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AUTOMOBILE

APRIL 1992

Mercedes-Benz 500E LIKE A DRUG

*The mesmerizing
effect of a
322-bhp V-8*



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MERCEDES-BENZ 500E

It's expensive, exclusive, and more than a little unreal, but it makes you believe once again in the ability of Mercedes to make the ultimate automobile.

Los Angeles—

There are few nameplates that shine as brightly as that of Mercedes-Benz, yet it has looked a little shopworn lately, as if too many hands have reached out to touch it and carry away its magic. So many people have rubbed up against the Mercedes image that the company has become less noteworthy for its cars than for the defense of its trademark against assorted rap singers and small-time hucksters. Mercedes has become a shrine visited too often, a coin passed through too many hands, a phrase heard on the lips of too many people.

The Mercedes-Benz 500E ["Blitzen Benz!" December 1990] cleanses the company badge and renews its luster. The 500E reminds you that they make cars—not engineering manifestos or advertising slogans—in Untertürkheim, and that Mercedes cars are part of a great tradition of forthright speed and impeccable road manners.

"I was going down the autobahn toward Geneva in the 500E, and I was thinking about my friends who are always telling me how great it must be to work at a car magazine and then asking which car is the best I've ever driven.



And I thought: 'This is it. This is the best car in the world. This is the reason I work at a car magazine.' "

—Larry Crane

It's pretty easy to figure out this car. It's the mid-size W124 sedan (familiar to us as the 300E) with the 322-bhp V-8 engine from the 500SL sports car. Since the 500E weighs 290 pounds less than the 500SL, it has a liveliness that's missing from the two-seater. The 500E is a real road car, and we like it for basically the same reasons we like the Ford Taurus SHO and the Pontiac Bonneville SSEi. The difference is, we can't get enough of the 500E. It's just like a Mercedes, only faster.

"When you drive with all your normal inputs, you look down at the speedometer, and it's as if somebody dialed up the speed by 50 percent."

—Douglas Weisz

BY MICHAEL JORDAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL GASPAR

MERCEDES-BENZ 500E

Ah, the speed, the incredible speed. We are utterly intoxicated by the 500E's speed. We are besotted with it, unmanned and unwomaned by it. We tore across Angeles Crest Highway in California; in Michigan we hammered down Pleasant Lake Road, challenged the looping, eastbound Plymouth exit from M-14, and whistled through the southbound transition from M-14 to U.S. 23. By every measure of the road, the 500E makes us drunk with speed. This car is like a drug that you can't buy.

"You find yourself cruising along at 90 mph and then blowing through gaps in the traffic at 120 mph. The Ceppos family set a new personal land speed record of 145 mph, and it wasn't very hard because we didn't need much space in which to do it."—Rich Ceppos

As you would expect, the formula here is basically a big engine, stiff springs, and fat tires, but all of it has been executed with the sanitary thoroughness so typical of Daimler-Benz. The 32-valve, 5.0-liter V-8 engine from the 500SL has been modified with longer intake runners and a hot-wire air sensor for the fuel injection, and together these changes boost the torque rating by

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seven percent. There's sufficient power here to spin the rear wheels easily in wet weather, so Daimler-Benz's traction control is in place. This computerized system reduces wheelspin by combining inputs into the anti-lock brake system, adjustment of the throttle valve, retardation of the ignition timing, and adjustment of the fuel mixture. Top speed is electronically limited to 155 mph.

As far as the chassis is concerned, the body structure around the engine has

been strengthened, and much of the running gear has been upgraded to SL specification, including front disc brakes with big 11.8-inch vented rotors and powerful four-piston calipers. Wider fenders were required to encompass the 225/55ZR-16 tires; Daimler-Benz commissioned new tooling so the fenders would meet its standards. There's also some imaginative trickery in the suspension. First, plastic helpers for the springs make travel more progressive at full compression. And second, tiny helper springs inside the shock absorbers take the sting out of full rebound and also permit the use of softer anti-roll bars, improving ride quality.

