

ROAD & TRACK

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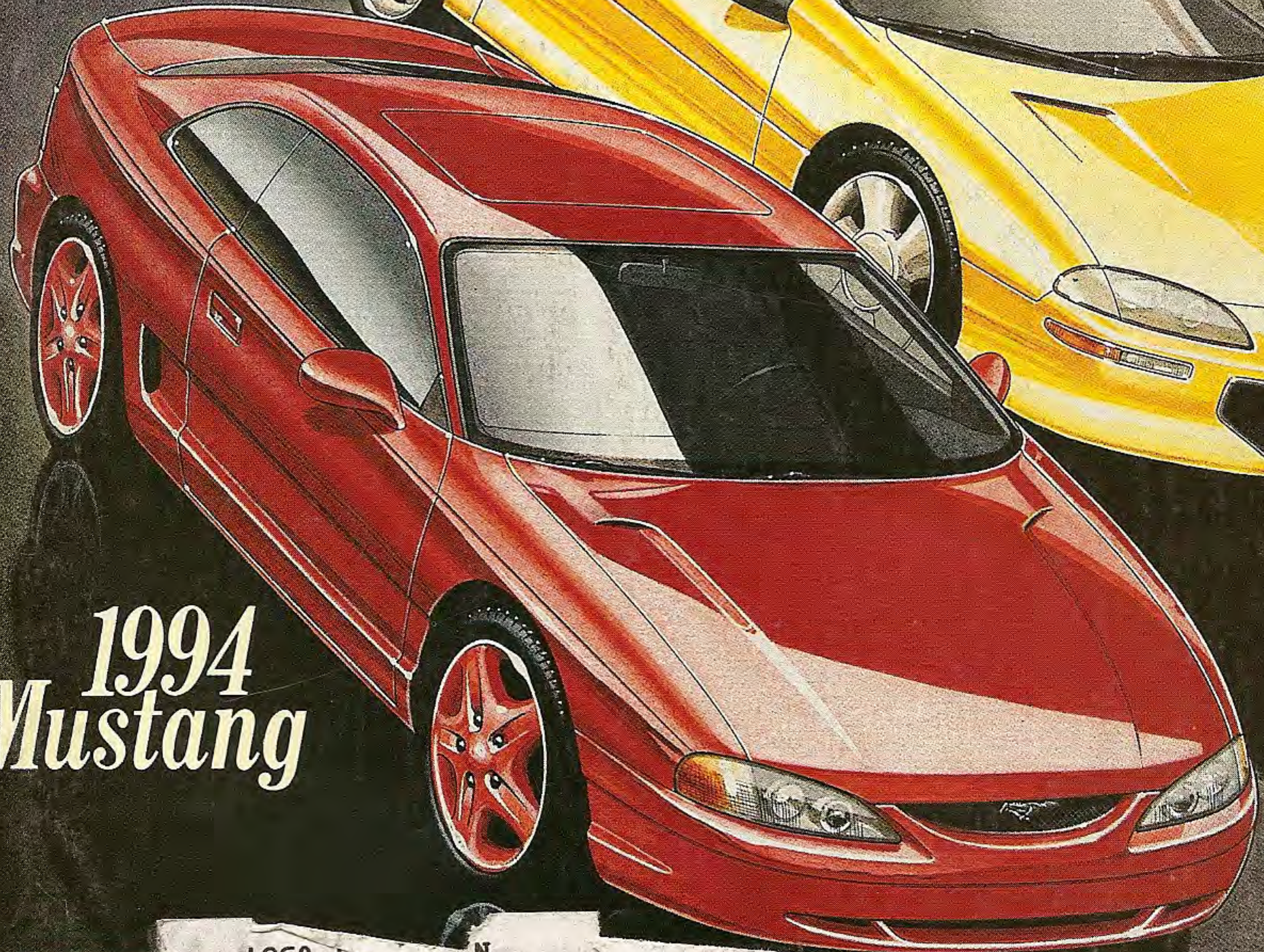
AMERICAN POWER!

