



Duo with trio: Hartmut Rauter and friend Matthias Hemm (right) succumbed to their first bout of displacement fever 20 years ago

The magic of numbers

The Mercedes-Benz 300 SEL 6.3, 450 SEL 6.9 and E 500 Limited are among the elite of four-door models bearing the three-pointed star. But the collector's dream is complete when two of the three classics come with provenance. The "trio infernale" displayed on these pages belongs to Hartmut Rauter from Wetzlar, who first fell under the spell of high-performance Mercedes-Benz sedans during his student days.



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When it comes to his passion for high-powered four-door sedans, Hartmut Rauter could not have started any higher: "One way or another you automatically end up with the 6.9." Twenty years ago Rauter was studying for a Business Management degree in Giessen when he came across his very first big Mercedes. "I was still driving a Stroke Eight 230.6, when my friend Matthias Hemm and I decided the time was right to buy an eight-cylinder Mercedes. We were keeping an eye out for a 350 SE from the W 116 series, when we discovered that for just 1,000 deutschmarks extra we could get hold of a 450 SE," explained Rauter. "But after thinking that one through, we realized that with another 1,000 marks we might even get our hands on a 6.9 model. And that's as far as we went." For the time being, at least.

Despite having launched themselves extravagantly into a collection that began with the most powerful Mercedes-Benz sedan of the post-war era, however, it was a passion that left room for development. Ten years after the format-filling 450 SEL 6.9 came the much-coveted 300 SEL 6.3; then almost another decade would pass before these two vehicles were joined by the even rarer E 500 Limited. Today the 42-year-old Rauter also owns a first-hand 230.6 with a mileage just into five digits. The select group also includes a 500 SL (R 107). But his favorites are without doubt the large eight-cylinders - particularly those powered by an M 100.

As the top-of-the-range model in the W 116 series, the 450 SEL 6.9 - of which 7,380 were built between 1975 and 1980 - represented the height of what was technically feasible, taking price and prestige into new dimensions altogether. With its increased displacement the M 100 engine, an advance development of the ground-breaking power unit from the Mercedes-Benz 600, developed 286 hp and reached its maximum torque of 560 Nm at 3,000/min. Top speed was 225 km/h (140 mph), and acceleration from 0 to 100 km/h (62.1 mph) took 7.4 seconds. It was a masterpiece of engineering and displayed its good breeding with all the self-composure of a sleepwalker. Nevertheless, it was complicated and expensive to maintain.

"Where cars were concerned, we worked our way up from nothing. Without mechanical expertise it would have been impossible for students like us to have driven such a complex car as the 6.9," says Hartmut Rauter, whose initiation came at a time when the choice of 6.9 models available was large and their price tags reasonable. "The first car was average, the next one good, and the one after that better still. You learn as you go on and adapt to each new task."

Daily contact with these engineering masterpieces served to whet the collectors' appetite for substance and authenticity. Quite by chance the M 100 enthusiasts ended up one day in the basement garage of VW tuner Oettinger based in Friedrichsdorf, where a 6.9 in muted blue gray metallic paintwork (color code 906) had lain slumbering for eight years. Rauter and Hemm soon established that under the thick layer of dust was a car of outstanding quality. Hartmut Rauter: "Its excellent condition, low mileage and almost complete equipment left us in little doubt. Once we had changed the seized fuel pump, the engine fired up after a couple of seconds and the hydropneumatics gently brought the car out of hibernation."

Once the 6.9 had shaken off its long sleep and drawn a deep breath, we discovered that it also had extraordinary provenance. "This was



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4 Equipment code 997 identifies the 300 SEL 6.3 as being an "exhibition car" **5** The 6.9 is an ex-prototype car with made-to-measure interior appointments (upholstery from the W 109) **6** A matter of taste: Extravagantly patterned Roser leather in the E 500 Limited



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1 This 300 SEL 6.3 is thought to be the display vehicle built for the 1970 Paris Motor Show. Mileage over the last 40 years amounts to only 148,000 km (92,000 miles) **2** The prototype 450 SEL 6.9 was built in 1977 and has a mere 144,000 km (89,000 miles) on the clock **3** Just 500 units of the E 500 Limited were built between March 1994 and April 1995. This example from 1994 has so far clocked up 149,000 km (93,000 miles)

“For ride feel, the E 500 is closer to the 6.9 than the 6.3.”

a prototype vehicle once used by the Board of Management to test additional comfort features such as an electrically adjustable rear seat bench,” explained Rauter. An ammeter and an exterior temperature display were integrated in the center console, and the car featured a made-to-measure interior, the fabric of which originated from the W 109 predecessor model. One detail that never got as far as series production was the unusual belt “de-”tensioning system, which provided additional comfort while driving by enabling the driver to slightly loosen the seat belt at the touch of a button.