The basic W124 sedan might be the most successful of the Bruno Sacco shapes, with just the right amount of surface tension in the soft aerodynamic form. The 500E, which rides about an



inch lower than a 300E and has a track 1.5 inches wider, gives the basic shape a kind of sculptural voluptuousness. Given the wonderful palette of colors that is available, it is hard to believe that anyone would choose a color like the battleship gray that cursed our West Coast test car. On the visual interest scale, it was a black hole. The gray color didn't do the

Traction control is a boon in the wet but can be disconcerting in spirited driving. Inputs must be deliberately controlled. Right: Driving environment is basically unchanged from previous 300 series but is still simple and elegant with its burl walnut console and dash fascias. And, in case you were wondering, the "E" in 500E comes from Einspritzung, German for "fuel injection," and now identifies any gasoline-engined model.



interior any favors, either, although the seats (slightly wider than the optional Sportline seats now available in some of the 300-series cars) are very good.

"It's like a Porsche 911 Turbo with four doors. You can go faster than a Ferrari 512TR because it's so predictable, and it's so civilized compared with a BMW M5. This is the best car I have ever driven." —Kathleen Hamilton

The 500E does not drive like a hot rod. The AMG Hammer [July 1987], this car's spiritual ancestor, was simply snubbed down and tightened up, and you could make it crease apexes like a Formula 1 car or back it into corners on



The 500E's handling characteristics and road manners are "best in world." Innovative suspension bits help travel at full compression. Fenders are flared for bigger 225/55ZR-16 tires and a sport look.

opposite lock like a sprint car. But the 500E drives like the ideal Mercedes-Benz. This means that no special techniques are required for going fast; you step in and drive. It tracks through corners, following the front tires with a kind of obedient resolve. In fact, you can be disappointed if you try to hustle this car in the point-and-shoot mode. As soon as the traction control system senses too much wheelspin, it's on you like the thought police, and the car lurches as it settles down. You have to sneak up on peak cornering speeds with the skilled laboring of Rick Mears.

On the whole, this is not a car that likes tight corners and frantic inputs. And since it doesn't call for finely honed reflexes, it doesn't serve the vanity of self-styled hero drivers. Instead, this is a true Mercedes, and that means it is intended for serious travel, not stunt driving. In fact, Mercedes is most proud of the car's even weight distribution under partly loaded conditions, its stable rear suspension geometry, and the complete car's safe and easy-to-control character in slippery road conditions.

Speed is what this car is really about. And the feeling it gives you—a combination of exhilaration, confidence, and safety—is virtually impossible to describe. Like Ishmael in Herman Mel-

MAKING A MERCEDES THAT DRIVES LIKE A PORSCHE

The 500E has its roots in Daimler-Benz's decision in the early Eighties to counter BMW's fashionable performance image with some speedy hardware of its own, a move that led ultimately to the Sauber-Mercedes racing car that won the 1989 24 Hours of Le Mans. The 500E was conceived in 1987, at the time when the AMG Hammer was turning so many heads. In fact, AMG was initially approached to build the 500E, but it didn't have sufficient production capacity.

In 1988, Daimler-Benz contracted Porsche to execute the project. Porsche ultimately took responsibility for the structural improvements, the side-impact crash testing, and the production engineering. It's likely that Porsche R&D's Weissach facility proved useful for development since Mercedes has only a tiny test track next to the original facility to

call its own and uses the racetrack at Hockenheim for high-speed testing. Only recently has the company at last found a site for a full-scale test facility.

The 500E's body shell is assembled at Porsche's Zuffenhausen facility, shipped to the Benz plant at Sindelfingen for painting, and sent to Zuffenhausen for the final assembly of all components. Then the car is shipped back to Sindelfingen for final inspection. Porsche's assembly takes place in the Rossle-Bau, the factory area where the high-tech Porsche 959 supercar was built. About twenty cars are built each day, but only 600 will swim to the United States this year.

This relationship between Daimler-Benz and Porsche has sparked rumors of a takeover by the more sensationalist members of the German press, but the rumors have been countered by hot denials from both parties. In fact, such a takeover seems somewhat unlikely in the near future. After all, Mercedes-Benz was discouraged from acquiring little AMG because it would create a potential monopoly, and Porsche remains solvent even as its sales slump. The fact remains, however, that the 500E is very much the sedan Porsche would build if it could. This is precisely the sort of project that Porsche will have to seek in order to guarantee enough income to keep the company in the specialty-car business. —MJ

The 500E's ability to deliver speed and comfort with complete safety makes it a standard by which we will measure all automobiles.

MERCEDES-BENZ 500E

ville's *Moby Dick*, we find that we cannot describe the whiteness of the whale.

