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Rolling Thunder in the Valley of Fire

Comparing four V-8 super sedans

By Douglas Kott • Photos by Guy Spangenberg
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Chip away the dark layer of manganese, and the luminous red sandstone shows through — instant writing tablet, circa 1000 A.D. If you were a member of the ancient Anasazi culture in what's now called Nevada's Valley of Fire, your etchings here were simply recording a solar eclipse, rite of passage or bison hunt. Just how might have these petroglyphs depicted our small caravan of roaring, ultra-powerful sedans back then, at a time when the fossil fuel we're burning lay fermenting far beneath this incredible wind-swept rock? We're guessing with exaggerated speed lines, small pictographs of pegged speedometer needles and stick figures of magazine writers with permanent silly grins.

We're witnessing a remarkable renaissance of performance in virtually every segment of the automotive continuum, and the cars before you are proof positive. Four sensational, 2-ton V-8 sedans with 1703 horsepower among them, fitted with fender-stuffing 18-in. wheels and tires, and braking systems that would do justice to an open-wheel formula car. And sophisticated electronics — in the form of stability control, navigation systems and engine/transmission management — that far exceed the binary-code wizardry found in even the top racing series. The *least* powerful car here has 390 bhp; the most powerful (469!) has nearly as much torque as a Dodge Viper and, incredibly, will out-gun a Ferrari 360 Modena through the quarter mile. All comport themselves with ease around town, and show their

Superpower Sedans

How They Ranked

1. Mercedes-Benz E55 AMG
2. Audi RS 6
3. BMW M5
4. Jaguar S-Type R

Check out the [complete results](#) of our comparison.

hand not through exaggerated bodywork or flamboyant color, but with hunkered-down ride heights, a multitude of exhaust tips and discreet badges...and, when appropriate, a squeeze of the loud pedal.

Plus: Take a [Behind the Scenes](#) look at these high-performance luxury sedans.



Wicked-quick 4-doors like these need vast expanses of open road to exercise, and to that end we planned a three-day, 1000-mile route that ranged in elevation from -282 feet to 7000, from our Newport Beach offices through Death Valley to Lone Pine, California, hugging the backside of the Sierra Nevada range. Long, twisting ascents into the Sylvania Mountains were an excellent test for our forced-induction participants as we crossed into Nevada, and we made good time under cover of darkness along Highway 95 toward Las Vegas for a night's rest, then on to the Valley of Fire.

In addition to our usual staff stalwarts, we invited two-time IMSA GTS champ and R&T contributor Steve Millen along for his considerable expertise in vehicle dynamics (not to mention his congenial Kiwi disposition) to take part in our ratings and evaluation processes. Here's how the sedans fared, in order of ascending points.

4th — Jaguar S-Type R 559.7 points

It's seductive, with the allure of a 1960s' Mark II saloon done in the modern idiom. It's powerful, with an Eaton Roots-type supercharger cramming boost into 4.2 liters of variable-valve-timed alloy V-8, for a total of 390 bhp. It's pedigreed, with the famous "leaper" hood ornament lunging over a grille of stainless-steel mesh, and a birth certificate that reads "Castle Bromwich." To boot, this lithe cat is the least expensive of our quartet, at \$64,600 as tested. So why didn't the S-Type R land on its feet in our ratings?



Well, consider the competition here, and also note that the final points spread among our contestants was a rather narrow one. Perhaps Senior Editor Kim Wolfkill said it best: "The S-Type R would be considered an excellent sports sedan if only it weren't compared with the other three cars in this test."



Underhood, Jaguar's 4-cam 4.2-liter V-8 is joined by our test group's only 6-speed automatic transmission to make short work of passing maneuvers and backroads alike.

To be fair, the S-Type R wasn't designed as a direct M5 competitor, but rather to dish out its considerable performance in a kid-glove package. Shifts of its 6-speed ZF automatic are gentle, velvety nudges (considering the power being transmitted), the V-8's cruising growl is nicely muted and, despite firmer spring rates and electronically controlled 2-stage shocks, the ride is supple without relinquishing control. It's only when you really start to press, at 7 or 8/10ths, that the tradeoff for ride is felt. "The Jag is lovely to drive...it handles really, really well," said Steve. "In fact, it may have a little less understeer than the Audi when really pushing it hard through these last canyon parts...yet over undulations at higher speeds the car starts to move around and the dynamics get bigger and bigger." Likewise, the braking system with impressive Brembo 4-piston calipers is set up with soft initial bite, yet formidable stopping power as more pedal is applied.

