

SOULS OF FIRE

**AUDI S4,
BMW M5,
MERCEDES-BENZ
500E**

**INTO THE VALLEY OF DEATH
WITH THE BEST SPORT SEDANS
ON EARTH**

by C. Van Tune

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT KILLEN

**ROAD
TEST**

The blinding yellow-white light of a summer's dawn pierced past giant mountain tops and struck our retinas with all the glare of a low-level thermonuclear blast. Even though we were testing on a closed road, it clearly was time for restraint.

Throttle closed. Brakes were gingerly applied. The speedometer needle of the bright-red BMW M5 dropped rapidly from its 160-mph perch and settled down to a 90-mph lope, a pace that felt slow enough that you could step out and walk alongside. Not far behind, the glistening Mercedes-Benz 500E joined the deceleration train, while the Audi S4, running farther back, used the opportunity to close the gap.

Our mission was one of intense scientific demands: Take the three fastest-accelerating, best-handling, shortest-braking sport sedans in the world and run them until we had a clear winner. Up giant grades with air conditioners cranked to the max, across desolate desert tarmac with near-gale-force crosswinds, through craggy canyons while dodging giant rattlers, and conquering elevations from 282 feet below sea level (at Badwater, California, the lowest point in the western hemisphere) up to over 6000 feet near Telescope Peak.

Death Valley National Monument, lovingly known as the borax capital of America, is one of the most inhospitable places you can get to by car.



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There are no trees, no grass, no potable water. No nothing but hundreds of miles of hard alkali ground and a climate only an oven mitt could love. In summer months, temperatures regularly exceed 120 degrees Fahrenheit; 134 is the record. And every pile of rocks, dried mud, and refuse carries some sort of foreboding moniker: Dead Man's Crossing, Satan's Revenge, Lucifer's Bed & Breakfast. Still they come, thousands of geriatric Good Sammers in their rolling retirement homes. Club Med it's not.

The Audi S4, BMW M5, and Mercedes 500E are three of the best cars you could choose for a quick escape from Death Valley. Pack each with four humans, luggage, and what's left of your sanity, then blast out of this God-forsaken hellhole at acceleration rates that'd humble most sports machines. These are true German muscle-cars:

big, powerful, full of technology, and cooing with luxury.

Don't be deceived by appearances. Though our trio of sedans are similarly shaped, they differ greatly in powertrain, price, and attitude. There's one V-8, one inline six, and a turbo/intercooled inline five. Two are rear drive, while the other uses all-wheel motivation. Prices range from the semi-affordable level of the Audi (\$44,750) to the CEO-only tariff of the monster Merc (\$80,000) with the BMW sequestered neatly in between at \$60,700.





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is a muscle-machine of epic proportions. Its body is a standard 5-Series that's been lowered, fitted with an extended front air-dam, side skirts, and new aerodynamic mirrors, and covered in the most perfect silken paint we've ever seen on a production car. Underneath, there are beefier anti-roll bars, more firmly calibrated gas shocks, increased-effort steering, and hefty 12.4-inch-diameter front disc brakes (11.8-inch discs at the rear) with anti-lock. The non-linear brake-pedal feel incited some minor corping, but none could complain about the record-setting stopping performance (for a sedan): 107 feet from 60-0 mph.

Aggressive, new five-spoke alloys replace the boring white-wall-tire look of the modular wheels fitted previously, though they use the same Michelin 235/45ZR17 rubber. No gripes here. From playing nip and tuck through tight mountain switchbacks to tackling dips at 100-plus-mph on the desert's decaying two-lane, the BMW never faltered. Not once threatened with bottoming or instability. You can hang its tail out if you want, or keep it neatly in check. Even at the limit of cornering adhesion, the M5 is totally under the driver's control. At top speed, it's a one-handed pleasure cruise.

"The steering is perfect for all driving speeds and roads, with just the right weight, ratio, and feedback" wrote one editor. "Phenomenal balance and firm damping, but coupled with good ride quality and a feeling of solidity that defies imagination," said another. Though 0.01 g off the Audi's torrid performance on the skidpad, the BMW blasted through the slalom at 65.5 mph. A speed 4.5 mph quicker than the 500E, 3.3 mph faster than the S4, and only 0.2 mph slower than a Ferrari 512TR. Does that tell you something about this sedan's prowess?

