

1988/90 AMG 300TE 6.0 Wagon

Since Americans are about to get their first V-8 Mercedes-Benz wagon, the E500, let's examine an earlier, independent effort in that direction—and beyond.

Back in the 1980's, long before AMG was taken under the official wing of Daimler-Benz, the noted German tuner established its own U.S. branch, AMG of North America, in the Chicago suburb of Westmont. Run by Richard Buxbaum and using engines developed by AMG back home in Affalterbach, the shop assembled one-off, high-performance Mercedes-Benz cars for particular (and wealthy) customers. Among the fastest were a series of E-Class (W124-chassis) sedans that AMG dubbed "Hammers," capable of 180 mph.

Meanwhile, for the 1988 model year, Mercedes-Benz of North America, as it was then known, imported its first gasoline-powered wagon, the 300TE. Although the popular 177-hp grocery-getter was both useful and handsome—and could better 130 mph in stock form—it could certainly have benefited from the additional power and torque of a V-8, so AMG decided that a U.S. market existed for a Hammer wagon, which is practically what we have here.

A-Mighty-Goer

As a basis for its first U.S.-built *uber*-wagon, AMG's U.S. shop bought a stock 1988 U.S.-version 300TE, then priced at about \$51,000, and went from there. The original 177-hp M103 inline six was yanked out, and a 238-hp M117 V-8 was acquired from a wrecked, low-mileage 560SEL. But that was just the start. After the aluminum block was bored out to six liters, the engine was balanced and blueprinted, and the heads were ported and polished. The engine management system and cams are said to have remained stock, but the four-speed automatic from the 560 had its valve body modified. Getting the V-8 into the engine bay required some careful metal-massage to make adequate space, but the result is a factory-like fit.

Off came the wagon's longitudinal roof strakes, and on went the requisite front spoiler, complete with driving lights, plus slick rear and side skirts. The usual AMG monoblock 16-inch wheels were added, too. Beneath the skin, Buxbaum's men cut one coil out of each spring to lower the wagon an inch and a half (though one magazine tester later blamed this crude suspension modification for a high-speed corkscrew motion).

The lucky guy who commissioned this wagon wanted to go as fast as he could for \$100,000, so AMG set the "list price" for it at \$99,500—and in 1990 that was not chicken feed. What the new owner got was a zero to 60 mph time of about 5.7 seconds, a zero to 100 mph time of 14.2 seconds, and a top speed of 153. At 100 mph, the engine was loafing along at just 3,700 rpm.

In fact, though, this wagon was one notch below the real Hammer offered in Europe. That even more rare beast was fitted with custom-built four-valve AMG heads to yield another 50 hp, but the snag was that it required another 200 man-hours to build, at a premium of about \$65,000. These heads, being practically one-offs, are also said to have been somewhat less durable. Even at \$165,000, you were still buying a prototype.

