

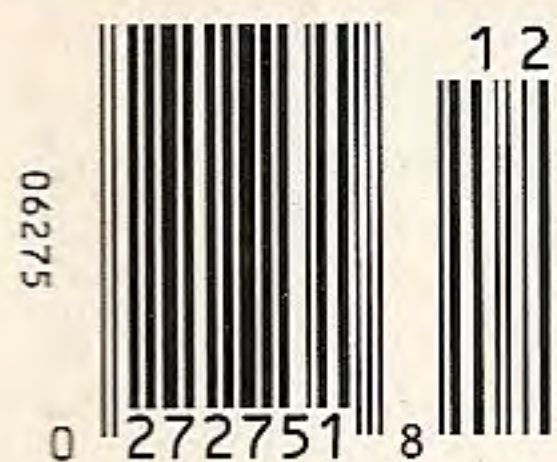
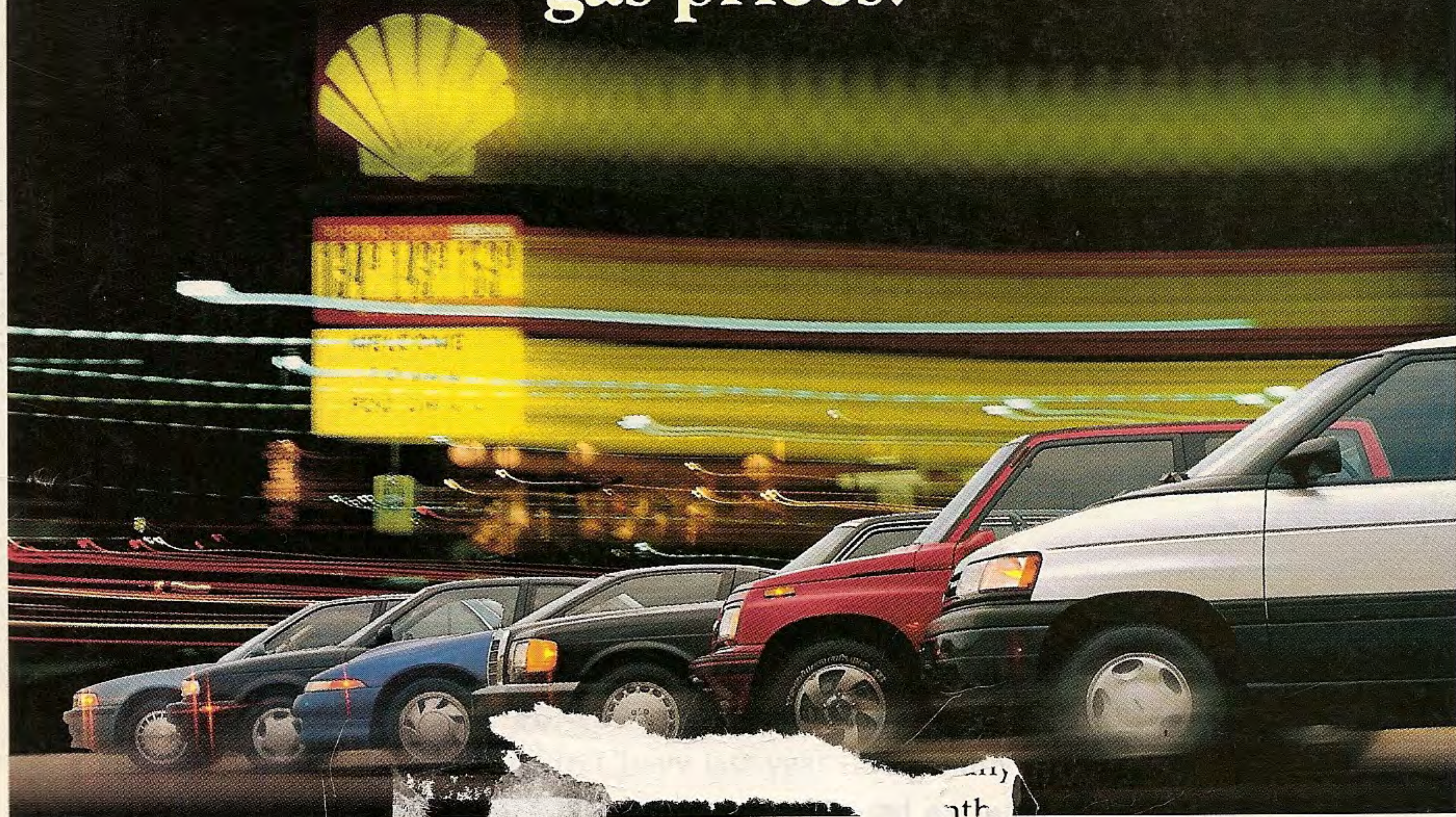
ROAD TEST: THE TRABANT 601. THE WHAT?

