

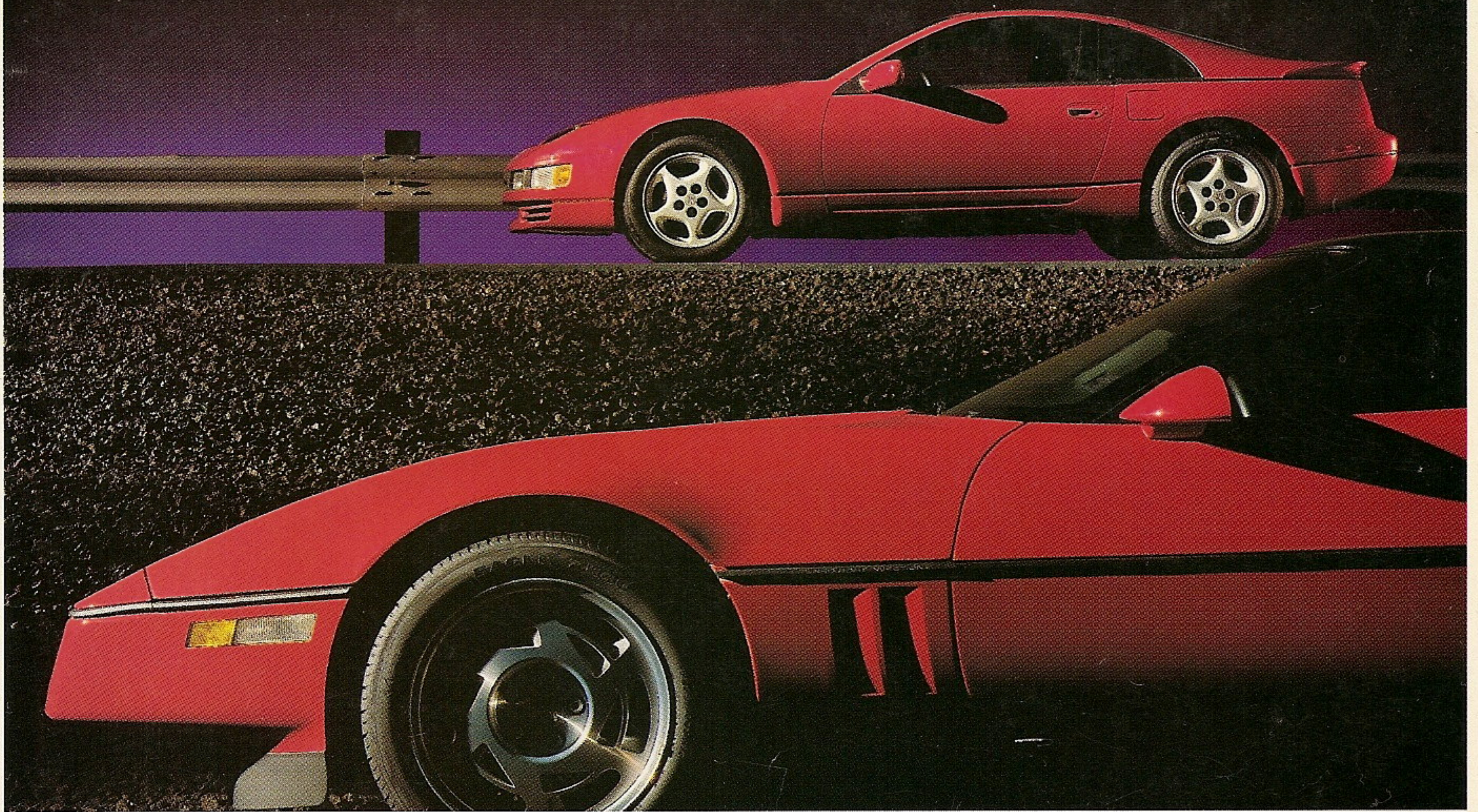
INSIDE: PONTIAC'S NEW TRANS SPORT!

