

1992 IMPORT CARS

Mercedes-Benz 400E

New muscles under the old suit.

BY PATRICK BEDARD

The mild-looking and mild-acting Mercedes mid-size four-door—always called the 300, plus some suffix since its 1985 introduction in the U.S.—has a new version for 1992 pumped up all the way to a 400E. The mildness of appearance carries on. The mildness of personality is completely forgotten. Because, lurking behind the usual upright grille where only in-line engines have lived before is a 32-valve, 4.2-liter all-

aluminum V-8 of 268 horsepower.

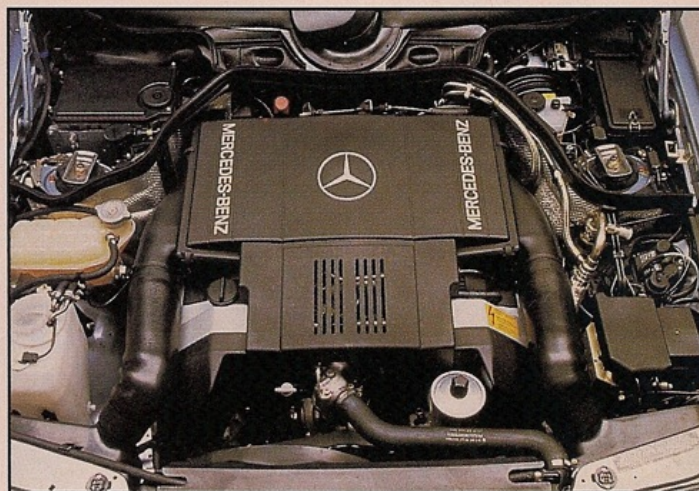
If luxury means more to you than high prices—if it means forward thrust that you simply can't get for less—then this mild-looking Mercedes finally earns the luxury label. This car makes so much sense you wonder why it took so long.

Actually, the answer to that is quite simple. Car buyers of the mid-1980s, with the gas-short years fresh in their minds, didn't expect much horsepower in their

luxury cars. They weren't being tantalized by energetic V-8s from Japan, either. But that was then and this is now and the 400E is an example of catch-up car marketing.

The idea for this car came from M-B's New Jersey office in 1988 as a North America-only car. It would have the power to go against Lexus and Infiniti. Moreover, it would make a V-8 Mercedes available to those who couldn't make the substantial price jump to the 1992 S-class. That was





the plan. But now the 400E seems so logical for the world market as it exists today that Japan will get it immediately and Europe will have it for 1993.

Except for alloy wheels in the style of the new S-class, and of course a 400E script on the deck lid, this car looks exactly like the \$48,000 300E (which continues in the model line). Price of the 400E is expected to be about \$55,000.

For sure, this is luxury-car pricing. And the 400E has certain cues that you expect of a luxury car today, including high-gloss wood-burl trim, wrinkly leather on the door panels, and a passenger-side air bag in the dash. But these are hardly enough to offset the compact exterior dimensions (about the same as the Maxima and the new Camry) and the rather spartan, hard-to-the-touch accommodations inside.

It's only when you dip into the power that the 400E unquestionably leaves the commoners behind. This car hustles. Its V-8 sings a wonderful sound that no luxury sedan over \$50,000 should be without. Mercedes engineers are finally get-

ting with the program. The four-speed automatic starts in first gear, and the usual Mercedes dead travel has been removed from the accelerator. So the 400E moves when you nudge it, just as a responsive car should. It'll move right up to 149 mph, an electronic limit set by the engineers to stay a respectful 3 mph behind the similarly engined but more expensive 400SE.

This car is part of a larger program at M-B to pass the powerful S-class engines down to the middle-sized car. The bulging-fender, hunkered-down 500E is a limited-production (about 600 per year to the U.S.) muscle car powered by the 322-horsepower 5.0-liter V-8. The 400E starts with the structurally revised body of the 500E, adds the smaller 4.2-liter V-8, and finishes off the package with Mercedes' everyday clothes.

This is not, however, a simple engine swap. Under its everyday duds, the 400E has the larger brakes, reinforced chassis, and upgraded suspension you would expect of a properly engineered Mercedes. Of course, stuffing bigger engines in small

spaces always causes problems, no matter who is doing the stuffing. The lack of under-floor space in the mid-size car necessitates a more restrictive exhaust system that costs fourteen horsepower compared with the bigger car. And the lack of underhood space requires the battery to be moved to the trunk, where—amazingly—it intrudes hardly at all.

That's the way of this new Mercedes—a barely noticeable change, until you step on the gas.

Vehicle type: front-engine, rear-wheel-drive, 5-passenger, 4-door sedan

Estimated base price: \$55,000

Engine type: DOHC 32-valve V-8, aluminum block and heads, Bosh Motronic engine-control system with port fuel injection

Displacement 256 cu in, 4196cc

Power (SAE net) 268 bhp @ 5700 rpm

Transmission 4-speed automatic with lockup torque converter

Wheelbase 110.2 in

Length 187.2 in

Width 68.5 in

Height 56.3 in

Curb weight 3650 lb

Manufacturer's performance ratings:

Zero to 60 mph 7.0 sec

Top speed 149 mph

EPA fuel economy, city driving 15 mpg