In our instrumented testing, the Jag was slowest...or more appropriately, least quick, as its 0-60 time of 5.2 seconds and quarter-mile blast of 13.7 still put it ahead of such heralded sports cars as the Honda S2000 and Nissan 350Z. Full throttle here brings out the highly audible supercharger whine — an urgent strain sort of like the gearbox on an electric drill — that disappears at cruise. Not the prettiest sound, but a Pavlovian indicator of performance to come.

Compared to other high-tech approaches, the S-Type's interior

is comfortable, classy and slightly more snug-feeling than the others, with uncluttered instrumentation bathed in a soothing green light at night. Torso-cradling sport seats adjust 16 ways, including moving the seat base fore/aft relative to the seatback, and the perforated leather wheel has a rim cross-section that naturally fits your hand. Gray bird's-eye maple veneers and abundant leather finish off an interior redesigned for 2003 to more closely resemble the XJ sedan's — a big improvement, as the old design had a huge semicircle at center dash, with tiny digital displays, that just didn't fit the Olde World design aesthetic. Yet we all felt that the quality of some interior plastics, the "hand" of the leather, underhood appearance and the trunk lining were slightly underwhelming for a car in this price range. And while we're quibbling, some noted that the detents on the "manual" side of the Jag's traditional J-gate shifter could be more positive when really flogging along. "At times like that, you don't need ambiguity," noted Associate Art Director Bert Swift.



The leather, wood and chrome-trimmed cockpit makes for an inviting motoring environment with traditional Jaguar design cues, while also subtly hinting at the S-Type R's supercharged performance.

At other times — most others, in fact — the S-Type R is a real sweetheart, with an extra measure of quiet class and ride comfort to complement its remarkable performance.



3rd — BMW M5 562.8 points

Relative to humans, sports-sedan years are a little like dog years, and even BMW's Uber-4-door — the car that arguably created the modern super-sedan genre — is showing flecks of gray around the muzzle. The current 5 Series body style has been with us since 1996; its Motorsport-tuned variant, since 2000. So there's a sameness to the design, which still looks tidy and well proportioned in the classic upright, BMW sports-sedan sort of way. "Attractive, yet dated," said Wolfkill.

It's a good thing that its 5.0-liter S62 V-8, with eight individual throttles snapping to attention, seems completely impervious to the aging process, because it's the same torquey, sonorous jewel it has always been. The only normally aspirated engine of our group (coupled to the only manual gearbox, a 6-speed) makes its 394 bhp through displacement and fine-tuned breathing, and its driver is rewarded with instant response from four variably-timed camshafts and a snarly V-8 baritone barked out its brawny exhaust tips. Since much of our driving was done at altitude, the M5 was at a slight disadvantage keeping up with the forced-induction cars. Said Swift: "You have to stir the box a little more, rev the engine a little harder, brake a little later and corner a bit harder to keep the gap from growing."

Fortunately, chase mode in the M5 is a most enjoyable process as its chassis sends the purest, cleanest messages back to the driver through its contact patches. "Its lively, tossable nature



The only normally aspirated engine of the bunch, the M5's quick-revving V-8 rewards the enthusiast with excellent flexibility, and the 6-speed manual gearbox brings the added satisfaction of increased driver involvement.

makes it a more challenging and ultimately, more satisfying car to drive quickly," said



Wolfkill. Added Millen: "The pedal position for heel-and-toeing was very good...the relationship of pedal



heights, and the distance apart." Factor in a businesslike set of gray-faced gauges (the tach with lighted sections, starting at 4000 rpm, that go out sequentially as the engine warms up), the typical notchy-yet-precise BMW shifter and a second-nature driving position, and you have a finely honed blade expressly for apex-carving.

Back down at reasonable elevations at our test track, the M5 shows why it was king of the roost for so long, with a 0-60 sprint of 4.8 sec. and a quarter-mile posting of 13.3 sec. at 108.5 mph, beating the Jag in this last contest by a sound 0.4 sec. and tying the considerably more powerful Audi to 100 mph, in 11.3 sec. The BMW also turned in the shortest stopping distance from 60 mph at 116 ft. (it should be noted that the total variance in this group was only 4 ft.). Powerful though the brakes are, the first bit of pedal travel feels soft, the only blemish in a very tight, responsive overall package.