CAR AND DRIVER

FEBRUARY 1990 • UK £2.40 \$2.95

CORVETTE MEETS GODZILLA

Nissan's new 300ZX Turbo takes on
the Corvette Z51.



Plus: New Lincoln Town Car, Honda Accord EX.
Elegant Mercury Sable. New Toyota Previa van.
Making money with your car's stereo system.

CAR AND DRIVER

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Cover photography by Vern Hammarlund



AMG 300TE 6.0

Not a Hammer, but a mighty muscular mallet.

BY JOHN PHILLIPS III

• Tampering with a well-known adage, Adlai Stevenson once observed, "Power corrupts, but *lack* of power corrupts absolutely." It's too bad that Mr. Stevenson never met Hans-Werner Aufrecht, the power broker behind the world's best-known customizer of Mercedes-Benz automobiles, AMG. For two decades, Aufrecht has clung tenaciously to statesman Stevenson's theory, ensuring that approximately one Benz per week would never lack for spleen-rupturing power. In the process, Aufrecht and company—including his Chicago-based AMG agent

in the U.S., Richard Buxbaum—have been corrupting buyers with such muscle-bound machines as the 181-mph AMG Hammer that we tested in our December 1987 "Gathering of Eagles."

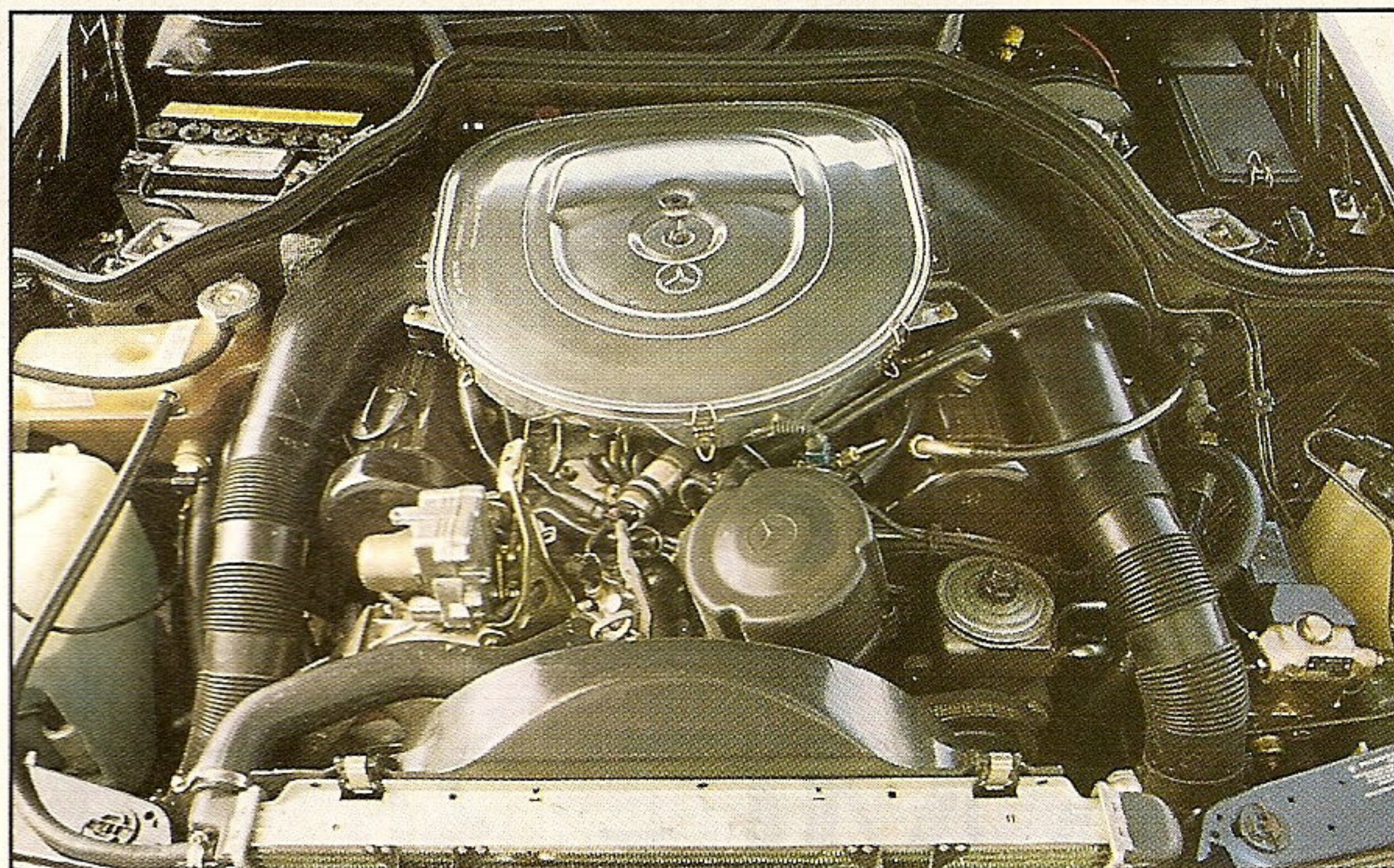
But forget about Hammers. Instead, let us review a more practical, somewhat more subtle AMG offering. One that will carry five people, two bags of golf clubs, three pieces of Gucci luggage, and one medium-sized golden retriever. This automobile began life as a stately and serene Mercedes-Benz 300TE wagon. Now it's called the AMG 300TE 6.0—not