Promising future or last hurrah?

1993
Camaro



1994
Mustang



SPOR

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New Jeep Cherokee & Ford Explorer & Chevy S-10 Blazer



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▲ Nissan at the 24.

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MERCEDES-BENZ 500E

IN SECOND GEAR and working your way up through the notched shift gate of the Mercedes automatic. Engine roaring, tachometer and speedometer needles arcing upward. Slower traffic disappearing in your mirrors. You're in the midst of a pleasant reverie (you're Caracciola at Avus in 1926, or Fangio at the Ring in 1957) when a silly line from a popular movie pops into your head: "*Hasta la vista, baby.*"

It's that *Terminator* thing, that might-makes-right, take-no-prisoners attitude that is vintage Schwarzenegger. Arnold does it with film. Mercedes-Benz does it with a car. The factory calls it the 500E. I call it the Terminator because, like Arnold, the 500E speaks with a Teutonic accent and is a muscular hulk that can pulverize the opposition—in this case, a variety of high-performance sports coupes, sedans and GTs. Not bad for a family 4-door that weighs nearly two tons.

Although Arnold hails from Graz, Austria, the 500E is built in Zuffenhausen, Germany, by Porsche at Works II, former home of the 911 and 928. When production of these two models was moved across the street to a new, automated plant, the old building sat empty. So a deal was struck with Mercedes to produce up to 4600 cars a year for Porsche's cross-town neighbor. Under terms of the contract, M-B ships 300-class bodies-in-white from its Sindelfingen factory to Zuffenhausen where Porsche craftsmen modify the chassis to accept 500-series engine, drivetrain and suspension, which they then install.

But not without some doing, because squeezing the 500SL's bulging 4-cam V-8 into the relatively narrow confines of the 300E's engine compartment is like trying to slip Arnold's foot into the shoe of his *Terminator II* co-star, Linda Hamilton. To accommodate this 32-valve, 5.0-liter powertrain, the frame rails are splayed outward and reinforced, and the driveshaft tunnel is widened. The front axle crossmember and myriad underhood compartments are also modified to accept the big V-8, which weighs 70 lb. more than the 300's 6-cylinder. The heavy-duty battery is moved to the trunk, mostly for

balance, which reaches an ideal 50/50 ratio with two people and 175 lb. of luggage aboard.

Because of the additional weight and because the 500E is designed for performance, it has sturdier and shorter springs with plastic buffers, and gas-pressurized shock absorbers with auxiliary internal damping springs fitted to suspension that includes modified MacPherson struts up front and Mercedes' distinctive 5-link setup at the rear. Wishbones and steering linkage, taken from the 500SL, have been reinforced to accommodate the increased weight—265 lb. to the front and 254 lb. to the rear of the car.

Hydropneumatic supports absorb the load from the springs and provide self-leveling for the rear suspension. And thanks to the added stiffness of springs and shocks, the 500E uses thinner front and rear anti-roll bars that are more limber than the 300E's. At any rate, the ride is soft under normal conditions with an absence of that racing-car-turned-road-car harshness that compromises the composure of some other high-performance sedans. Vented disc brakes from the 300CE 24-valve coupe (front) and the 500SL (rear) are fitted. And equipped with standard ABS, of course.

Distinctive, 8-hole, 8-in.-wide alloy wheels shod with low-profile 225/55ZR-16 tires give the 500E a sure-footed stance. Because the car's front and rear tracks are 1.5 in. wider, the standard 300E fenders have been given a pronounced flare, especially up front where the bulging sheet metal gives the 500E a menacing look exacerbated by a front air dam with tiny, but powerful, built-in driving lights. Of course, the 500E sits 0.9 in. lower than the 300E, another giveaway of the car's real nature.