What makes it even better is the engine. Study the quality fittings, note the jewel-like assembly. Now, fire it up. Rev it. The fast response of the 3.5-liter DOHC inline six sends the tach needle soaring toward the peg like a VU meter on a rapmaster's boombox. Pulling 310 horsepower out of a normally aspired six is no tiny accomplishment, but combining that with a chunky torque curve, in a motor that revs to 7000 rpm, is a creation worthy of a national holiday. Though the 265 pound-feet of torque peaks at 4750 rpm, there's big grunt available from 2900 rpm on up to redline. With 10:0:1 compression, lively valvetrain timing, and a throaty exhaust, the M5's motor makes some of the best sounds this side of a \$200,000 exotic car.



Use the five-speed's perfectly spaced ratios to their best potential, and there won't be many machines that'll eat your lunch. Not the Audi S4, not the Mercedes 500E. In fact, the 345-horsepower Porsche 928 GTS is only one tenth of a second quicker to 60 mph and through the quarter mile than this sedan. Launch the M5 like it craves, and you'll leave about 50 feet of smouldering rubber on the tarmac in first gear, another 10 feet in second, and you'll scream to 60 mph in 6.2 seconds.

If you don't ease up (and you won't want to), the Munich marauder will hurl you past the quarter-mile traps in 14.6 seconds at 96.7 mph. Keep the pedal planted even longer, and you'll experience the strong, steady pull up to 160 mph on the speeds (an actual 156 mph). Remove the speed governor, and 165 mph should be attainable.

Inside, the M5 will instantly be familiar to anyone who's ever been in a BMW 5-Series. There's less space for rear passengers than in the Audi or Benz, but its front buckets are by far the most comfortable and are covered (as are the rear seats, door panels, and dashboard) with the finest-quality leather ever smudged by a magazine writer.

Typical Mercedes owners won't like the M5's small rear-seat area, its throttle/clutch perturbations in stop-and-go traffic, and the non-availability of an automatic transmission. Audi S4 devotees will think the Bimmer's ride is too harsh, its interior too ancient, and demeanor too flamboyant. Ahhh, but to those of us who live on the lunatic fringe of the performance envelope, the M5 is pure high-speed, tail-out perfection. Buy one, and BMW will send you on an all-expense-paid trip to Germany to visit the production facility and tackle a day of driving at the Nürburgring race course.



Throttle down, tail out, and boiling the hides is how you can handle most any corner in the M5. This is a sports car wrapped in sedan clothing, with a high-revving 3.5-liter inline six making 310 horsepower and 0-60 mph in 6.2 seconds. Inside you'll find standard 5-Series surrounds, with sport seats and ultra-sumptuous leather. Outside are new five-spoke wheels, aero mirrors, and incredibly powerful headlamps.



MERCEDES-BENZ 500E

Remember the AMG Hammer? That was an E-Class Mercedes stuffed with the big 5.6-liter V-8, and bulging with fat tires, fender flares and more attitude than all the contestants on "American Gladiators" combined. A 170-plus-mph war ship that'd blow the living hell out of anything that crossed its path. But the Hammer was an aftermarket tuner's car, not something produced by Mercedes. However, the lessons learned by

observing that formidable machine weren't lost on the Stuttgart-based manufacturer.

In '91, Mercedes-Benz introduced its own version of the muscled: the 500E. Calling on next-door neighbor Porsche for assembly chores, Mercedes set about to construct the finest long-distance ground runner in its arsenal. The 5.6-liter engine had been phased out by this time, replaced by the stellar 5.0-liter DOHC V-8. This 303-cubic-inch engine throttles out 315 horsepower at 5600 rpm and 347 pound-feet of spine-disfiguring torque at 3900 rpm.