a Hammer, exactly, but something closer, perhaps, to Hercules' club or Thor's industrial-strength mallet.

"It is just a *nice* car," says Buxbaum. "Something for around town."

A "nice" car for people with more money than God.

Nail the throttle in this nice, \$99,500 wagon and you and your golf clubs will be transported to 60 mph in (hold on to your spleen) 5.7 seconds. Hang on for another 8.5 seconds and you'll smash through the 100-mph barrier. Cruise at that speed and the wagon's engine will



tick over at an I'm-so-bored 3700 rpm—not yet into the real power range. If your golfing pals aren't impressed, point out that these acceleration figures are nearly identical to those of a Porsche 911 Club Sport. Or if your pals lean more toward bowling than golfing, point out that your 3636-pound family wagon reaches a 4-mph-higher speed in the quarter-mile than a Corvette Z51. And that its top speed of 153 mph bests both the Porsche and the Chevrolet.

Some nice wagon.

To obtain that ripping speed, AMG's Buxbaum simply yanks out the 300TE's standard 177-hp in-line six and replaces it with the engine and drivetrain from a wrecked, low-mileage Mercedes 560SEL. Alterations to the SOHC, all-aluminum V-8 are minimal. After it has been bored out to displace 6.0 liters, the two-valve V-8 is balanced and blueprinted, and its cylinder heads are ported and polished. The camshafts are unaltered. Even the 560's engine-management system is left intact.

The whole works then drops neatly into the 300TE's engine bay. The result is a docile, tractable powerplant that is perfectly content—providing you feed it a gallon of fuel every fifteen miles—to

churn out about 310 hp at 5200 rpm and 320 pound-feet of torque at 4000.