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Cover photography by Tom Drew

P R E V I E W

Mercedes-Benz 500E

The factory builds a Hammer of its own.

BY PETE LYONS

• The Mercedes-Benz engineers responsible for this car are so proud of it they can't keep their faces straight. Carelessly refer to it as their "baby Hammer" and they'll interrupt you with broad grins and emphatic fist-pounding. "*Nicht* 'baby!' This is adult hammer! Steam hammer!"

What the M-B engineers have perpe-

trated here is a Stuttgart factory hot rod. They have taken the normal, everyday 300E sedan bodyshell and stuffed it full of all the important goodies found in the 500SL sports convertible: its tires, wheels, brakes, suspension, four-speed automatic transmission, and—most important—its 322-horsepower, four-cam,

32-valve 4973cc V-8 engine. The result is a car slightly bulkier than the SL two-seater but substantially lighter—a car that goes like, well, like a combat jet off a carrier's steam catapult.

It's called the 500E. Starting in the 1992 model year, as many as 5000 U.S. buyers will have a chance to call one their



M E R C E D E S - B E N Z 5 0 0 E



own. The price has yet to be determined, but get in line now anyway. The car is that good.

In its usual role as a mild-mannered passenger car, the 300E—Mercedes-Benz model-type W124—has won critical acclaim for its refinement, comfort, and handling stability. An “outstanding transportation tool,” *C/D* has called it. As sold in U.S. specification, it lists for \$45,950. It’s built on a 110.2-inch wheelbase and rides on V-rated 195/65R-15 tires. Curb weight is now 3315 pounds. Its SOHC, two-valve-per-cylinder engine puts out 177 hp at 5700 rpm and 188 pound-feet of torque at 4400. When we last tested the 300E, in August 1986, it accelerated from 0 to 60 mph in 8.3 seconds, ran the quarter-mile in 16.3 seconds at 87 mph, and reached a top speed of 136 mph.

From this car sprang the Hammer—the creation of Hans-Werner Aufrecht, proprietor of the German aftermarket company AMG. In December 1987, we tested an original Hammer, which was similar in concept to the production 500E that Mercedes is now preparing to unveil. The primary difference: AMG used its own twin-cam, four-valve-per-cylinder heads atop the longer-stroke Mercedes 560 V-8 engine. Horsepower was estimated at 360 at 5750 rpm. With a curb weight of 3600 pounds, the Ham-

mer scorched from 0 to 60 mph in 5.0 seconds and through the quarter-mile in 13.2 seconds at 108 mph. Top speed: a mighty 181 mph. Those of us who got to drive the AMG Hammer three years ago are still talking about it. Talking is all we’ve done, though, because Aufrecht’s U.S. agents wanted \$160,000 apiece when Hammers were available. (Recent emissions regulations pushed the Hammer out of the U.S. market.)

Since the Hammer’s introduction, it’s been easy to picture little knots of Mercedes-Benz factory guys gathered around the water coolers talking about how they could do a better Hammer of their own. They soon included their colleagues at Porsche in their talking. As the program was finalized, M-B did the engi-

neering and Porsche carried out test and development duties. Porsche will also assemble the production cars.

The heart of the new 500E is Mercedes’ M119 engine. The heritage of its aluminum block goes back more than a decade, when it appeared in 5.0-liter form with single-cam heads in the 1978 450SLC 5.0—a model never officially imported to America. In 1979, Mercedes put a twin-turbocharged version in the back of its C111/IV streamliner. Tuned for about 500 hp—a limit established by the available tires—it lapped the 7.82-mile track at Nardo, Italy, at an average speed of 250.803 mph. That was good for the world absolute closed-course speed record.