Inside, the same criticisms of the exterior apply — handsome, but old-looking. The demeanor is businesslike and a tad somber, but titanium-hued metal accents on the dash and door panels provide some relief; and the Motorsport tri-color emblem adds panache to the speedometer face and illuminated shift-knob insert. Seats covered in textured Nappa Point leather are superbly supportive and comfortable, and offer a thigh support cushion that electrically extends and retracts in addition to the other adjustments. Some of us judged the steering-wheel rim (its leather stitched with the three "M" colors) to be a little squishy-feeling. And the wheel position seems a bit high relative to the seat, something we've noted in virtually every BMW.



There's still a lot to like about the grand statesman of superbly powerful sports sedans. And rumors of a 500-bhp, V-10-motivated M5 replacement, due in the next couple of years, show that BMW is serious about recapturing its dominance of this segment.



2nd — Audi RS 6 573.4 points

If leeches went to boot camp, they'd do well to have an Audi RS 6 as their drill instructor. Such is the remarkable adhesion of this tremendously powerful, 450-bhp twin-turbocharged

sedan fitted with the Quattro IV all-wheel-drive system. Despite its compact engine completely overhanging the front axle (making for the most nose-heavy weight distribution of the lot, at 58/42 percent, front/rear), the Audi understeers only moderately at the edge of its considerable 0.88g grip envelope, and absolutely clawed its way out of the tight, constant-radius corners of the Sylvania Mountain section. "Just when you think that perhaps you've asked too much," offered Swift, "the all-wheel drive grabs the chassis at all four corners and rips the car in the proper direction." Said Steve: "You never feel that the rear is at all nervous or going to let you down; it's just nailed, and it follows the front of the car."



Small paddles on the back of the steering wheel make for quick and convenient shifting of the RS 6's 5-speed Tiptronic transmission.

Cornering is impressively flat, no doubt helped by Audi's Dynamic Damping Control, a hydraulic system that links diagonally opposed shocks. In a right-hand bend, for instance, the system senses the lightly loaded right-front suspension and transfers pressure to the left-rear shock to reduce roll.

When corners give way to the short chutes, the V-8 is there with only the slightest hesitation from its twin K04 turbos, summoning massive torque at low rpm — 415 lb.-ft. from 1950 to 5600 rpm — and veritable rocket-sled acceleration. Our Stalker test gear confirmed the subjective impressions, with a 4.6-sec. leap to 60 mph and a blazing 13.1-sec. quarter mile; put another way, those are Aston Martin Vanquish numbers. And the Audi delivers it in such an understressed way, with a low murmuring sound that rises and falls in relation to throttle.

It's also easy to keep it on boil with extremely well-placed paddle shifters on the steering wheel that decisively command the Tiptronic 5-speed automatic.

Brakes are as powerful as the engine is strong, with gargantuan 8-piston front calipers that clamp equally large rotors that float on radial pins protruding from special hubs. Initial feel is quite touchy, and braking effort for even hard stops is significantly lighter than the other cars, but once acclimated, their power is addictive.

We've had high praise for recent Audi interiors and the RS 6's insides are very inviting. Our car had the optional carbon-fiber trim, with fine wire woven into its cloth, that served as the perfect high-tech accent. Seats are comfortable, with not quite as much lateral support as some of the others, and covered in an appealing scheme of ivory leather with blue piping. Gauges don't come much bolder than the RS 6's, with red-on-black graphics and a special typeface for the numerals. If there's criticism to levy, it's that the center-stack buttons for ventilation and sound systems have rather small white markings that turn into a sea of red hash marks at night. The Audi's rear seat area deserves special mention as it's chock-full of amenities — map lights, seat heaters, ashtrays, ventilation ducts, and optional sunshades for the side windows. Plus, its rear seats fold down to reveal a huge rectangular pass-through for increased utility (the Jag's fold down too, but the pass-through is much smaller).



A deliciously smooth 450-bhp twin-turbocharged V-8 and 8-piston calipers with floating rotors are just a few of the treats in the RS 6's plentiful bag of technological tricks.

All in all, the Audi is a highly desirable, though pricey (\$82,700 list) endurance racing car for the street. Wolfkill spoke for all of us when he wrote, "If there exists a better car for going effortlessly fast, I haven't driven it."