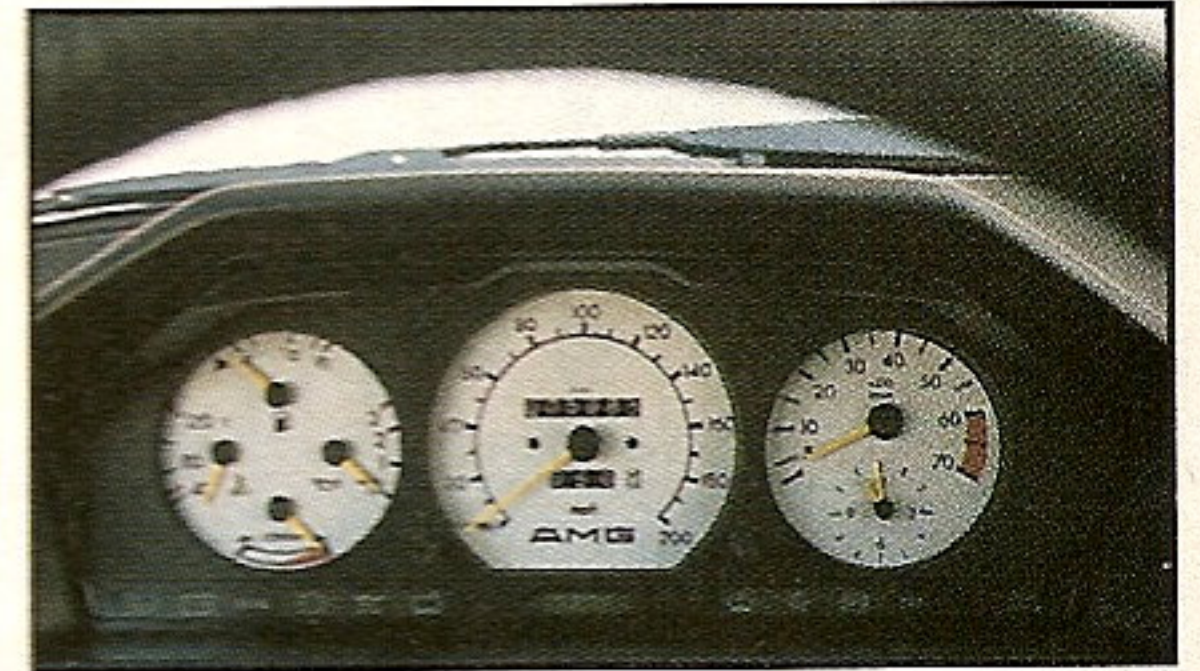
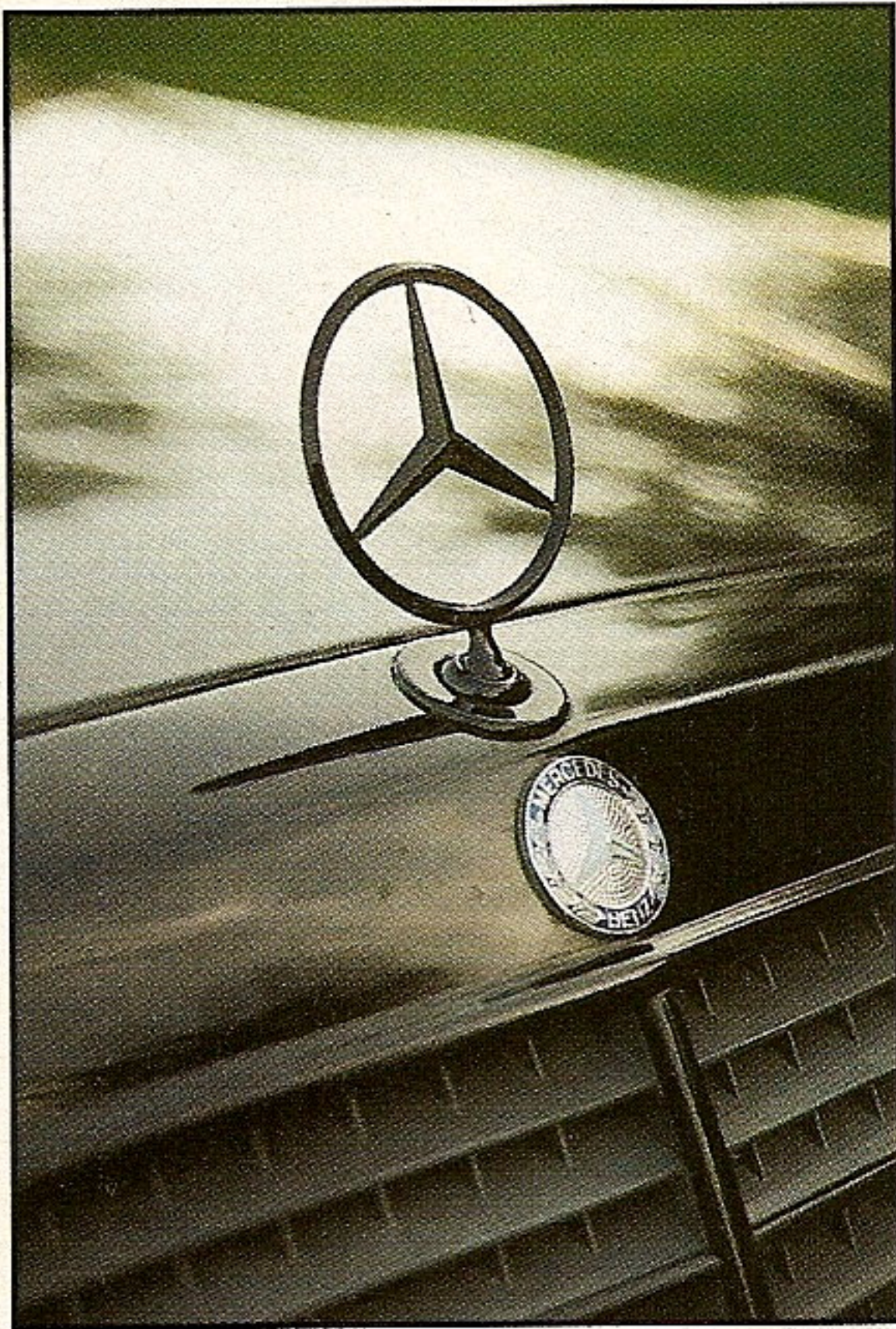
The power threads its way to terra firma via a four-speed automatic transmission whose hydraulic valve body has had its modulator-pressure settings revised by "a small German gentleman who works like a clockmaker," says Buxbaum. "He takes the valve bodies home at night, then brings them back in the morning. That's all we know."