In keeping with Mercedes' image, the 500E only comes one way: with an automatic transmission and traction control. The four-speed unit is tough as a career drill sergeant's heart, and uses a 3.87:1 ratio first gear for getaways of incredible haste. Moving the Merc's 3855 pounds to 60 mph in 6.3 seconds, and past the quarter-mile timing traps in 14.7 at 96.9 mph testifies to the arrive-early/stay-late nature of this engine's powerband. And unlike the Audi or BMW, almost no driver intervention is required. You see that new Mustang GT in the next lane? Your blue-haired grandmother could blow it away with no more effort than poking at the throttle with her cane tip.

Having a Mercedes with king-of-the-street-racers performance is more fun than you'd imagine. Except for the traction-control system. It's not defeatable, which means not only does it prohibit you from delighting neighborhood teens with 100-foot burnouts, it significantly hampers the car's prowess in high-thrill cornering situations. In the tight, uphill corners leading to Telescope Peak, the traction system's invisible hand of sensibili-

The undercover muscle-car boasts fender flares and a lowered stance, though you'll have to look closely to see them. To most bystanders, it's just another 300E. Your fun comes from unleashing the 315 horsepower at unwary Corvette drivers. The 500E wants to be a tire-smoking corner-slider like the BMW, but its computerized mommy (non-defeatable traction control) won't allow it. The cockpit gets dual airbags, but loses its glovebox.



ty was constantly backpedaling the throttle to avoid wheelspin, illuminating the orange warning triangle in the speedo face as it operates. This would be applauded in wet or icy situations, but on a dry summer's day, it's more than a little maddening. Like finding Ralph Nader riding in the backseat and crimping the fuel line each time you start to have fun. On the test track, the system also was disturbing, intervening at each apex on our slalom course and drastically slowing the progress around the skidpad. Find the correct wire to interrupt, and this Benz would significantly improve its handling numbers.

Gripes about the traction control aside, there's little to fault in the muscle-Mercedes. "Mountain-moving torque combines with brisk downshifts, plus firm upshifts at the redline, and a nice balance of hunk-smoothness when driven normally. This is the most confident-feeling car at 156 mph [its electronically governed top speed] I've ever driven," reads one entry in the logbook. "The Pirelli 225/55ZR16s are ultra quiet and very good in the wet, but lack the dry grip of the BMW's Michelin," stated another. With typical M-B aplomb, the 500E is equally happy at 150 mph as it is at 50 mph, and handles like a much smaller machine. Road imperfections are absorbed without drama, the steering is precise but never darty, and the meaty four-wheel-disc brakes operate with a softer, more linear, touch than in the M5 (halting you from 60 mph in 116 feet).

In fact, the entire demeanor of the bad-boy Benz is one of broad-shouldered confidence cloaked in the visage of a normal luxury sedan. Quick but anonymous. A better super-sleeper than anything produced by Sarta. And that may be the 500E's biggest problem: image. At this price, most performance buyers want a bit more flash. Like five-spoke 17-inch alloys, a decklid spoiler, a more aggressive grille, special seats—something! Mercedes did pony up flared fenders, a lowered ride height, and a deeper front air dam, but only the M-B cognoscenti will be able to spot those from 20 paces. The interior is standard E-Class fare, with the usual firm seats, full analog gauges, hideous radio controls, and a busy button-fest on the center console. Dual airbags, heated front seats, and a power-operated rear sunshade are standard.

You'll have to supply your own attitude.



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THE VERDICT

Price notwithstanding, our long-distance favorite is the Mercedes. "It's a car for drivers who want a luxury sedan, but with no-excuses power," as one editor summarized. Though high on our 500E wishlist are a manual gearbox, another click toward "sport" in suspension tuning, and a solid dose of visual excitement. Maybe then, we could look at the pricetag without going into vaporlock.

Rating considerable Honorable Mention awards from our judges is the Audi S4. Styling, interior design, comfort, and the excellent Bose sound system garnered across-the-board compliments. The all-wheel-drive system is obviously this car's major claim to fame and should be strongly considered if you live anywhere other than Death Valley. Areas for improvement include reduction of turbo boost lag, better steering response, and beefier brakes. Even as it sits, however, the S4 is a lot of car for the money.

