



Mercedes-Benz 300CE

Fewer doors, more pounds, bigger bucks.

• Besides death and taxes, there is one other inescapable fact of life: the escalating prices of Mercedes-Benz cars. With the dollar still faltering against the D-mark, silver-star sticker prices are rocketing toward the very edge of the universe. Mercedes' latest offering, a coupe derivative of the 300E four-door sedan, is a case in point. The price of the 300CE hasn't yet been officially announced, but a Mercedes marketing executive we spoke with in Stuttgart said he will be very surprised if the new two-door comes in for less than \$50,000. In anybody's currency, that's cubic money.

The good news is that the 300CE is nearly as fine a piece as the sedan from which it issues. The two-door is 3.3 inches shorter in wheelbase and 3.5 inches shorter in overall length than the four-door. It is also 1.4 inches lower, and its windshield leans back a bit more. The two models share the same suspension, powertrain, and front sheetmetal, but the coupe's other body panels are unique.

The Mercedes engineers, with their typical thoroughness, employed CAD/CAM technology to design new structural underpinnings for the coupe. The front frame forks are laid out in a tri-Y arrangement, which directs the forces of frontal impacts to three separate areas of the body structure: the transmission tunnel, the floorpan, and the bases of the A-pillars. Since the 300CE has no B-pillars, considerable structure was added to its

window areas to give it as much rollover and torsional stiffness as the six-pillared sedan; further reinforcement was built into the area between the trunk floor and the C-pillars. In addition, the coupe's A- and C-pillars are larger in cross section than the 300 sedan's.

All this structural integrity, of course, exacts a price. According to Mercedes, the two-door weighs 115 pounds more than the four-door. But the weight penalty translates into a structure so tight that the 300CE seems to have been carved from a solid billet of steel.

Unfortunately, only one powertrain is available to motivate the coupe's solidity: a 177-hp, single-overhead-cam six-in-line engine, backed up by a four-speed automatic transmission. Although the car launches fairly well from a dead stop, you really miss the 300E's five-speed manual when you're trying to carve up a mountain road. If you lose too many rpm in a tight corner, it seems to take forever to regain engine speed. Of course, shifting the automatic manually will keep the engine on the cam; but if you have to watch the

tachometer, what's the point of having an automatic?

Considering its 3300 pounds, the 300CE handles commendably. You do experience extreme roll angles, but the 195/65VR-15 Michelin MXVs stick very well and give you plenty of feedback and early warning of breakaway. Getting the coupe to work with you is largely a matter of overcoming your prejudice that too many pounds are listing too much to stay on the road. In time you become confident that the CE will follow your desired trajectory.

Like all Mercedes, the 300CE comes into its own on a maximum-effort blast down the Interstate. We had the exquisite pleasure of hammering it on the autobahns around Stuttgart, both in the dry and in some heavy rain. Few cars can equal the poise of an M-B in such conditions. At 130 mph, all the pieces of the coupe just click, like the tumblers in the lock of a bank vault. The steering is neither floaty nor spooky, the directional stability is so good that the car feels as if it were locked in by guide rails, and the brakes respond smoothly and solidly when you're coming up on a wheezy 2CV at a speed differential of 70 mph.

Mercedes plans to produce only 15,000 coupes annually, of which only about 3000 will be sent to the U.S. Of course, not many people will be able to afford this beast anyway. But if you're one of them, we bet you can think of a lot more dopey ways to spend \$50,000. —Tony Assenza

Vehicle type:	front-engine, rear-wheel-drive, 4-passenger, 2-door sedan
Estimated base price:	\$50,000
Engine type:	6-in-line, iron block and aluminum head, Bosch KE-Jetronic fuel injection
Displacement	181 cu in, 2962cc
Power (SAE net)	177 bhp @ 5700 rpm
Transmission	4-speed automatic
Wheelbase	106.9 in
Length	183.9 in
Curb weight	3300 lb
Projected EPA fuel economy, city driving	18 mpg