Five years after that, Swiss driver and constructor Peter Sauber talked the factory into supplying him with engines for a Group C racing effort. Gradually, Mercedes took on more and more elements of the project—when a trio of Sauber-Mercedes C9 coupes went to Le Mans in 1989, they wore German racing silver. Equipped with four-valve-per-cylinder heads and twin turbos, the C9’s engine was capable of about 830 horsepower, although at Le Mans it was tuned for about 750 hp at 7000 rpm to meet the fuel-consumption requirement of 51 liters per 100 kilometers (4.6 mpg). Torque was just under 600 pound-feet at

With the \$160,000 Hammer knocked out of the U.S. market by tough emissions laws, the time is right for a “factory hot rod” from Mercedes-Benz.

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165QR13 s	44	195/65TR15	65
175QR14 s	51	205/65TR15	73
185QR14 s	61	215/65TR15	76
185QR14r	65	185/60TR14	62
175/70QR13 s	45	195/60TR14	68
185/70QR13 s	49	195/60TR15	73
175/70QR14 s	46	215/60TR15	79
185/70QR14 s	52	225/60TR15	81
195/70QR14 s	63	205/55TR15	82
205/70QR14	66	205/55TR16	106

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195/65TR15	75	195/60TR14	69

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155QR12 s	\$34	175/70QR13 s	\$44
145QR13 s	35	185/70QR13 s	47
155QR13 s	36	175/70QR14 s	46
165QR13 s	38	175/70TR14	46
175QR13 s	43	185/70QR14 s	51
165QR14 s	41	195/70QR14 s	54
175QR14 s	45	205/70QR14 s	60
185QR14 s	47	185/70TR15	64
155QR15 s	38	185/65TR15	74
165QR15 s	41	195/65QR15 s	72
165/70QR13 s	42	205/65TR15	86

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185/70QR13 s	46	195/65TR15	77
175/70QR14* s	45	215/65TR15	93
185/70QR14* s	52	185/60TR14	71
195/70QR14	56	195/60TR14	80
205/70TR14	62	225/60TR15	103
185/70TR15	62	205/55TR15	91
185/65QR14	54	205/55TR16	135
195/65TR14	70	225/50TR16	142

*Winter S/2 design
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185/55HR15	96	225/55HR16	152
195/55HR15	105		

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Fox, 4000	5 1/2 Jx13	33
40000, 5000 exc. Turbo	5 1/2 Jx14	44
80, 90	5 1/2 Jx14	44
200, 5000T, Quattro	6 Jx15	57
BMW 320i	5 1/2 Jx13	35
318, 325 82-89	5 1/2 Jx14	42
528, 535, 635 81-84	6 Jx14	50
7 series 14" o.e.	6 1/2 Jx14	52
735i, 750i	6 1/2 Jx15	56
Honda Prelude 83-85	5 Jx13	37
Prelude 86-90	5 Jx13	37
Civic DX, CRX 84 on	5 Jx13	37
Accord 84-89	5 Jx13	37
Accord 88-89	5 1/2 Jx14	42
Accord 90	5 1/2 Jx14	46
Accord 90	5 1/2 Jx15	54
Hyundai Excel	5 Jx13	37
Sonata	5 Jx14	46
Mazda RX7 87 on	6 Jx15	58
626 fwd 83-90	5 1/2 Jx14	42
323 90	5 Jx13	43
GLC, 323 85-87	5 Jx13	37
Nissan 310 fwd 79 on	4 1/2 Jx13	35
Sentra, Pulsar 82-86	4 1/2 Jx13	35
Sentra, Pulsar 86-90	5 Jx13	37
Peugeot 505 84 on	5 1/2 Jx14	45
Saab 900 85-90	5 1/2 Jx15	57
9000 86-90	5 1/2 Jx15	57
Subaru GL, DL	5 Jx13	37
Legacy	5 Jx14	55
Toyota Corolla	5 Jx13	37
Terrel 83-84	4 1/2 Jx13	35
Camry 83-84	5 Jx13	44
Camry	5 1/2 Jx14	42
VW Rabbit, Dasher, Fox	5 Jx13	30
Quantum 82-85, Golf	5 Jx13	30
Scirocco, Golf, Jetta	5 1/2 Jx13	33
GTI, Scirocco, Syncro	6 Jx14	40
Passat	6 Jx14	46
Bus, Camper	5 1/2 Jx14	41
Corrado	6 Jx15	48
Volvo 240, 260 series	5 1/2 Jx14	56
740, 760 series	5 1/2 Jx15	57