The standout sport-sedan champ is BMW's M5. So good is it, that despite a \$63,300 bottom line, it's still a strong value. Comparatively speaking, the Audi and M-B are far softer, much further on the luxury side of the equation than the take-no-prisoners attitude of the BMW. As one judge wrote, "The M5 is a truly unique automobile that delivers everything it advertises: serious performance in a well-balanced, enjoyable, secure platform." What's it lacking? Not much, save for a passenger-side airbag and perhaps a styling update.

Which raises the question: Now that the 740i's engine has found its way into the 5-Series, is there a 4.0-liter V-8-powered M5 in our future? Park the 850i's six-speed gearbox behind that combination and prepare for total world domination.

MT

TECH DATA

GENERAL			
	Audi S4	BMW M5	Mercedes-Benz 500E
Importer	Audi of America, Inc., Auburn Hills, Mich.	BMW of North America, Inc., Woodcliff Lake, N.J.	Mercedes-Benz of North America, Inc., Montvale, N.J.
Location of final assembly plant	Neckarsulm, Germany	Dingolfing, Germany	Zuffenhausen, Germany
Body style	4-dr., 5-pass.	4-dr., 5-pass.	4-dr., 4-pass.
EPA size class	Compact	Compact	Compact
Drivetrain layout	FE, AWD	FE, RD	FE, RD
Airbag	Dual	Driver's side	Dual
Engine configuration	I-5, DOHC, 4 valves/cylinder turbocharged, intercooled	I-6, DOHC, 4 valves/cylinder	V-8, DOHC, 4 valves/cylinder
Engine displacement, c/c	136/2226	216/3555	303/6973
Horsepower, hp @ rpm, SAE net	227 @ 5500	310 @ 6000	315 @ 5500
Torque, lb-ft @ rpm, SAE net	258 @ 1950	265 @ 4750	347 @ 3900
Transmission	5-speed man.	5-speed man.	4-speed auto.
Base price	\$44,700	\$60,700	\$80,090
Price as tested	\$48,085	\$63,300	\$81,390

DIMENSIONS			
Wheelbase, in./mm	108.0/2692	108.7/2760	110.2/2800
Track, fr./in./mm	61.5/60.1/1567/1527	58.0/58.9/1473/1496	60.6/60.2/1540/1530
Length, in./mm	192.6/4892	185.6/4719	187.2/4755
Width, in./mm	71.0/1804	68.9/1750	70.7/1795
Height, in./mm	56.5/1435	54.8/1392	55.4/1407
Ground clearance, in./mm	4.0/102	5.0/127	5.5/139
Min's base curb weight, lb	3781	3805	3655
Weight distribution, fr./%	60/40	49/51	54/46
Cargo capacity, cu ft	16.4	16.2	13.7
Fuel capacity, gal	21.1	21.1	23.8
Weight/power ratio, lb/hp	16.7	12.3	12.2

CHASSIS			
Suspension, fr.	Independent/independent	Independent/independent	Independent/independent
Steering	Rack and pinion, power assist	Rack and pinion, power assist	Recirculating ball, power assist
Turning circle, ft	34.4	37.7	38.4
Brakes, fr.	Vented discs/vented discs/ABS	Vented discs/vented discs/ABS	Vented discs/vented discs/ABS
Wheel size, in.	16 x 8.0	17 x 8.0	16 x 8.0
Material	Cast aluminum	Forged aluminum	Cast aluminum
Tire size	225/50ZR16	235/45ZR17	225/55ZR16
Mfr. and model	Firestone Firehawk SZ	Michelin MXH1	Pirelli P600

PERFORMANCE			
Acceleration, 0-60 mph, sec	6.5	6.2	6.3
Standing quarter mile, sec/mph	15.1/103.3	14.8/98.7	14.7/96.9
Braking, 60-0, ft	115	107	116
Handling, lateral acceleration, g	0.87	0.96	0.84
Speed through 600-ft slalom, mph	62.2	65.5	61.0
EPA fuel economy, mpg, city/hwy	18/23	12/23	16/19