And yet, all of this is merely window dressing because the 500E's allure is its V-8 powerplant. Known internally as the M119, it's identical to the 500SL engine, save for its Bosch LH Jetronic fuel injection. With its hot-wire air mass sensor, this system serves each cylinder individually and does a better job of metering fuel and controlling exhaust emissions than the continuous-flow KE Jetronic used by the SL roadster. Although the new injection doesn't change the



WZ 500E

The *Terminator* of luxury sedans

BY JOE RUSZ
PHOTOS BY RON PERRY



horsepower output of the 5.0-liter (it's still 322 bhp), it does increase torque by 22 lb.-ft.—brought about by the redesign of the 500E's intake manifold, which has longer runners.

Like the engine, the 500E's 4-speed automatic transmission is taken from the roadster. So is the rear axle, which uses a relatively tall 2.82:1 differential that exploits all the V-8's torque.

Oh yes. The 500E is equipped with ASR (traction control) that brakes a spinning wheel and, if necessary, retards the ignition and closes the throttle until the offending drive wheel regains traction. Mercedes believes this is wonderful stuff (it's certainly idiot-proof). But we respectfully disagree, for reasons we'll mention later.

Distinctive on the outside and underneath, the 500E is just your average 300-series sedan inside. Because of a fatter driveshaft tunnel, the front seats are set a little farther apart—as if you'd notice. But everything else including intelligent interior design, excellent ergonomics, simple, easy-to-read instrumentation plus comfort and luxury are standard Mercedes fare. And, just as there's nothing extraordinary about the 500E interior, there's nothing unusual about the way the 500E drives and feels under normal conditions. Get physical, though, and what was formerly just another 300-series 4-door becomes... the Terminator.

Flooring the gas pedal launches this 3900-lb. sedan smartly, but to ensure that the transmission starts in low gear and not 2nd, move the selector down and over to B, then slide it back to D. You'll start in 1st regardless of how you attack the throttle. Upshifts will occur automatically and positively as speed builds. Downshifts, brought about by the appropriate movement of the gear lever, will occur just as positively in this electronically controlled automatic that thinks it's a manual gearbox. And makes sporty driving a pleasure.

At the track, our Road Test Editor wrung some pretty respectable acceleration times out of the 500E—0 to 60 in 6.2 seconds, the quarter mile in 14.6 sec. That's better than the BMW M5, Chevrolet Camaro, Ford Mustang and Nissan 300ZX Turbo and the same as the Corvette L98 and the old Ferrari Testarossa. This is a Mercedes?



