip, and it is. It's a toll road, built in the early '30s as a tourist attraction but also as a colossal job creation scheme to help haul Austria out of the Depression.

As you'd expect of a road made for daytrippers, it's staggeringly scenic, taking you right into the High Alps alongside glaciers and the Grossglockner itself, Austria's highest mountain. And it isn't hard to drive; toll-paying customers falling off would be bad for repeat business, so the road snakes along the side of the mountains, sometimes letting you see along a series of bends and get your foot all the way in if it's clear. When it has to go down it does it in a mad tumble of kidney-shaped loops, instead of the first-gear hairpins we'll be tackling later.

Racing started on the Grossglockner almost as soon as it opened; Hans Stuck went up in a 500-horsepower Auto Union with two rear tyres on each side. Now the car makers come here to test their brakes; on the way down we pass a disguised new S-class heading up with brake test gear attached. They should have done more work on the

YOU DON'T NEED A
SUPERCAR TO DRIVE ON
ROADS LIKE THE UMBRAIL.
OFTEN SOMETHING
SMALLER IS BETTER

1 Stelvio pass asks a lot of both car and driver. You're never more than a split second away from an adjustment to brake, throttle, steering wheel or gearchange, or all at once

3 Umbrail is the only pass on our route with a loose surface, where the M6 becomes a forest rally car. A rally car with a very good stereo and Isofix child seat fixings, that is

2



ROUTE 03 SWITZERLAND

old SL we're stuck behind; the smell of badly distressed brake pads gets stronger and stronger until the driver has to pull over and coast to a halt.

From the northern end of the Grossglockner the Gerlos pass takes us west. I'd love to tell you what it's like but it rains so hard we can barely see beyond the nose of the car, an early reminder that the weather rules these roads. It takes us to the Brenner pass, which heads south to the Italian border and is one of the few Alpine passes capable of carrying a motorway. We turn off just on the Italian side and start up the Jaufen pass, which leads away from Vipiteno and into a network of incredible passes around San Leonardo.

I wish I had enough time to do them all, but the Jaufen pass will do. It starts like a classic Alpine ascent with a long series of hairpins and – that evening at least – a diabolical mist rising off the road surface. But once you're clear of the tree line the gradient lessens and it suddenly turns into the world's best Welsh road; occasionally precarious but mostly very fast with miles of visibility over open moorland. And, of course, utterly deserted.

Until this point, it feels like I've planned the trip pretty well. But I realise that it's 11 at night and that between us and our hotel in Bormio stands the Stelvio pass, the second highest in Europe and one of the hardest. We'll be climbing the more difficult north side, with its 48 numbered hairpins, which in 16 miles from the start of the pass climb a mile to the



CAR'S FAVOURITE ROAD IN SWITZERLAND

SUSTEN PASS

● Arguably the best road in Europe; it has the altitude (2224 metres), the road (wide, well surfaced and not too many hairpins), and the weather (snow and cloud, even in summer). Elevation: 2224 metres



UMBRAIL PASS Umbrail to Santa Maria

OFEN PASS B28 Santa Maria to Zernez

FLUELA PASS B28 Susch to Davos

OBERAL PASS B19 Disentis to Andermatt

SUSTEN PASS B11 Wassen to Innertkirchen

SAN GOTTARD PASS B2 Andermatt to Airolo

GET YOUR PASSPORT - YOU'RE GOING

Anyone with a map, a car and a couple of days off work can do this. But there are pitfalls. Avoiding 3am finishes is hard when the length of a pass on the map bears no relation to how long it takes to cross, and you don't know where the next fuel stop is. Driving tour firm Dettaglio (www.dettaglio.co.uk) claims to know these basics – and less basic info,

such as the fact you can get an Enzo into the car park at the Hotel Majestic Barriere in Cannes, but not an F40. A seven-day tour in your own car with hotels starts from around £500; they can be shorter or longer, and are supported by guides and back-up vehicles. They'll also work out a bespoke itinerary if you want to go solo.

