TOP 100

The final countdown: from fifth to first

Here, then, are our five finalists, each of them a car of the first order. **Richard Lane** makes the difficult decision and declares a winner

PHOTOGRAPHY JACK HARRISON



Into the top five we boldly go. And what's this – not a mid-engined creation to be seen? Surely some mistake. But no, not at all. Truth be told, the absence of supercars from the final quintet shouldn't come as a colossal surprise given the criteria to which we're working. If this contest was mostly concerned with undiluted excitement and raw synaptic delight, then the following pages would of course be drenched in high-octane products from McLaren, Ariel, Ferrari et al. But we're looking at an altogether rounder picture here. Every car over the next few pages has both a deep-seated 'rightness' and a conceptual purity, plus decent usability, meaning they're enjoyable more of the time. They are, to us, simply 'super' cars.

This explains why, first thing in the morning, there's a Dacia Jogger bumbling its way to our West Country base of operations for the day. As it happens, the French-Romanian bargain-basement seven-seater arrives moments after another finalist – a Porsche 911, in off-duty-racing-car white. If you knew no better, you would assume the 911 was the star of the shoot and the blocky 109bhp estate was the support mule, chock-full of photography equipment. Yet both are here on merit and for similar reasons: they are totally charming and do their Specific Thing to near-perfection. Anyone on the Autocar payroll would happily own either of these cars, given the chance, although this remains true of all the five finalists.


Don't be fooled: the Dacia has earned its place here

In its starkest form, the Jogger costs a little over £18,000. You might not want it in such a basic guise as that, but the fact that an ingeniously versatile family car exists at this price at all deserves celebrating. Our car has three pedals, a three-figure cubic capacity and a torsion beam axle at the back; we won't pretend it doesn't feel a touch rudimentary on the move. 'Performance' is not in the Jogger vernacular, either, while the driving position is faintly agricultural. Yet everyone who drives the Dacia loves it, and not in an ironic way. There is a joy in the unpretentious simplicity of cars such as this, especially when they don't mind being hustled through corners. The Jogger is dependable, likeable and strangely handsome, don't you think? No, it was never going to win this contest outright, but a place on the podium? That, we can now reveal, is in the bag for this stellar car that has undertones of 1970s French utili-cool.

In the final standings, the positions immediately behind the Dacia are occupied by cars divergent in detail but closely related in philosophy. They are Toyota's GR86 and ➔



Supercars aren't the only conspicuously absent format. No hot hatches? Were the Fiesta ST still around, it would have been here. Maybe the Hyundai i20 N too. Alas, both are now retired.



Jogger plays the practicality card to perfection



911 works as sports car or GT; Dacia is basic but brilliant

The Porsche and Toyota are the only cars here in possession of what you might call 'god-tier' handling. But into which would you pump your last gallon of super? Probably the GR86. It just comes alive so easily.



the Mazda MX-5, which also happen to be the only remaining cars of their genus. It's a depressing fact that if you want a light, rear-drive two-seater with a modest footprint, a manual gearbox, a palatable price and a Goldilocks balance of power and grip, and which could be used day to day by anyone, the Japanese duo are your only options. It's telling that they have both ended up this high in the ranking, eh? I suspect that if a third car of this kind existed, and it was executed half-well, it too would have booked a spot in the final shootout. Along with hot hatches, diddy, fizzing sports cars have long been the lifeblood of the enthusiast experience.

But which finishes higher? Given the choice, most people would rightly reach for the key to the GR86 if the assignment was a five-mile blast. The Toyota has the better driving position, the more direct steering, sharper body control and, with its low-slung boxer engine, a beguiling manner to the way it snaps into bends, almost immediately loads up its back axle with grip and then begs you to tease the chassis out of line on the throttle. It is alert, reactive and frankly more enlivening than a good number of self-proclaimed driver's cars five times its price. The powertrain is short on romance, and there isn't quite enough reach in the steering column, but if you want a car to egg you on to push at its predictable limits and put a smile on your face, the GR86 is perhaps second only to a Caterham Seven.

So, yes, less really is more in this case. In the era of electric powertrains and easy access to power, 1276kg and 231bhp can seem curiously modest figures for a performance car, although there's nothing modest about the scope of this package. It is, in short, sublime – especially given the luggage space you have not only in the boot but also behind the front seats, meaning the little Toyota can also play the junior, long-snouted GT role. Less sublime is the fact that safety regulations have cut the car's lifespan short.