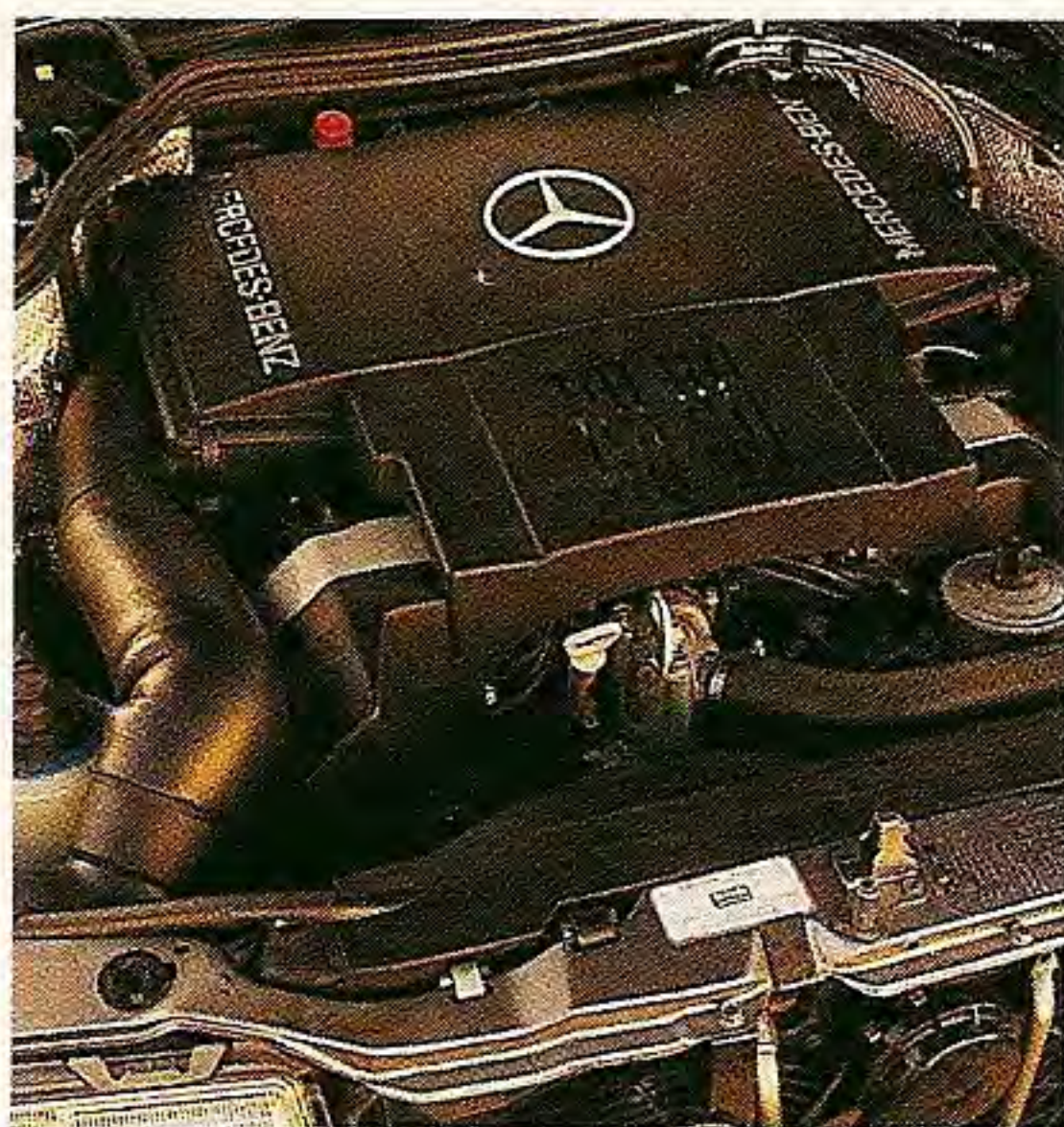
Yes. But our intrepid tester opined that he could've been quicker without the automatic traction control. To get the best numbers, some wheelspin is necessary—to enable the engine to reach its powerband quickly. With ASR, not only does the engine fail to spool up, but also any rear-wheel slippage is countered by braking and a reduction of power that don't engender dazzling acceleration times.

Nor does ASR reward the experienced driver who uses the throttle to position his car. Lift off the accelerator in the 500E and the sedan settles down nicely. But on-throttle, the ASR never lets you probe the limits to find that nth degree of handling prowess. And just as acceleration times could have been better without ASR, similarly, lateral acceleration as measured on the skidpad could also have been better. As it is, the super-Merc (a moderate understeerer) pulled 0.85g with ASR slowing the engine and keeping the handling composed but not scintillating.

Mercedes (and your friendly insurance company) would ask, "What's wrong with that?" Not a thing where the average driver is concerned. But for the qualified few who consider car control part of the driving experience, it would be nice if M-B offered the option of defeating the traction-control system just as Chevrolet does on its Corvette.

And yet, away from the absolute world of the test track, the 500E is a magnificent high-performance sedan that's heavy on the visceral. It looks right (low slung, intimidating, but not showy like the AMG Hammer or Mercedes' own 600SEL). It sounds great (nothing beats the thunder of a big V-8). It goes sinfully fast for a family 4-door (155 mph, electronically limited). It has everything you'd expect in a Mercedes. And a few things you wouldn't. Mostly, gobs of horsepower and an attitude that says... well, you know the words. 

Mercedes chose not to tamper with excellence, leaving the 500E's interior virtually unchanged from the 300E's. Instruments are easy on the eyes, and the much-copied squiggly-gate shift selector makes manual shifting a breeze.



Merc's 5.0-liter 4-cam 32-valve V-8, aided by variable intake timing, makes 322 bhp.