Whatever necromancy is involved, it's fine by us. Launch the AMG wagon from a stoplight—an exercise guaranteed to warp the frontal lobes of onlooking Corvette owners—and only moderate wheelspin ensues. But the engine rushes urgently to its 6000-rpm redline, and under full throttle the transmission upshifts with a driveline-shuddering *ka-POW!*, as

if you'd just made a George Hurst powershift in a Pro Stock Hemi 'Cuda. The final *ka-POW!*—the upshift from third to fourth—comes at 114 mph, and even there the acceleration is still fierce enough to flop the front floor mats in half. To the German clockmaker's credit, the NHRA-style shifts occur only under full boot.

"So," you're asking, "if this wagon is so fast, how come it isn't a Hammer?" Because "real" Hammers sport four-valve heads (which deliver an additional 50 horsepower) and require an extra 200 hours of labor to produce. Hammers also carry a price tag that is heavier by some \$65,500.

"See," Buxbaum explains, "the customer's assignment for this car was 'Make it fast, and make it cost less than



\$100,000.' So we went the two-valve route, and it worked so well that we may see a lot of these babies." (A lot for Buxbaum isn't a lot—he's talking maybe 50 cars in 1990.)

To lessen costs, AMG laid on only the barest of cosmetic gewgaws: white instrument faces, an Alpine 7903 AM/FM/compact-disc player, and new wood dash inserts—"pickled bird's-eye maple" in this case, which looks to us like the sort of fake travertine marble you'd find in the honeymoon suite of a Las Vegas motel.

Outside, the 300TE is gussied up with AMG's special skirts and spoilers. And every square inch of sheetmetal—from the three-pointed star on the radiator to the three-pointed star on the tailgate—is slathered with ebony paint, as if the car had fallen into a vat of boiling tar.

Suspension modifications are few. The customer didn't want the low-profile Yokohama tires looking lost in the cavernous wheel wells, so Buxbaum cut one coil from each coil spring, lowering the Benz 1.5 inches and giving it the menacing countenance of, say, Lyle Alzado on his hands and knees.