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155QR13 s	33	205/70TR14	61
165QR13 s	36	195/65TR14 s	56
175QR14 s	38	185/65TR15 s	55
185QR14	50	195/65TR15 s	60
185QR14r	53	205/65TR15 s	68
165QR15* s	43	185/60TR14 s	59
165/70QR13	38	195/60TR14 s	65
175/70QR13 s	38	195/60TR15 s	68
185/70QR13 s	43	215/60TR15 s	73

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Semperit Direction Grip

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205/55HR16	92	225/50HR16	102

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165R13	40	175/70R13	44
175R14	48	185/70R13	46
185R14	51	185/70R14	49
185R14r	55	185/65R15	59

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MERCEDES-BENZ 500E

3500 rpm. In practice, one of the Sauber-Mercedes team cars was timed on the Mulsanne straight at 249.826 mph.

In the race, despite losing two-thirds of the blades on one turbo impeller when it swallowed an errant bolt, one Sauber-Mercedes car won, covering 3271.49 miles in the 24 hours. Another took second, even though its transaxle locked itself in top gear in the last hour. A third C9 was fifth. On teardown in Stuttgart, according to Mercedes, none of the three V-8s showed more than nominal wear.

Minus the turbos and some racing modifications, this was the engine introduced to street duty later that summer in the 500SL two-seater. Its main features: low weight (claimed to be 456 pounds), compact size, and an electromechanical advance mechanism for the intake camshafts, which broadens the torque curve.

Stuck into the type W124 body, the M119 engine brings the 500E's all-up *fahrfertig* (driving-ready) weight to about 3750 pounds, according to preliminary factory figures. Call it a good ten percent lighter than the 500SL. Also, the 500E's final-drive ratio is shorter than the SL's—2.82:1, versus 2.65. The result is a claimed 0-to-62-mph time of 6.1 seconds. (It may in fact be even quicker: we typically find that Mercedes perform better than the factory claims.) The 500SL managed a 6.3-second 0-to-60-mph run for our December 1989 issue.

The engine of the 500E is like a very good blue-cheese dressing: creamy-cool with lots of satisfying chunks of V-8 pulse stirred into it.

Cosmetically, the 500E's Z-rated 225/55-16 tires require small fender bulges that add 2.2 inches to the car's overall width. These bulges were on the prototype we drove and photographed, as was an AMG-style painted radiator shell. According to early information, production 500Es will have normal chrome-plated shells and also will get big SL mirrors on both sides. U.S. cars will feature a license-plate valance panel, the inevitable high-mounted rear brake light, and all-leather upholstery. Unlike AMG, Mercedes doesn't seem to feel its supercar needs a ducktail spoiler.

It does seem to feel the 500E needs ASR, M-B's traction-control system. The prototype was equipped with it. Mercedes says ASR may be one of the few 500E options. If so, buyers are going to have to think hard about whether to



The heart of the beast is aluminum, and a turbo version once powered the fabled C111.

MERCEDES-BENZ 500E



ly presentation-quality.

Though it's not meaningfully bigger than the 300E, somehow the 5.0-liter car seems as though it commands twice as much space on the road. The seats in the prototype lock you firmly and prominently into your proper place behind the magnificent steering wheel. The car rides tautly, is quick-steering, and feels bull-powerful—a meaty delight in the hands. The engine is like good blue-cheese dressing: creamy-cool with lots of satisfying little chunks of V-8 pulse in it. The neo-Hammer simply storms down the road, gathering way like a steam locomotive that's snapped loose from its train. On Hockenheim's return straight, it's no trick at all to see 210, 215, maybe 217 on the kilometer scale before you have to shut off for a curve. Later you work it out—almost 135 mph. In pouring, streaming, swishing rain. Wow again. It felt as solid and comfy as hurtling along inside a rocket-assisted, leather-lined gun safe, if you can imagine such a thing being pleasurable.

A long autobahn blitz in this thing would be first-class travel indeed. Truly. Oh, baby.