MERCEDES-BENZ 500E

IMPORTER

Mercedes-Benz of North America
P.O. Box 350, One Mercedes Drive
Montvale, N.J. 07645-0350

PRICE

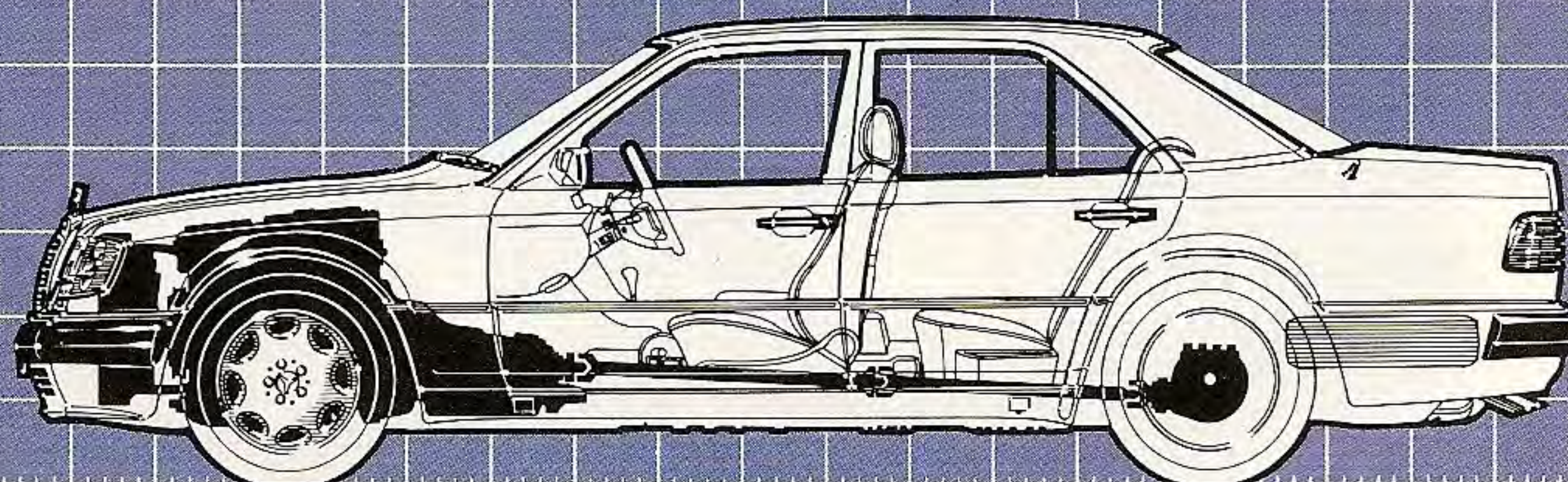
List price, all POE **\$79,200**
Price as tested **\$81,890**

Price as tested includes std equip. (driver & passenger airbags, air cond, ABS, traction control, AM/FM stereo/cassette, leather int, cruise control, central locking, anti-theft system; elect. windows, mirrors, sunroof, seats & steering column), gas-guzzler tax (\$2600), floor mats (\$90).

TEST CONDITIONS

Temperature 70° F
Wind calm
Humidity 40%
Elevation 990 ft

0-60 mph **6.2 sec**
0-1/4 mi **14.6 sec**
Top speed **155 mph**
Skidpad **0.85g**
Slalom **59.5 mph**
Brake rating **excellent**



SCALE: 10 in. (254 mm) DIVISIONS
DRAWING BY BILL DOBSON

ENGINE

Type aluminum head & block, **V-8**
Valvetrain dohc 4-valve/cyl
Displacement 303 cu in./4973 cc
Bore x stroke 3.80 x 3.35 in./
96.5 x 85.0 mm
Compression ratio 10.0:1
Horsepower
(SAE) **322 bhp @ 5700 rpm**
Bhp/liter 64.7
Torque **354 lb-ft @ 3900 rpm**
Maximum engine speed 6000 rpm
Fuel injection Bosch LH elect. port
Fuel prem unleaded, 91 pump oct