"It is important that prospective 500E drivers have impeccable credentials as adults. The car is so quick, so eager, so agile, that it makes immature people drive like idiots. We all fell into that latter category. Example: Early evening, medium traffic, good visibility. I'm minding my own business in the right-hand lane with the cruise control set at 80 mph. Another idiot blasts past in a 5.0 Mustang, and all self-discipline vanishes. I'm on him like a leopard on a tethered goat. He tries to hold me off, but he hasn't a prayer. A small hole opens, I give the Mercedes one more squirt, and the Mustang disappears in my mirror, its headlights getting closer together as though I were watching through the wrong end of a telescope. At three in the morning, in bed, staring back at the darkness, I squirm uncomfortably and accuse myself: 'Idiot! You know better than that! You could be in jail right now!'" —David E. Davis, Jr.

"The ride is amazingly good considering the enormous capabilities of this car. And yet the control is still there. It



reminds you that the Europeans still know how to build the best automobiles in the world."

—Barry Winfield

"It's incredible that it feels so normal to drive above 100 mph all the time."

—Mark H. Schirmer

"I sold my 500SL and bought one. I wanted a car that had the running gear of an SL but was completely inconspicuous. It has avoided a great deal of trouble with the police."

—Georg Kacher

"This car is worth the money. It makes you want a Mercedes again."

—Jean Lindamood

This is a plain, almost austere car. It reacts to everything with a kind of thoughtful delay, a soft, progressive engagement that marks every system, from the steering to the turn-signal stalk. Yet underneath is an extraordinarily dramatic personality that holds us spellbound. This car is so enormously capable that it inspires the driver to match its greatness with his or her own best effort.

Sure, an \$80,000, 155-mph sedan that gets 14 mpg is not a paragon of social responsibility. Yet the 500E's ability to deliver speed and comfort with complete safety makes it a standard by which we will measure all automobiles. Call us drugged by speed, but we think the 500E is a vision of automotive excellence.

MERCEDES-BENZ 500E

GENERAL:

Front-engine, rear-wheel-drive sedan
4-passenger, 4-door steel body
Base price/price as tested \$79,200/\$80,750
(+ luxury tax of 10% over \$30,000 and estimated \$2600 gas guzzler tax)

MAJOR EQUIPMENT:

Standard air conditioning, cruise control, leather interior, dual air bags, AM/FM-stereo/cassette system; optional CD player \$1200, sunroof (no cost)

ENGINE:

32-valve DOHC V-8, aluminum block and heads
Bore x stroke 3.80 x 3.35 in (96.5 x 85.1 mm)
Displacement 304 cu in (4973 cc)
Compression ratio 10.0:1
Fuel system sequential multipoint fuel injection
Power SAE net 322 bhp @ 5700 rpm
Torque SAE net 354 lb-ft @ 3900 rpm
Redline 6000 rpm

DRIVETRAIN:

4-speed automatic transmission
Gear ratios (I) 3.87 (II) 2.25 (III) 1.44 (IV) 1.00
Final-drive ratio 2.82:1
Traction-control system

MEASUREMENTS:

Wheelbase 110.2 in
Track front/rear 60.6/60.2 in
Length x width x height 187.2 x 70.7 x 55.4 in
Curb weight 3855 lb
Weight distribution front/rear 53/47%
Ground clearance 5.5 in
Coefficient of drag 0.31
Fuel capacity 23.8 gal
Cargo capacity 13.8 cu ft

SUSPENSION:

Independent front, with damper struts, coil springs, anti-roll bar
Independent multi-link rear, with coil springs, self-leveling dampers, anti-roll bar

STEERING:

Recirculating-ball, power-assisted
Turns lock to lock 3.1
Turning circle 38.4 ft

BRAKES:

Vented discs front and rear
Anti-lock system

WHEELS AND TIRES:

16 x 8.0-in cast aluminum wheels
225/55ZR-16 Michelin MXM Sport tires

PERFORMANCE (manufacturer's data):

0-60 mph in 6.1 sec
Top speed 155 mph
Pounds per bhp 12.0
EPA city driving 14 mpg

MAINTENANCE AND REPAIR:

Headlamp unit \$149.60
Front quarter-panel \$330.00
Brake pads front wheels \$85.59
Filters air \$18.00/oil \$13.17
Warranty bumper to bumper 4 yr/50,000 mi

