



500E/E500 - Proven Formula

By Gerry Van Zandt*

As impressive as the 190 E 2.3-16 series was in the 1980s (and still is, embarrassing newer cars regularly in Autocross events) the concurrent 1980s success of then independent **AMG's E-Class "Hammer"** reconfirmed a market that M-B almost abandoned.

Porsche was in dire straits at this time with sales way down and facilities such as its Rossle-Bau factory idled as production of the fabled 959 & 928 ended. To keep productive, Porsche contracted to other manufacturers to do chassis and engine design and engineering projects. It was a serendipitous moment for both companies: the **500E** would require hand-crafting made impossible by the high-volume manufacturing lines at Sindelfingen; and **Porsche** had the engineers, expertise and facilities at Rossle-Bau to produce the car. A deal was signed, and Porsche commenced the project during 1989 and 1990.

To create the 500E, Mercedes stuck to its proven formula (pioneered with the 6.3 and 6.9) of shoe-horning a powerful V-8 into a small chassis while keeping an understated exterior appearance. To do this, Mercedes borrowed the 306-horsepower M119 engine from the 500SL, using the Bosch LH engine management system and the company's first use of the state-of-the-art control-area network (CAN) system. The R129 rear axle was chosen and the W124 suspension optimized by Porsche for performance, handling and comfort.

Each 500E took 18 days to build, as opposed to three days for normal W124 sedans. Standard W124 body shells were trucked across town from Sindelfingen to Porsche at Zuffenhausen, where they received structural modifications and reinforcements. Panels and doors were installed as well. The partially completed chassis were then shipped back to Sindelfingen for rust-proofing and painting and back again to Porsche for interior and drivetrain.

Completed 500Es were sent back to Mercedes for final inspection and distribution or export to dealers worldwide. Eight to 12 cars were produced each day.

Nearly 10,500 500Es and E500s were produced from 1990 through early 1995. 1,505 were imported into the U.S. market at that time. Originally priced at \$79,200 for US buyers, the price crept to \$82,000 by the end of the model run in the US. Only left hand drive cars were produced even for export to right-hand-drive countries.

From late 1993 through early 1995, Mercedes closed out production by creating the **E500 Limited**, which was produced for the Swiss market. These otherwise stock cars featured upgraded interior packages consisting of various colored wood and leather options.

AMG also worked its magic on numerous 500E and E500s, upgrading them to **E60 AMG** status with a 381-horsepower six-liter variant of the M119 drivetrain. Twelve E500 Limited models were upgraded to **E60 Limited** editions, the rarest model of all.

Changes were made throughout the production run. 1992 and early 1993 US-model cars were more powerful (+7 HP) than later 1993 and 1994 cars. The 1994 cars were renamed "**E500**" and received the "face-lifted" grill and boot-lid found on all 1994/1995 W124 models. 1994 cars received larger **SL600 brakes** that provided marginally greater stopping power over the '92 and '93 models, which used 500SL brakes. The larger brakes were welcome. Some 1992 models used aluminum calipers made by Brembo, causing a resonance when the brake pads wear down to a certain point. Later 1992 and 1993 cars used ATE iron calipers which were heavier and eliminated this noise problem.

Despite changes some owners prefer the earlier cars. As always individual condition and documented maintenance history defuse model year differences as cars get older. **These cars have only a few major flaws**, chief among them being failure of the main engine wiring harness that is typical of all 1992-1995 Mercedes — due to the use of "environmentally friendly" sheathing on the wires. Cost of the harness is currently around \$800 and rising annually, but it can be replaced by a competent owner in the driveway in just a few hours. The cars' electronic "throttle by wire" actuators can fail

due to the same wiring issues. This costs approximately \$1,500 to replace. Ignition control (EZL) modules fail on rare occasions and cost \$3,200 new but used parts are frequently available for \$1,000 and less.

The self-leveling rear suspension is not prone to problems when properly maintained. It is well-tested on the 450SEL 6.9, W123 & E-Class wagons, 126 V8s, and the 190 2.3-16 cars. 500Es and E500s are prone to rapid front brake pads and rotor wear, but these are relatively inexpensive to replace. Owners should change rotors every 60-75,000 miles as a rule of thumb. Early models used the **Becker** 1432 radio standard to US-spec 124s. Reliability of these radios is uneven. For 1994 the radio was significantly upgraded to an Alpine unit with 10 speakers.

The 500E/E500 is an easy car to live with as a "daily driver." It is better than most sports cars or coupes in its performance range. Expect to get 20-21 MPG in 70-75 MPH freeway driving and 13-15 MPG around town in mixed/city driving. The M119 engines are near-bullet-proof—300,000 and even 400,000-mile 500Es are not uncommon in Europe where they were/are driven on the Autobahn by demanding owners. Transmissions are durable though occasionally flaring is experienced during shifting. This can be adjusted out but typically requires a rebuild around 150,000 miles.

500E/E500s are found in over a dozen colors but **Pearl Black (paint code 199) is the most common in the US**. Dealers all but refused special order alternatives. Generally this exterior color, metallic graphite gray, is paired with either a black or gray leather interior.

Although the cars have always been popular "drivers" by the cognoscenti, low-mileage "time-warp" cars are quietly finding their way into serious collectors hands. Typical cost north of \$30,000. Well-preserved, lightly-used cars run in the \$25,000+ range, while well-maintained "driver" class cars cost \$18-25,000. Less expensive "bargains" are common in the \$8-15K range, but generally have significant deferred maintenance backlogs and are not worth purchasing. For collectors and enthusiasts, \$15,000 is a good bottom-line starting point for Condition 2.5+ to 3 cars.

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