1st — Mercedes-Benz E55 AMG 578.0 points

Rarely does an automobile come along that makes you run to the railing, fling your arms open and scream, "I'm king of the world!" The Audi is the most balanced overall package, but the sheer, overwhelming hot-rod thrust of this Affalterbach-built Benz can turn seen-it-all journalists into wide-eyed schoolboys. We'd like to personally thank the sole AMG technician responsible for hand-assembling this engine (his signature is on a plaque affixed to the 5.4-liter sohc V-8's Lysholm supercharger, but like a lot of signatures, we couldn't read it). The result is 469 bhp and a massive 516 lb.-ft. of torque, with the supercharger's twin screws churning at 23,000 rpm. Even right off idle, there's enough twist to easily light up the rear 265/35ZR-18 Continentals by just stepping on the gas in 1st gear. And yep, minimize the wheelspin and it's the Ferrari-beater, smoking to 60 in a mere 4.2 sec., on to an astounding 12.4-sec. quarter mile at 116.4 mph that's only a couple of tenths off the new Dodge Viper. And this in a quiet, civilized (albeit firm-riding) 4-door sedan, equally at home on a grocery run or bumping off its 155-mph speed limiter on the *Autobahn*.



Hand-built by a single technician at AMG's Affalterbach, Germany, headquarters, this 469-bhp marvel (below) propels the E55 through the quarter mile faster than most high-end sports cars, which is quite a feat for a 4200-lb. sedan.

Through our route's high-speed sweepers, the Benz felt positively glued down, delivering steering feel that's uncharacteristically communicative for a Mercedes, and very welcome. It's on the exit of tighter corners where you can feel the electronics — traction control, stability control — fighting to rein in the power. Even with stability control switched off, it still intervenes at the ragged edge, but not before allowing you to step the tail out. During strong acceleration, there's an intentional relaxation in power delivery on the upshifts to prevent the tires from spinning — perfectly timed, but noticeable. Also, through the tighter stuff on some surfaces, the front tires will chatter with extreme side load and you sense the Merc's heft.

Brakes, when used with moderate to hard pedal pressure, inspire the same huge confidence of the Audi system. And a peek between the thick spokes of the AMG-design wheels

shows why, as there are immense 8-pot calipers and correspondingly large discs up front here as well. It's with light application that we find fault; Mercedes' brake-by-wire system, used in both the SL- and E-Class cars, requires delicacy of modulation for smooth around-town stops. "Not a major flaw," noted Wolfkill, "just a feature that requires a period of acclimatization."

So there are a few foibles in the running gear, but unquestionably Mercedes has crafted an interior that exudes polish, class and quality. "A very special, chic place," said Swift. Chrome-ringed, white-faced gauges are legible (though it does seem odd to have a large analog clock hog so much valuable instrument-panel real estate), and a pair of deeply supportive sports seats upholstered in Nappa/Nubuk leather offers exceptional hold, and features adjustable "clamp" of the seat

bolsters. Just-so polished wood edged with chrome, and an extremely intuitive-to-use band of high-set climate controls finish the tasteful treatment.

It's nicer still for long highway stints with the S-Class-derived Airmatic suspension that quickly alters damping and spring rates as the system's accelerometers and sensors see fit, or according to four driver-selectable modes. Set in the middle of the range, the ride quality is similar to the Audi's; set full soft, it's between the Jag and BMW, all summoned from a push of what Formula 1 fan Swift dubbed the "Jenson Button" on the center console. Likewise, electronic control of the 5-speed automatic transmission sweetens the experience in either canyon-carving or cruise mode. In Mercedes' SpeedShift system, sequential changes can be made either with wheel-mounted buttons or a sideways nudge of the selector lever. Shift speed is commendably quick; and shift quality commendably smooth.

Technology, torque, luxury and true supercar performance make the E55 the new king of high-performance sedans, lacking only a version of Mercedes' 4Matic all-wheel drive to allow dialing out some of



Football-sized 8-piston brake calipers put the bite on massive cross-drilled rotors to help counter the accelerative effects of the supercharged V-8's prodigious power.

the electronic aids and dialing in a purer experience. It and the Audi have truly raised the bar for all comers in this prestigious segment. And listing at an estimated \$75,000, the E55 has to be considered a relative bargain.

In My Opinion...

Every time I get out of the Audi I'm struck by the ease with which it devours vast quantities of real estate. It doesn't seem to matter if it's a stretch of highway, a winding mountain road or an especially inviting off-ramp. The RS 6's combination of unrelenting thrust, all-wheel-drive traction and unflappable composure makes it a genuine speed-seeking cruise missile. If I had 85 large lying around, there'd be one sitting in my garage tomorrow. — *Kim Wolfkill, Senior Editor*

To pick a favorite among this group is near impossible. The level of performance is truly astounding. The E55 and the RS 6, as the newest examples, raise the bar in this class. But for me, the M5 is very close. The M5's dynamic character, while the most conventional, is also the most predictable. It is the most comfortable for me. Considering the extremes that these cars are capable of, that counts for a lot and makes the M5 the car I was angling to drive on the long journey home. — *Bert Swift, Associate Art Director*

