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# *Modern Classic*

1992 MERCEDES-BENZ 500E

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## *The German sales brochure summed it up: Feuer und Seide. Translation: Fire and Silk.*

Emotive stuff coming from the folks at Mercedes-Benz, but the 500E had power sufficient to make even Swabians swoon when it arrived in 1992. Emotive, perhaps, yet Teutonically precise, because the 500E embodied a heat and smoothness that had been missing from the Mercedes lineup since the passing of the 450SEL 6.9 in 1980. The 500E's mission was clear: to send a message to BMW that only Mercedes could build a world-class, high-performance sedan.

The excellent W124 sedan (otherwise known as the 300E) served as the foundation for the response. Mercedes employed one of the oldest hot-rod tricks in the book by taking a mid-size car and shoehorning into it the biggest engine possible; in this case, the 322-horsepower, 5.0-liter V-8 from the 500SL convertible. The SL's running gear also was utilized, with its four-piston-caliper, 11.8-inch vented front brakes and four-speed automatic transmission. The track

was widened by 1.5 inches; the suspension, lowered by 0.9 inches, received minor tweaks for improved ride quality.

On the exterior, the purity of Bruno Sacco's design (arguably one of his finest) was enhanced by gorgeously flared front and rear fenders to accommodate the larger wheels and 225/55ZR-16 tires. Aside from a revised front fascia and the badge on the trunk lid, these fenders are the biggest clues that this is more than a garden-variety E-class. Compared side-by-side, though, the 300E seems anemic and underfed, while the snubbed-down, rottweiler stance of the 500E demonstrates a purposefulness that is revealed out on the road—or, more correctly—the Autobahn.

Part of the car's mystique is that production engineering, crash-testing, and structural improvements were all executed by the performance marque across town, Porsche. The body shell was assembled in Porsche's Zuffenhausen facility, re-





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turned to Mercedes for painting, and then shipped back to Zuffenhausen for final assembly in the same factory area where Porsche built its legendary 959 supercar. Finished cars were delivered once more to Mercedes for final inspection; such logistics meant it took eighteen days to produce a car and limited daily output to an average of ten. Most likely, it added to the base price of almost \$80,000, too.

Mercedes produced a total of 10,479 cars by the end of the 500E's run. Only 1505, however, were sold in the United States: 633 in 1992, 498 in 1993, and 374 in 1994. The differences between them are small, but the type that devotees love to debate, like arguing which is the better album, *Revolver* or *Sgt. Pepper's*. The 1992 version, with its closed-deck engine design, makes seven more horsepower than the 1993 and 1994 models, and only the '92 and '93 cars were assembled by Porsche. The '94 versions (known as the E500 due to



the change in Mercedes nomenclature that year) have a restyled front end that gives them an updated look, with more smoothly integrated headlights, hood, and grille.

Regardless of the year, the overarching appeal of the 500E is an understated appearance that betrays little of its performance capabilities—and performance is what set the automotive press collectively thumbing through the thesaurus when it came time to write reviews. Fourteen years later, a turn behind the wheel of this 1992 model reveals that enthusiasm is still well deserved.

The driver's door opens and closes with a reassuringly solid *kerchunk* that calls to mind your choice of bank-vault clichés. The interior is completely in keeping with a Mercedes of the early Nineties vintage: simple orange-needed gauges with white graphics on a black dash, indecipherable climate controls, and a tasteful mix of leather and burled walnut. Compared with a modern luxury performance sedan, the 500E is monastic in its absence of creature comforts—nary a cup holder in sight. It is a performance sedan with a touch of luxury, rather than the other way around. A twist of the key in the dash-located ignition fires the DOHC 32-valve V-8 to life,



and the car surges forward slightly, like a thoroughbred in its chute.

These initial interactions underscore how much cars have evolved since the 500E's introduction. Despite being fourteen years old, driving one today comes

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close to a vintage experience. The door is unlocked the old-fashioned way, with a key in the door, rather than with the push of a button. You use that same cut-from-metal key to start the car, rather than a microprocessor-embedded fob that communicates electronically with a computer. There is no throttle- or brake-by-wire, and the shifter is connected directly to the transmission, rather than to electronic intermediaries that actuate gear selection. Aside from antilock brakes and basic traction control, the 500E does not try to protect drivers from themselves; instead, it offers a sense of involvement and control that is lacking in most of today's offerings.

While it may have the heart of a hot rod, the 500E drives much like a regular Mercedes, albeit a Mercedes that has been turned up to eleven. It is fully evolved,

with a bit more of everything that makes a Benz a Benz: greater acceleration, better braking, crisper handling. The fact that it can be flogged around a road course on track days is simply a testament to its pedigree, but not its primary mission; just because you can light a cigarette with a flamethrower doesn't mean that's how it was intended to be used. No, the 500E is at its best when wafting along at 100 mph, carrying its driver, three passengers, and their luggage to some fabulously luxurious destination that normal people don't even know exists.

Under more prosaic driving conditions, the 500E moves with a deliberateness that lends a degree of gravitas. There is none of the high-strung, over-caffeinated edginess of its super-tuned peers of the day; this car is entirely comfortable with its sedan-ness. Its recirculating-ball steering lacks a chef's knife sharpness for carving up corners, but is perfect for top-speed runs where a little latitude in such endeavors is appreciated. The transmission's second-gear start (intended as a fuel-saving and transmission-sparing device) adds to the unhurried feeling, but can be overridden by manually shifting into the lower gear and then back into Drive.

Thus unrestrained, the 500E accelerates with alacrity, the transmission snapping off shifts at the 6000-rpm redline. Magazines of the era recorded a 0-to-60-mph time of 5.5 seconds, 0 to 100 mph in 13.8 seconds, and the quarter-mile in 14.1 seconds at 101 mph; top speed was electronically limited to 155 mph. The real fun happens from 50 to 70 mph (gone in 3.5 seconds), when the transmission kicks down with Doberman-like obedience and sends the revs straight into the sweet spot of the torque band. The car is so poised, so balanced, that it never feels fast—until you glance at the speedometer and discover that you are exceeding the speed limit by double digits.

Quoting performance numbers to describe the 500E, though, is like citing Grace Kelly's measurements to describe her beauty. Trying to distill its essence into mere numbers misses the point. It's not about the data, it's about the total package, one that balances all aspects of performance for a complete driving experience. It is one of the last great Benzes, conceived when a Mercedes was built to meet a standard, not a profit margin. The 500E embodies an era and an ethic now passed, a reminder of what the three-pointed star once represented. 

## 1992 Mercedes-Benz 500E

Four-door, four-passenger sedan

Price	Base	\$79,200 (1992)
	As-Tested	\$80,750 (1992)
	Market Value	\$15,000-\$35,000
Powertrain	Engine	DOHC 32-valve V-8
	Displacement	5.0 liters (304 cu in)
	Output	322 hp, 354 lb-ft
	Transmission	4-speed automatic
Chassis	Drive	Rear-wheel
	Steering	Power-assisted recirculating ball
	Suspension F/R	Strut-type/multi-link
	Brakes	Vented disc, ABS
	Tires	Michelin MXM Sport
	Tire Size	225/55ZR-16
Measurements	L x W x H	187.2 x 70.7 x 55.4 in
	Wheelbase	110.2 in
	Track F/R	60.6/60.2 in
	Weight	3855 lb
Performance	Cargo Capacity	13.8 cu ft
	Fuel Capacity	23.8 gal
	0-60 MPH	5.5 sec
	Top Speed	155 mph*
	Fuel Cons. City/Hwy.	14/17 mpg

\*Electronically limited