The GR86 is such a slathering spaniel of a sports car that when you drop down into the MX-5's Recaros immediately after, the famous roadster feels a touch underdamped and lethargic. This is strange because, at 1062kg, the Mazda weighs notably less than its compatriot, and with the roof down it generates more easily the sensation of speed. It also, it must be said, has the spicier engine – in this case a naturally aspirated 2.0-litre four that, with its revised top end and lighter flywheel, now zings to the 7500rpm redline every bit as sweetly as the 1.5 does. There's a proper limited-slip diff, too.

Seat time in the Mazda reminds you it is a mistake to treat an MX-5 like it's a GR86, because doing so doesn't play to its considerable strengths. That sense of lethargy is not a flaw but a signal that this car wants to be flowed, not grabbed by the scruff of its neck; it wants to be poured neatly into bends, not chivvied apex-wards on a lifted throttle. It wants to carry momentum, making best use of a chassis that is both stellar in its balance and usefully absorbent on our pocked B-roads. If the Toyota



High-rise Jogger has a distinctly utilitarian raised driving position



> “The little Toyota can also play the junior, long-snouted GT role”

GR86 is a small-scale Ferrari 812 Superfast, the Mazda MX-5 plays understudy to Aston Martin’s excellent DB12 Volante. Except that, 90% of the time, it’s even more enjoyable to drive than the super-GT because its diminutive size means you can carve gratifying lines without leaving your lane, and its paucity of power means your foot remains constantly, gloriously planted.

Of course, both cars are wonderful, but ultimately the MX-5 gets the nod over its co-star, finishing fourth. It’s a cherished stalwart: unlike the GR86, you will still be able to buy an MX-5 from new next year, and the year after that – as we have been able to since 1990. That was the year this magazine road tested the original Mk1 MX-5, declaring that “the world’s most written-about and, arguably, most desirable affordable car is here”. Some 34 years later, those same sentiments still stand up to scrutiny.

Next up is the BMW 3 Series. If ever a car needed less of an introduction, it’s the definitive sports saloon, now in its seventh generation and dynamically better than ever. Its inclusion here isn’t remotely surprising. What was surprising is that BMW had no examples lurking within one of the most expansive press fleets in the business, although it had the legitimate excuse of being in an inventory refresh. We are therefore grateful to Dick Lovett BMW in Swindon, which kindly agreed to supply a car and it did not disappoint. Honestly, any 3 Series would have done, because they all have the same intrinsic handling appeal and high calibre of comfort and ergonomics. But the car Lovett sent? As an M340i with tan interior it’s a real charmer, with carbonfibre interior trim that’s a cheeky nod to those absent supercars…

Slide aboard and you’re reminded that the driving position in the 3 Series is utterly pedigree: as long of leg and as short of arm as anyone could reasonably expect in a saloon, it sets the tone. This car’s 369bhp 3.0-litre straight six then states an altogether more outwardly exciting case for itself. It’s deep and, with turbocharging, quite nasal but undeniably one of numerous cylinders. That fact alone separates the BMW from current rivals, although again, this car’s presence here today isn’t dependent on a particular engine specification.

It’s here because there is almost nothing a 3 Series – any 3 Series – cannot do well. All-day cruising on the motorway? The G20-generation car conjures up isolation levels that not too long ago were the preserve of the 7 Series. It also exhibits good pliancy and plushness, despite ➔

What if we’d used a circuit?

Track testing of road cars is often seen as an irrelevance, but as well as being useful for exploring limit handling, the fact is that three of the cars in our top five would be fine options for the occasional track day-goer. The GR86 and MX-5 are especially able, being lightweight, super-adjustable and, crucially, gentle on consumables such as brakes and tyres. You wouldn’t be the fastest car on track, but you could well be the driver having the most fun.

The 911 also excels on track, as we know from the countless times this rear-engined marvel, in one form or another, has put in a strong performance at our annual ‘Handling Day’ contest. In fact, for the 911 owner who is serious about driving, we would say a bit of time on track is almost mandatory – otherwise you may never discover just what an astonishingly fluid and playful machine you have on your hands. As for the Jogger? Leave it in the paddock!



BMW is agile despite its size and compliant despite M Sport set-up



Dacia does many things, but open-roof thrills aren't on the menu

the fact that, for most incarnations of 3 Series, BMW now insists on offering only M Sport suspension. Space? The big-booted Touring variant is an aero-efficient antidote to the onslaught of SUVs on our roads (the owners of those high-riding behemoths just haven't realised it yet). Performance? In the real world there isn't much that a well-steered M340i can't live with, while the 503bhp M3 Competition is in practice an all-weather supercar. But even the torquey 320d offers more than adequate shove, not to mention economy comfortably the far side of 50mpg on a long run. The breadth of this model line is truly astonishing, and that's before you arrive at its trump card, which is what it always has been for the 3 Series: handling.