For a change, my decision was easy: the Audi RS 6. Though it falls short of the E55's world-conquering torque, the Audi is still blurringly quick, and it applies its considerable power to the ground with such fluid and unruffled ease that your confidence factor soars. Add in the best steering feel of any modern Audi, brakes that could stop a locomotive, a sublimely sporting interior and just enough race-car attitude in its stance and appearance, and you have the ultimate 4-door lust object. — *Douglas Kott, Executive Editor*



Luxurious elegance with a sporting flair, the E55's interior mixes rich leather upholstery with wood, chrome and brushed-metal accents to produce a comfortable cockpit well suited for extended stints of high-speed driving.



About 15 years ago the motor industry was telling us that the days of high-horsepower performance cars had come to an end. Having spent three days with this terrific group of sedans, I'm grateful that prediction was a fallacy. All these cars perform and handle very well, but the car for my garage is the E55, as the brute performance coupled with such understated classy styling really got my attention. Although...every year I compete in the week-long Targa Rally of New Zealand, and for this event I would love to borrow the RS 6. — *Steve Millen, Contributing Editor*

The Slingshot Factor

One of the true joys of being in a powerful car on a remote two-lane highway is the ease of passing dawdling tourists with a sharp prod of the accelerator. For a sense of this, we made three instrumented acceleration passes with each car in 3rd gear, from a steady-state 60 mph on up to 90 and recorded the best times. For context, we performed the same test in an Acura RSX Type-S, a 200-bhp sports coupe that's among the best performers in its class.

Obviously, different gearing affects the way each car accelerates; all four sedans used 3rd gear, while the Acura required a 3-4 shift for the last 5 mph. The timing starts once we see the car start to accelerate on our data, rather than the instant the throttle is pressed. Nonetheless, the times reveal just how potent our quartet of super sedans really is. What the data can't capture is just how satisfying it is to dip into that deep well of torque. — *DK*

Slingshot Factor

60-90 mph, in seconds

Audi RS 6	4.6
BMW M5	4.4
Jaguar S-Type R	5.3
Mercedes-Benz E55 AMG	4.4
Acura RSX Type-S	7.3

PERFORMANCE

Performance points based on proportional scale (normalization).

		Audi RS 6	BMW M5	Jaguar S-Type R	Mercedes-Benz E55 AMG
0-60 mph time	30 pts	27.4	26.3	24.2	30.0
0-1/4 mile time	30 pts	28.4	28.0	27.2	30.0
Slalom	30 pts	30.0	30.0	29.7	29.1
Skidpad	30 pts	30.0	29.0	29.0	28.6
Braking, 60-0 mph	30 pts	29.5	30.0	29.0	29.5
Braking, 80-0 mph	30 pts	30.0	29.9	28.9	29.0
Fuel Economy	20 pts	19.0	17.0	20.0	19.0
SUBTOTAL	200 pts	194.3	190.2	188.0	195.2

SUBJECTIVE RATINGS

Subjective ratings based on points awarded in each of 12 categories by editors and scored based on a proportional scale.

Driving Excitement	20 pts	20.0	18.3	16.8	18.9
Engine	20 pts	18.4	16.9	16.3	20.0
Gearbox	20 pts	20.0	17.3	15.6	19.6
Steering	20 pts	19.3	20.0	17.7	17.7
Brakes	20 pts	20.0	17.8	16.7	18.9
Ride	20 pts	17.7	18.2	20.0	20.0
Handling	20 pts	20.0	17.8	16.1	17.8
Exterior styling	15 pts	15.0	13.8	14.6	15.0
Interior styling	15 pts	14.2	11.3	12.9	15.0

Seats	10 pts	9.1	10.0	8.0	10.0
Ergonomics/controls	10 pts	10.0	8.7	8.7	8.9
Luggage space	10 pts	10.0	8.3	8.3	9.2
SUBTOTAL	200 pts	193.7	178.4	171.7	191.0
TOTAL POINTS Price independent	(400 pts)	388.0	368.6	359.7	386.2

PRICE

Points based on a proportional scale; points range for price equals average points range of Performance and Subjective categories.

Price as tested	200 pts	185.4	194.2	200.0	191.8
		\$85,010	\$72,645	\$64,600	est \$76,105

FINAL STANDINGS

TOTAL POINTS Price dependent	(600 pts)	573.4	562.8	559.7	578.0
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Audi RS 6	BMW M5	Jaguar S- Type R	Mercedes- Benz E55 AMG

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