Typically, lowering a car in that method plays hell with suspension geometry and also degrades the ride. Surprisingly, however, the wagon's ride—even with the inflexible sidewalls on the Yokos—is nearly as good as a stock 300TE's. Plenty of wheel travel remains, and road impacts are more an affront to your ears than to your backside.

The modified suspension *does* have one delinquent trait, however. Beyond 100 mph, and right up to the car's 153-

mph top speed (which is 27 mph higher than a stock 300TE's), the AMG's chassis goes into an odd corkscrewing motion. The car doesn't wander badly—steering corrections are minimal—but the unpredictable tracking prompted us to hold the AMG some distance from the guardrail during our top-speed runs, lest we return Herr Vader to Buxbaum with a Darlington stripe.

What is the culprit? The wheels on this car are an inch wider than the stock 300TE's, the nose—stuffed chockablock with V-8—is heavier than a stock 300TE's, and reducing the number of coils in a coil spring inevitably increases spring rates. Tinker with German suspension geometry and you have to expect a surprise or two.

Driven hard into corners, the AMG wagon initially heels over in typical Mercedes fashion, its inside front wheel on full rebound. And just when you reckon you'd better back off, the car assumes a firm, controlled set. Push harder, while holding a rock-steady throttle, and the AMG tends toward moderate understeer. Lift off the gas mid-turn, however, and the rear end departs instantly for Kalamazoo. The trick is to feed in throttle and induce a smidgen of power over-

steer—fun and evidently the fast way through turns, but a path safely trodden only by a driver whose right foot is practiced and masterfully disciplined.

Indeed, with practice we were able to hustle the AMG wagon around the skidpad at 0.82 g—a performance identical to that of a Mazda MX-5 Miata and nearly as good as a Porsche 911 Carrera 4's 0.83 g. What we have here is a 3636-pound wagon that is door-handle deep in sports-car territory.

Of course, the superb skidpad performance can be attributed largely to the nearly treadless Yokohama tires and to AMG's five-spoke, 7.5-inch-wide wheels (polished to a luster that would make them a welcome addition in the Hall of Mirrors). A dandy combination. *Until it rains.* You can't grasp the meaning of sweaty palms until you've driven a 310-hp AMG 300TE 6.0 in the rain and felt its rear end break loose under acceleration at 65 mph. Buxbaum usually insists on Pirelli P700s, and we can see why.

Of greater concern, however, is that the AMG 300TE 6.0 displays the flaws, fissures, faults, and foibles so often resident in conversions of this sort. During the wagon's two weeks with us, its cruise control began to surge maniacally. The heater steadfastly refused to deliver a single British thermal unit. AMG's unique exhaust resonator broke free and crashed to the asphalt. Two warning lights blinked intermittently for no obvious reason. The power-steering pump stopped pumping. The unique AMG speedometer was 13 mph optimistic at top speed. And from the moment we took delivery, our AMG wagon idled as if it were a decrepit Cummins diesel, ticking, rattling, and gasping in decidedly unrefined fashion.

We love the AMG 300TE 6.0, even though it is 49 percent more obscenely expensive than the car that initially rolled into Buxbaum's garages. Strangers pull alongside and shout, "Wow, is it a Hammer?" ("Yes," we always replied, lying.) But we also love the stock 300TE (C/D, August 1988), which costs a "mere" \$50,880 and certainly would *not* have exhibited eight defects in the first 5000 miles of its life.

Moreover, what will AMG do in 1991, when the Mercedes-Benz factory itself builds a 300E fitted with the luscious 322-hp, DOHC V-8 that currently nestles under the hood of the new 500SL? That supersedan won't cost anything like \$99,500, and it may slap a hammerlock (forgive us) on Aufrecht and Mister B.