The 3 Series is not a small car, but such is the accuracy of its steering and quality of its body control – both of which benefit enormously from the G20's torsional stiffness – that you need to find a very tawdry B-road indeed to unsettle it. You point, it goes. Layer onto this the sort of throttle-adjustability usually reserved for dedicated sports cars. Yes, there is less delicacy to be enjoyed here than with, say, the scalpel-like GR86, but the ability of the 3 Series – a well-heeled executive saloon, remember – to rotate mid-corner makes it a jewel of the automotive world. But hang on, isn't Alfa Romeo's Giulia even more expressive? Perhaps it is. But it lacks the BMW's composure, which means you often have to back off on interesting roads – a definite handicap in the UK. The BMW has an answer for everything.

Except, perhaps, for the Porsche 911. When the 992 generation emerged, there were concerns that, this time around, the new car really was too wide and too heavy to have the necessary agility and playfulness on anything other than a race track. And there's truth in this. The latest 911 often feels more grippy and monolithic than we would like. And yet in the end it still handles like a 911 should, only with monumental levels of poise. It feels different from anything else out there, in the best way, and impossibly well honed. I'm not sure there's another fast car in existence in which you feel at home more quickly than the 911. You acclimatise, you learn the car and you start to push it and have fun. The 992 is both tolerant of ham-fistedness and receptive to deft throttle and steering inputs. That's quite the trick when you think about it, and it's not something much else, if anything, is able to pull off.

> “In the real world, there isn't much that a well-steered M340i can't live with”

There's not enough space here to talk about the expertly wrought cabin, or the genuinely impressive amount of clobber you can fit into a 911 when you take into account both the 'frunk' and the fold-down rear seats. It's also a car that begs to be used, not mollycoddled, and it can double up as a fabulous GT at a moment's notice. The flat six can be economical, too, and on a dull commute the 992 is no more taxing to drive than a Volkswagen Golf, and it is more comfy, in fact, because the driving position is just spot on.

With its enchanting adjustability and ear-splitting engine, the 9000rpm GT3 laughs in the face of more serious supercars, yet the almost entirely basic 911 Carrera we have here today is, in its own way, just as appealing – maybe more so. There's not a dud in the range, or indeed anything that is even less than superb.

With the GR86 and MX-5 finishing fifth and fourth respectively, we now need to reveal the podium place into which the Dacia, remember, has so impressively catapulted itself. As it happens, third is as high as the Jogger goes, but that is as resounding an endorsement for a budget family car as you are likely to see. As if to cement that fact, second place goes to no less than the Porsche 911, onto which we needn't pile any more plaudits. It is, quite simply, the most complete performance car in the world.

Which leaves our winner. Step forward the BMW 3 Series. Cars are getting more expensive, but the fact you can still buy such a fine-handling, well-equipped and practical saloon for little over £40k is reason for cheer. You can escalate matters if you want, right up to the dazzling heights of the six-figure M3 CS, but the beauty of the 3 Series, and especially this G20 generation, is that all variants vigorously scratch the enthusiast itch, and do so without sacrificing the other attributes you need in a trusty yet desirable everyday companion. Is that enough to make it our 'best' car on sale? We'd say so. A