“When you have such a unique vehicle in your possession and experience the thrill of the M 100 engine, then your desire for a 300 SEL 6.3 is only natural,” said Rauter with a laugh. The 6.3 made its sensational debut at the 1968 Geneva Motor Show. A rev counter, locking differential and in particular the distinctive double headlamps

signaled that this W 109 – with a price tag of 39,000 deutschmarks at its debut – was not short of head-turning prestige. And it fulfilled all its promise in most impressive fashion: with an output of 250 hp, the car’s large 6.3-liter V8 engine made it the world’s fastest production sedan of its day, air suspension notwithstanding. A total of 6,526 examples were built between 1967 and 1972.

Ten years after their discovery of the W 116, Hartmut Rauter and Matthias Hemm chanced upon a 300 SEL 6.3 in Luxembourg with a colorful history to match that of the 450 SEL 6.9. “This is thought to be the very car shown as the display model at the Paris Motor Show in October 1970, although on that occasion it appeared in silver gray metallic, code 180, and had no alloy wheels. Thereafter the car belonged first to a Parisian businessman, then to a lady in Nice, who had it repainted in dark blue 904. And since the car spent most of the time in the garage of her holiday home, it clocked up only around 1,000 kilometers [600 miles],” says Rauter.

Armed with a sizeable toolkit and hydraulic car jacks, the friends set off to the seller in Luxembourg, since over the years the six-three’s engine had developed a weak chest. The extensive inspection of the rather listless sedan lasted four hours. Rauter and Hemm negotiated for two months, until finally they were able to bring the 300 SEL 6.3 back home to Wetzlar under its own steam. “In summer 2002 we completely overhauled the engine, putting right the botched repairs of various workshops. The highlight was without doubt being able to

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restore the magnificent engine to the condition in which visitors to the Paris Motor Show would have seen it in 1970, complete with black cylinder heads and polished intake manifold." Erich Waxenberger's signature on the intake manifold of his own brainchild is a relatively recent addition. The spiritual father signed it at a Mercedes-Benz meet only a few years ago.

With a prototype and an exhibition model, Hartmut Rauter's collection was essentially complete – until one day at an auction in 2009 he came across an E 500 Limited. "This was the car I was missing, even though it was just an E-Class. Of course, a 560 SEL from the W 126 series would have been the logical continuation. But it would have lacked the same exclusivity of the two M 100 models. What excites me most about these three sedans is their specialness – and I find the smaller car with a big engine particularly appealing."

10,479 units of the W 124 with M 119 engines left the production line between 1990 and 1994 (including the E 60 AMG, for which no separate documentation exists). With its **235 kW/320 hp** 5.0-liter four-valve V8 engine borrowed from the 500 SL (R 129), the 500 E/ E 500, built at Porsche in Stuttgart-Zuffenhausen, rapidly rose to become the perfect heir to the 300 SEL 6.3, without recourse to any such hedging of model designation. "Strictly limited; striking looks" was the strapline in the Mercedes-Benz brochure for the 500-unit special edition named Limited, which was available either in brilliant silver or sapphire black. With seats in green, red or gray leather and 17-inch star rims in the EVO II design and a price tag of 145,590 deutschmarks, the Limited was not to be confused with the rather more restrained E 500.

It was as if car and collector had been made for each other. By the end of the auction the E 500 Limited belonged to Hartmut Rauter: "An ex-factory classic, rare, powerful and imposing. The colored-leather seats may not be to everyone's taste today. But who knows, perhaps one day they will be back in fashion. After all, there was even a time when the 6.3 and 6.9 had had their day." Although the smaller W 124 offshoot can never match Rauter's W 109 and W 116 for provenance and history, with a lifetime of love shown by the company and a car



The ammeter, exterior temperature display and switches for the belt "de"-tensioning system (top right) identify the 6.9 as a prototype model

enthusiast the E 500 Limited more than makes up for it in terms of everyday practicality and sound, reliable engineering.

"For ride feel, the E 500 Limited is much closer to the 450 SEL 6.9 than the 300 SEL 6.3. You can settle into the first two of these cars, turn on the radio and get out again after two hours of fast expressway driving without any sign of stress whatever. The 6.3 is a different story entirely: it is much more demanding and handles with the same brutishness as a sports car. I turn the radio off when I'm driving the 6.3, just so I can hear the fantastic sound of the engine; and in summer I'll always arrive after a long drive exhausted and soaked in sweat, but happy as a lark." What better way is there to explain the magic of those large displacement numbers? ●



Shop talk: Photo finish at Butzbach, Hesse