Col de Turini is where F1 drivers come to watch the Monte Carlo rally. And - who knows? - maybe they'll be watching you too

Col de Vence was surprisingly quiet when we were there. Good

Route Napoleon is the one where you get to go fast. You can see why people like it so much

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ROUTE 04 FRANCE

CAR'S FAVOURITE ROAD IN FRANCE

COL DE TURINI

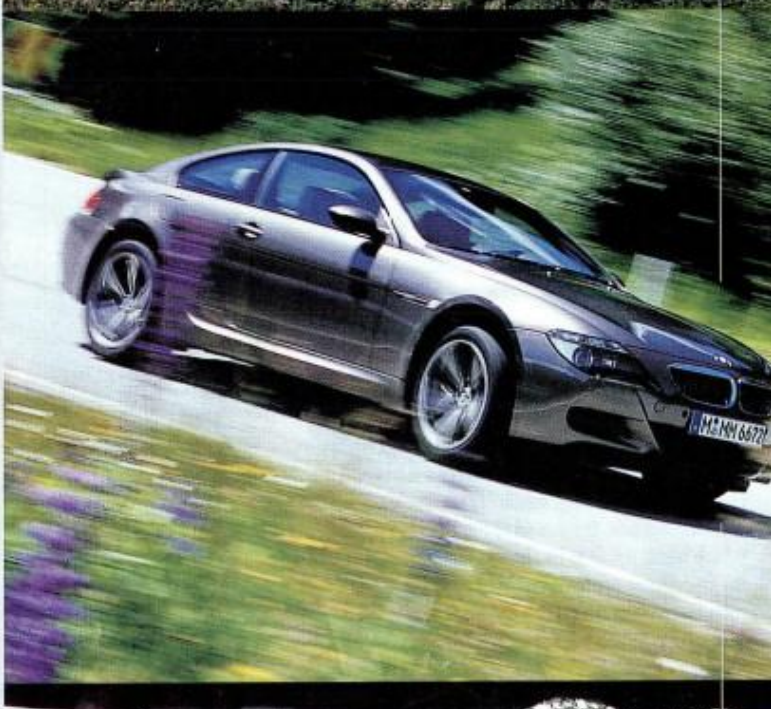
● Legendary Monte Carlo rally stage but a genuinely good drive too. All hairpins and thousand-foot drops heading north from Sospel; faster but still tricky on the other side. Hot and lush in summer - very different to the Alpine passes. Links with the superb Col de Braus at the southern end. Elevation: 1604 metres



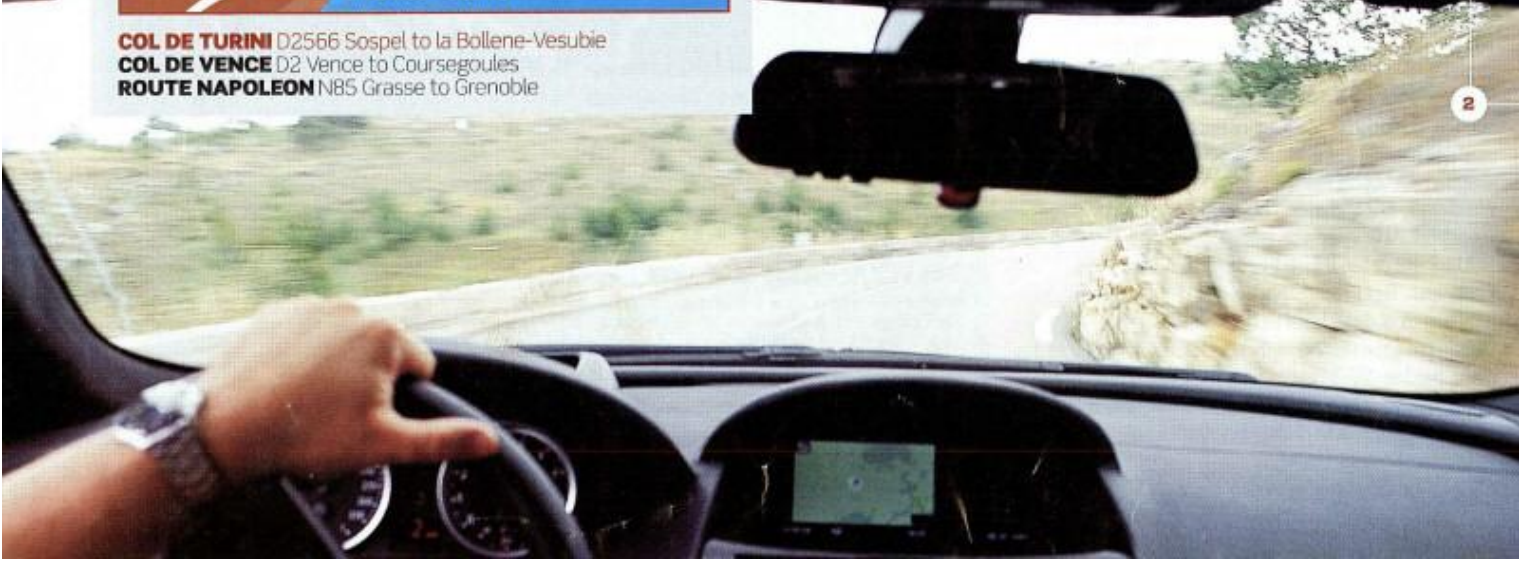
COL DE TURINI D2566 Sospel to la Bollène-Vesubie