CHASSIS & BODY

Layout **front engine/rear drive**
Body/frame unit steel
Brakes
Front **11.8-in. vented discs**
Rear **10.9-in vented discs**
Assist type vacuum, ABS
Total swept area 448 sq in.
Swept area/ton 278 sq in.
Wheels alloy, **16 x 8J**
Tires Michelin MXM Sport,
225/55ZR-16
Steering **recirc ball**, pwr asst
Overall ratio 14.5:1
Turns, lock to lock 3.1
Turning circle 38.4 ft
Suspension
Front modified **MacPherson**
struts, lower A-arms,
coil springs, tube
shocks, anti-roll bar
Rear **5-link**, coil springs,
tube shocks, anti-roll
bar, self-leveling system

DRIVETRAIN

Transmission **4-sp automatic**
Gear Ratio Overall ratio (Rpm) Mph
1st 3.87:1 10.91:1 (6000) 41
2nd 2.25:1 6.35:1 (6000) 72
3rd 1.44:1 4.06:1 (6000) 112
4th 1.00:1 2.82:1 (5750) 155
Final drive ratio 2.82:1
Engine rpm @ 60 mph in 4th 2225

GENERAL DATA

Curb weight **3935 lb**
Test weight 4085 lb
Weight dist (with
driver), f/r, % 53/47
Wheelbase 110.2 in.
Track, f/r 60.6 in./60.2 in.
Length **187.2 in.**
Width **70.7 in.**
Height **55.4 in.**
Ground clearance 6.0 in.
Trunk space 17.5 cu ft

MAINTENANCE

Oil/filter change ... 7500 mi/7500 mi
Tuneup 15,000 mi
Basic warranty 48 mo/50,000 mi

ACCOMMODATIONS

Seating capacity **5**
Head room, f/r 37.5 in./36.5 in.
Seat width, f/r 2 x 21.0 in./
2 x 21.5 in.
Front-seat leg room 44.5 in.
Rear-seat knee room 22.0 in.
Seatback adjustment 70 deg
Seat travel 11.0 in.

HANDLING

Lateral accel (200-ft skidpad) .. 0.85g
Balance moderate understeer
Speed thru 700-ft slalom .. 59.5 mph
Balance mild understeer
Lateral seat support very good

ACCELERATION

Time to speed Seconds
0-30 mph 2.7
0-40 mph 3.7
0-50 mph 4.9
0-60 mph 6.2
0-70 mph 7.9
0-80 mph 9.8
0-90 mph 12.1
0-100 mph 14.5
Time to distance
0-100 ft 3.3
0-500 ft 8.2
0-1320 ft (1/4 mi): 14.6 @ 100.5 mph

BRAKING

Minimum stopping distance
From 60 mph 141 ft
From 80 mph 252 ft
Control excellent
Pedal effort for 0.5g stop 15 lb
Fade, effort after six 0.5g stops from
60 mph 18 lb
Brake feel very good
Overall brake rating excellent

FUEL ECONOMY

Normal driving 16.0 mpg
EPA city/highway 14/17 mpg
Cruise range 330 miles
Fuel capacity 23.8 gal.

INTERIOR NOISE

Idle in neutral 47 dBA
Maximum in 1st gear 71 dBA
Constant 50 mph 64 dBA
70 mph 69 dBA

INSTRUMENTATION

160-mph speedometer, 7000-rpm
tach, oil press., coolant temp, fuel level

Test Notes . . .

■ On slippery surfaces, the powerful 500E's traction control is a blessing. However, at the track, it hampers wheelspin—useful for acceleration, as well as positioning on the skidpad.

■ The 225/55ZR-16 tires are not terribly wide for a 3900-lb. sedan. Nevertheless, the 500E stops in impressively short distances, suggesting brakes that are both effective and well vented.

■ The 500E's engine grows ever so briefly on its way to full-throttle upshifts. The rest of the time, all this power is unobtrusive, and the Mercedes cabin is a hushed environment.