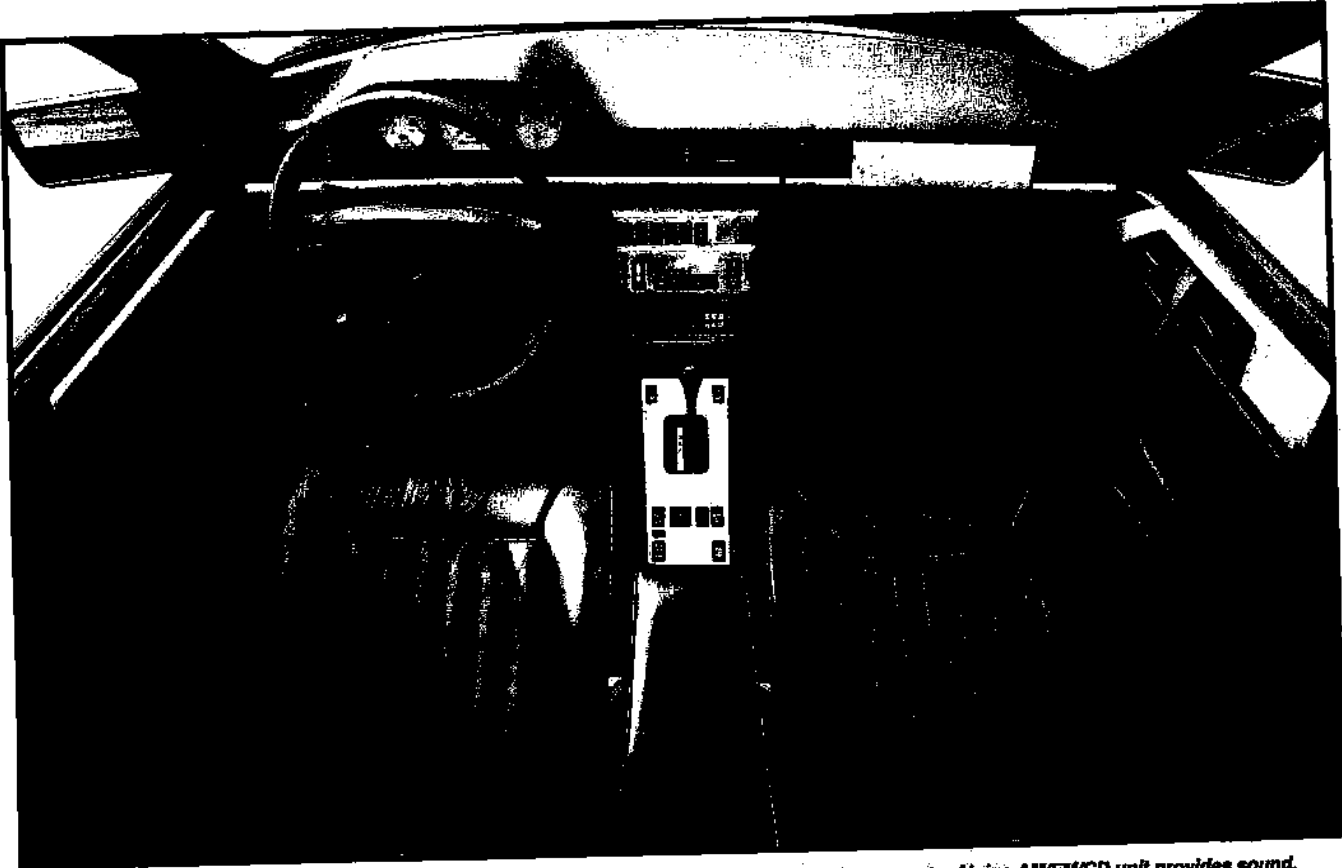




A 560SEL V-8 was bored to 6.0 liters, tuned, and blueprinted, yielding a claimed 310 hp.



Craig Jarem



Greg Jaram

Black leather upholstery is accented by light, birds-eye maple wood trim and black-on-white instruments; Alpine AM/FM/CD unit provides sound.

For 1991, Buxbaum planned to build up to 50 hot wagons for the U.S., but that never happened. That year, AMG abruptly left the U.S. market.

Why? Well, first Mercedes-Benz invented the 400E, with a 268-hp V-8 and a price tag of \$56,000. Then, in 1992, came the factory's 326-hp 500E, "hammering" the last nail into the AMG's coffin. Of course, both of these models were far better developed than low-volume specials and far less demanding of their owners when it came to parts and service, not to mention emission tests. Of course, it was still too bad that DBAG didn't make a V-8 wagon for the U.S., though, that oversight is now being rectified with the 2004 E550 Wagon.

Several magazines that tested this six-liter wagon complained about the poor quality of its conversion—bits kept falling off—and the car's very nature meant that it was bound to lead a hard life. Originally all black but for the light, bird's-eye maple interior trim, the wagon was later bodged-up with a black and silver two-tone paint scheme, gold fender trim, and gold wheels (yecch) with bald snow tires.

eBay Motors

Fast-forward to late 2001, when Northern New Jersey Section member and Hammer enthusiast Dave Shimano spotted this wagon on eBay.

"I had only seen a Hammer wagon for sale years before in *Hemmings*. I absolutely had to have it. My dream car was not a low-slung Italian two-persons-and-their-toothbrushes transporter but a seven-passenger 'Mom from Hell' Mercedes-Benz. Then I made the mistake of mentioning it to my wife."

"&\$\$%>*S@%#!" she said.

"To her credit, my wife is very tolerant of my automotive orphan adoption tendencies, but at the time I was tending to a 1983 Aston Martin Lagonda, an old Alfa Romeo, and a long-wheelbase Checker. 'It's a great family car, and you can carpool in it,' said I, imagining her hell-bent for the kids' school on a slick, leafy autumn two-lane road with 360 hp at the rear wheels and no traction control.

"But the wagon was gone. As the auction ended, I watched my dream car go to another, refreshing the computer screen for an hour until that harsh fact set in. I noted

the buyer's e-mail address and went on with my life."