COL DE VENCE D2 Vence to Coursegoules

ROUTE NAPOLEON N85 Grasse to Grenoble



2



top, 2757 metres above sea level. The average gradient is seven percent and the worst stretch 15 percent. It's not the kind of road you want to attempt for the first time in the dark.

At times like this the grade of leather on your seat ceases to matter; your 80-grand car is reduced to the sum of its mechanical parts, your awareness of it limited solely to how well the engine, gearbox, brakes, steering and suspension all function. And in an M6 they all function pretty well; on some of the harder descents the brake pedal lengthens, and like other M-cars the steering doesn't reveal the final 10 percent, but for a 1710kg four-seat GT the M6 is an astonishingly grippy, agile device.

WE SPEND THE NIGHT IN BORMIO, AN Italian town with immediate access to more good roads than any other in the world. I'd love to drive over the Gavia pass on the other side of town and head south to Mortirolo, famous as the hardest hillclimb in cycling, but we have a plan to stick to. So we head back up the Stelvio, in daylight this time and sharing the switchbacks with motorhomes, German bikers, skateboarders and the Lithuanian national cycling team. Near the top we pull off onto the Umbrail pass, which leads more gently down the slopes into Switzerland. Unlike the Stelvio it's almost tourist-free but single-track for most of its length and the last Alpine pass with a loose surface.

The M6 doesn't feel entirely at home going down the Umbrail, a reminder that you don't need a supercar to drive on these roads and that often something smaller and with a longer range is better; we're stopping to fill up every 150 miles because you really, really don't want to run out of juice on an empty mountain pass. The next road suits it better. Three of Switzerland's best roads – the Susten pass, the Furka pass and the Grimsel pass – form a triangle around the 3630-metre peak of

Dammastock, with the San Gottardo pass and the famous Klausen hillclimb route running off them. Getting there from Italy involves another three passes – the Ofen, the Flüela and the Oberalp – that lead west through Davos and Klosters. You can do all of these easily in a day and it will probably be the single most intense day's driving you've done.

We go over the Ofen pass first; it's a main road, so unlike the others we've been on it has long straight stretches, but at 2149 metres it's still high enough for the air to be noticeably thinner. Not that a lack of oxygen seems to slow the M6; the straights mean we can use all of its acceleration and it spears onto the next pass so hard that we worry it might not leave enough oxygen for everything else, and you half expect to see the grass blanch and die as you go by.

By the time we get to the Oberalp pass the cloud is so low and thick it's like driving through milk and we're using the satellite navigation to spot hairpins 40 feet in front of us. This curtails the fun slightly so we head south-east back into Italy and on to France.

After three hours of warp-speed autostrada we don't need the odometer to tell us we've come a long way. Stepping out of the car at our hotel in Menton on the Riviera the atmosphere feels hot and close after the sharp clarity of the high Alps. Our ears have finally stopped popping every 20 minutes and the water bottles we last tightened at the top of the Susten pass are now crushed by sea-level pressure. But we must come here; you can't say you've driven Europe's best roads if you don't drive

over the Col de Turini, for decades the heart of the Monte Carlo rally, then cross the quiet Col de Vence high over Nice to drive at least some of the Route Napoleon that leads back up into the Alps and which conventional wisdom says is the best road in the world.

The Turini is terrific, its hairpins dizzying and hard work, and it's helped by the fact that, depending on your age and preferences, you're guaranteed to imagine yourself as either Paddy Hopkirk or Sébastien Loeb. The Route Napoleon is helped by the seductive Provençal landscape it runs through and the fact that if you're a Riviera playboy there's enough room to let your supercar off the leash without risking five-figure panel damage bills. If you get the chance you should drive them both. But given the choice of just one of our 15 roads, I'll take my chances on the empty, icy Susten pass. **3**

ON THE ROUTE NAPOLEON THERE'S ENOUGH ROOM FOR RIVIERA PLAYBOYS TO LET THEIR SUPERCARS OFF THE LEASH WITHOUT RISKING FIVE-FIGURE PANEL DAMAGE BILLS'