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

Estimated base price: \$65,000

Standard accessories: power steering, windows, seats, locks, and sunroof, A/C, cruise control, rear defroster

Sound system: Mercedes-Benz AM/FM-stereo radio/cassette, 10 speakers

ENGINE

Type V-8, aluminum block and heads
Bore x stroke 3.80 x 3.35 in, 96.5 x 85.0mm
Displacement 303 cu in, 4973cc
Compression ratio 10.0:1
Engine-control system Bosch KE-5-Jetronic with port fuel injection
Emissions controls 3-way catalytic converter, feedback fuel-air-ratio control, EGR
Valve gear chain-driven double overhead cams, 4 valves per cylinder, hydraulic lifters
Power (SAE net) 322 bhp @ 5500 rpm
Torque (SAE net) 332 lb-ft @ 4000 rpm
Redline 6000 rpm

DRIVETRAIN

Transmission 4-speed automatic
Final-drive ratio 2.82:1

Gear	Ratio	Mph/1000 rpm	Speed in gears
I	3.87	6.7	40 mph (6000 rpm)
II	2.25	11.5	69 mph (6000 rpm)
III	1.44	18.0	108 mph (6000 rpm)
IV	1.00	25.9	155 mph (6000 rpm)

DIMENSIONS AND CAPACITIES

Wheelbase 110.2 in
Track, F/R 60.3/59.9 in
Length 187.2 in
Width 70.7 in
Height 56.3 in

Frontal area 22.4 sq ft
Curb weight 3750 lb
Fuel capacity 18.5 gal
Oil capacity 8.5 qt
Water capacity 15.9 qt

CHASSIS/BODY

Type unit construction with 1 rubber-isolated crossmember
Body material welded steel stampings

INTERIOR

SAE volume, front seat 50 cu ft
rear seat 40 cu ft
luggage space 15 cu ft
Front seats bucket

SUSPENSION

F: ind, strut located by a control arm, coil springs, anti-roll bar
R: ind, 2 lateral links and 3 diagonal links per side, coil springs, anti-roll bar

STEERING

Type recirculating ball, power-assisted
Turns lock-to-lock 3.2
Turning circle curb-to-curb 36.7 ft

BRAKES

F: 11.8 x 1.1-in vented disc
R: 10.9 x 0.4-in disc
Power assist vacuum with anti-lock control

WHEELS AND TIRES

Wheel size 8.0 x 16 in
Wheel type cast aluminum
Tires Dunlop SP Sport D40, 225/55ZR-16

MANUFACTURER'S PERFORMANCE RATINGS

Zero to 62 mph 6.1 sec
Top speed 155 mph

MERCEDES-BENZ 500E



The insider's view: quick steering, taut ride, bull-powerful, heavenly interior, but otherwise . . . well, wow.

order it or not, because it probably won't come with an off switch.

Functioning much like similar systems on other cars, ASR senses wheelspin at the drive wheels and both cuts engine power and drags the proper brake to stop it. It really works. Snow was unavail-

able to us during our test drive in Germany, but there was no shortage of rain. Our test: maneuver the 500E off pavement onto a forest track, make sure the rear wheels are standing on squishy mud, and stamp all 322 horses deep into the ground. What happens? Nothing. The

huge, exotic Le Mans-winning V-8 simply chugs softly, tenderly nursing the fat rear tires forward through the goo.

Impressive, in the sense it's interesting to watch an autopilot fly a plane. No doubt there are innumerable situations in everyday driving when traction control can save your hide, or at least a fender. But if you suspect there are other situations, times when the ASR's "Get your damn hands off, I've got it" personality might cut into the fun factor, you're right. On a rain-slick Hockenheim race-track, we found it balked our every attempt to boot the tail out with power as God and Gottlieb Daimler intended. All we got was persistent, piggish push.

Going into bends, though, the prototype's tail felt a little wayward, a touch tricky. A 500SL we tried was steady at the same points. Oh, and at the end of our few laps we blotted our copybook with our hosts by clouding the pit lane with stinky white brake-pad smoke. This car isn't a racer.

But otherwise . . . well, wow. The 500E may be a factory hot rod, but the hot-rodding was done by a factory justifiably famous for doing its work with obsessive, serious-minded thoroughness. There are no raw edges on the Mercedes-Benz 500E. As a transportation tool, it's strict-