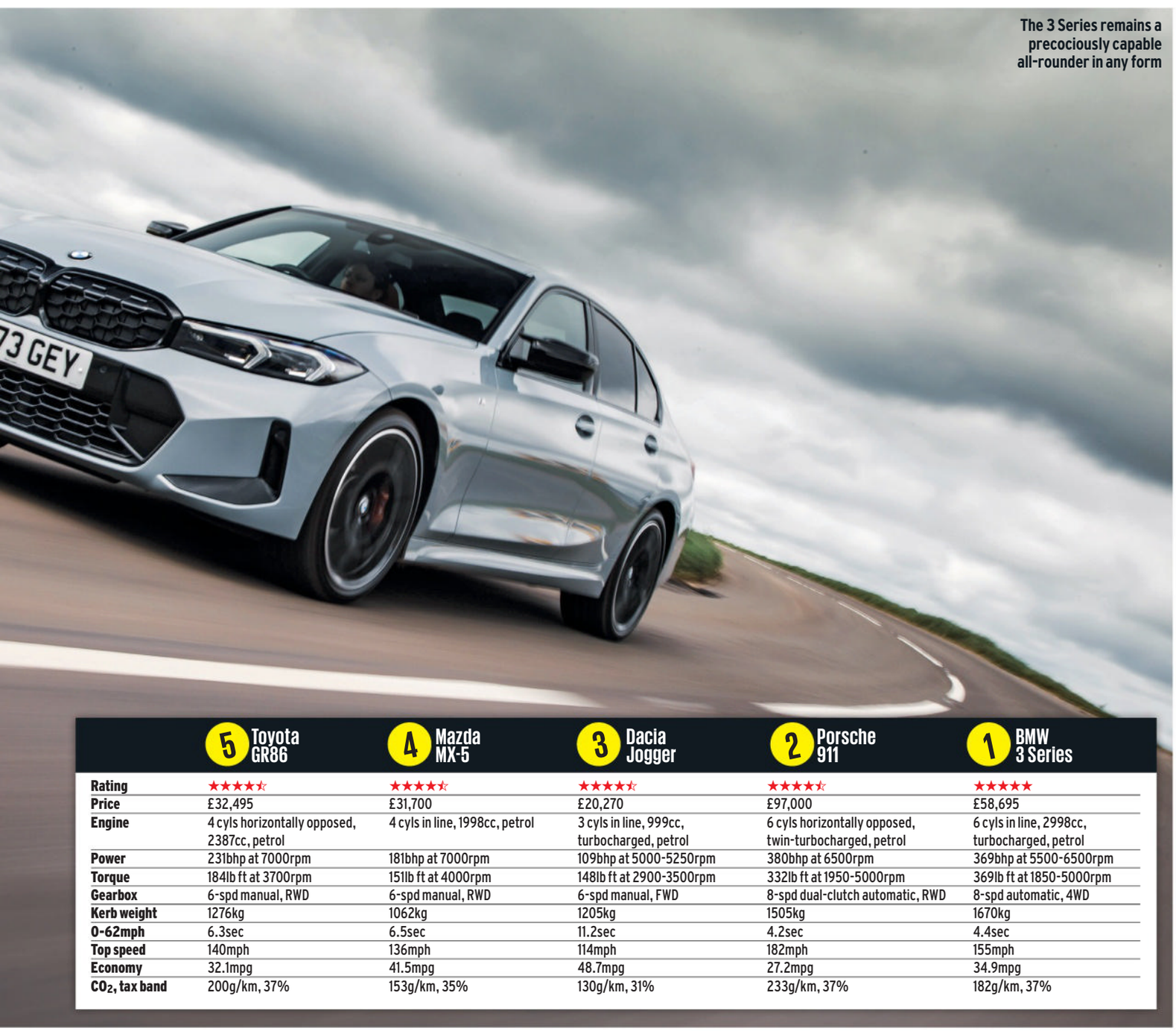


Engaging GR86 is as benignly adjustable as you want it to be


911 is no rarefied supercar. Instead, it begs to be used



MX-5 rewards a smooth, flowing approach to bends



The 3 Series remains a precociously capable all-rounder in any form

	5 Toyota GR86	4 Mazda MX-5	3 Dacia Jogger	2 Porsche 911	1 BMW 3 Series
Rating	★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★★★
Price	£32,495	£31,700	£20,270	£97,000	£58,695
Engine	4 cyls horizontally opposed, 2387cc, petrol	4 cyls in line, 1998cc, petrol	3 cyls in line, 999cc, turbocharged, petrol	6 cyls horizontally opposed, twin-turbocharged, petrol	6 cyls in line, 2998cc, turbocharged, petrol
Power	231bhp at 7000rpm	181bhp at 7000rpm	109bhp at 5000-5250rpm	380bhp at 6500rpm	369bhp at 5500-6500rpm
Torque	184lb ft at 3700rpm	151lb ft at 4000rpm	148lb ft at 2900-3500rpm	332lb ft at 1950-5000rpm	369lb ft at 1850-5000rpm
Gearbox	6-spd manual, RWD	6-spd manual, RWD	6-spd manual, FWD	8-spd dual-clutch automatic, RWD	8-spd automatic, 4WD
Kerb weight	1276kg	1062kg	1205kg	1505kg	1670kg
0-62mph	6.3sec	6.5sec	11.2sec	4.2sec	4.4sec
Top speed	140mph	136mph	114mph	182mph	155mph
Economy	32.1mpg	41.5mpg	48.7mpg	27.2mpg	34.9mpg
CO_2, tax band	200g/km, 37%	153g/km, 35%	130g/km, 31%	233g/km, 37%	182g/km, 37%