Be heedful, AMG, lest you corrupt power absolutely. ●



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

Price as tested: \$99,500

Options on test car: base Mercedes-Benz 300TE with AMG discount, \$42,739; AMG modification package (includes 6.0-liter engine and driveline with 2.65:1 final-drive ratio and limited-slip differential, suspension tuning, Hammer-style side and rear skirts and front spoiler with driving lights, chrome Aero 7.5-x-16-inch wheels, Yokohama AVS 205/55VR-16 tires, white-face instrument cluster with 200-mph speedometer, gray bird's-eye maple trim kit, Alpine tuner and compact-disc player, AMG floor mats, Mitsubishi Diamond cellular telephone), \$56,761

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

Sound system: Alpine 7903 AM/FM-stereo tuner and compact-disc player, 4 speakers

ENGINE

Type V-8, aluminum block and heads
 Bore x stroke 3.94 x 3.73 in, 100.0 x 94.8mm
 Displacement 363 cu in, 5956cc
 Compression ratio 9.2:1
 Fuel system Bosch KE-III-Jetronic fuel injection
 Emissions controls 3-way catalytic converter, feedback fuel-air-ratio control, EGR
 Valve gear chain-driven single overhead cams, hydraulic lifters
 Power (C/D estimate) 310 bhp @ 5200 rpm
 Torque (C/D estimate) 320 lb-ft @ 4000 rpm
 Redline 6000 rpm

DRIVETRAIN

Transmission 4-speed automatic
 Final-drive ratio 2.65:1, limited slip

Gear	Ratio	Mph/1000 rpm	Max. test speed
I	3.87	7.1	42 mph (6000 rpm)
II	2.25	12.1	73 mph (6000 rpm)
III	1.44	19.0	114 mph (6000 rpm)
IV	1.00	27.3	153 mph (5600 rpm)

DIMENSIONS AND CAPACITIES

Wheelbase 110.2 in
 Track, F/R 58.9/58.6 in

Length 188.2 in
 Width 68.5 in
 Height 58.8 in
 Frontal area 22.5 sq ft
 Ground clearance 5.4 in
 Curb weight 3636 lb
 Weight distribution, F/R 49.8/50.2%
 Fuel capacity 19.0 gal
 Oil capacity 8.5 qt
 Water capacity 13.7 qt

CHASSIS/BODY

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

INTERIOR

SAE volume, front seat 50 cu ft
 rear seat 40 cu ft
 luggage space 42 cu ft
 Front seats bucket
 Seat adjustments fore and aft, seatback angle, front height, rear height
 General comfort poor fair **good** excellent
 Fore-and-aft support poor fair **good** excellent
 Lateral support poor fair **good** excellent

SUSPENSION

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

STEERING

Type recirculating ball, power-assisted
 Turns lock-to-lock 3.3
 Turning circle curb-to-curb 36.7 ft

BRAKES

F: 11.2 x 0.9-in vented disc
 R: 10.9 x 0.4-in disc
 Power assist vacuum with anti-lock control

WHEELS AND TIRES

Wheel size 7.5 x 16 in
 Wheel type cast aluminum
 Tires Yokohama AVS AV1-55W, 205/55VR-16
 Test inflation pressures, F/R 30/30 psi

CAR AND DRIVER TEST RESULTS

ACCELERATION	Seconds
Zero to 30 mph	2.1
40 mph	3.1
50 mph	4.3
60 mph	5.7
70 mph	7.4
80 mph	9.5
90 mph	11.8
100 mph	14.2
110 mph	18.0
120 mph	22.4
130 mph	28.1
Top-gear passing time, 30-50 mph	2.9
50-70 mph	3.8
Standing 1/4-mile	14.2 sec @ 100 mph
Top speed	153 mph
BRAKING	
70-0 mph @ impending lockup	175 ft

Fade none **moderate** heavy

HANDLING

Roadholding, 300-ft-dia skidpad 0.82 g
 Understeer minimal **moderate** excessive

COAST-DOWN MEASUREMENTS

Road horsepower @ 30 mph 6 hp
 50 mph 15 hp
 70 mph 32 hp

FUEL ECONOMY

C/D observed fuel economy 15 mpg

INTERIOR SOUND LEVEL

Idle 50 dBA
 Full-throttle acceleration 79 dBA
 70-mph cruising 71 dBA
 70-mph coasting 71 dBA