Fast-forward again, this time just a few months. "As I did my daily eBay search for 'mercedes + wagon,' there it was! '1988/90 AMG Mercedes-Benz 6.0 wagon, 155 mph.' It was the same car I'd missed a year and a half ago. I was blinded by lust. I was not going to let this car get away from me again."

"Then I made the mistake of mentioning it to my wife, again."

"Anyway, this time the car didn't sell, but I eventually ended up on the phone with the seller. Bottom line, he ended up with less than he wanted, and I had the deal of a lifetime (I thought).

"There are rules to follow when buying a car. I had a book once, *How to Buy a Car Long-Distance*. It was over 100 pages, and I broke every rule in it. The could have used a photograph of my pained expression as the cover of the book. If a car has a handbuilt \$16,000 engine, a certain degree of caution is undertaken by any sane person buying such a car. Such a sane person never buys such a car sight unseen.

"I bought the car sight unseen."

Rude Awakening

"Have you ever wanted something so badly that you threw caution to the winds and said to hell with the consequences? Granted, the seller had \$14,000 in receipts, owned other tasty cars, checked out with all the mechanics, and had sorted out everything on the car. Or so I thought. The car had been repainted—again—in black. The air-conditioning was upgraded to R134, and records showed a new compressor, alternator, regulator, starter motor, battery, radiator, coolant tank, thermostat, exhaust system, catalytic converter, tie rods, drag link, wheel bearings, control arms, and more. The engine had even had a top-end rebuild. What could possibly go wrong?

Shipped from Chicago to David's home in New Jersey just before Christmas, the car arrived on New Year's Eve. Minutes after it was ensconced in the garage, a line of coolant crept from beneath the car.

"When I called the previous owner, he said it had always dumped coolant but only while running. Mechanically, the car had been ridden hard and put away wet. I had to find a good independent Mercedes-Benz shop."

David took the car to longtime Mercedes-Benz mechanic Bob Gade at Exclusive Auto in Lakewood, New Jersey. Bob's diagnosis? The engine had been heat-damaged. The six-liters are known to have "cooling issues." Oh, and a bad rod, scored cylinders, and a worn bottom end. Rebuild time. While the engine is out, they inspected the transmission. Rebuild time.

Finally, just a few months ago, the restoration was completed.

Who Knows?

Naturally, because of the custom-built nature of these low-production specials, documenting them can be difficult. Still, Dave says, "Based on the magazine photos and the car's service records, I am almost certain this is the car that was tested by *Car & Driver* in 1990." The original plot was to build 50 cars, but only about 13 are believed to have been completed. How many of them survive? Who knows?

At least this black cat, thanks to Dave, has just begun its second life.

FDB

Technical Specifications, 1988 300TE 6.0

Engine: M117 aluminum block, steel crank, overhead injection

Bore x stroke: 4.06 x 4.06 in.

Displacement: 5.9 liter

Power: 170 hp @ 5,200 rpm

Compression: 12.0:1 (10.0:1 for

Maximum rpm: 5,000

Tires: 155SR14 (optional 155SR14, 155SR16 optional)

Interior: black leather, custom floor and seat, triple wood trim

Radio: AM/FM 700W AM/FM/CD

Wheels: AMG three-spoke original 155SR14, new 17.5 in.

Tires: original 155SR14, 155SR16, new 155SR16, new Michelin Pilot Sport 225-45ZR17

Weight: 4,300 lb.

Original Price: \$80,500

Performance:

0-60 mph: 9.5 sec.

0-100 mph: 16.2 sec.

Top speed: 155 mph

Road G: 100 mph: 3.7 sec.

Fuel consumption: 15.1 mpg city



In Perspective

Back in 1990, just how much of a performance improvement did \$50,000 buy you at AMC? And how does this experienced 15-year-old compare to today's fresh, new, \$5000 Wagon?

Car	Peak hp	Peak Torque, lb-ft	0-60 sec.	Top speed, mph	Price
1988 300TE	177	188	9.5	140	\$51,000
300E	168	205	7.0	143	\$5,800
500E	322	354	5.0	155	70,200
300TE 6.0	310	320	5.7	155	60,500
2004 E500 Wagon	302	330	6.0	155	60,000
2004 E55 Wagon	176	317	6.8	155	N/A

converted

Herrin. Without even factoring in inflation, depreciation, interest, maintenance, restoration, and expensive gifts to placate your significant other, those numbers make the coming E500 Wagon look like a bargain and the 1990 four-door a pure steal! On the other hand, having practically a ton of AMC model certainly has an intangible value all its own.

