



Mercedes-Benz 300E

A superbly competent, 140-mph transportation tool.

• When a three-pointed star rolls by, everyone from Palm Springs heiresses to Camp Lejeune pump jockeys perks up and takes notice. To most Americans, a Mercedes-Benz is the rolling equivalent of a Russian sable coat—an unmistakable symbol of luxury and status. To a few others, Mercedes are juggernauts of the autobahn and masters of the Alpine pass—in other words, the world's premier sports sedans. In our view, however, Benzmobiles are neither status symbols nor sports sedans. They are simply outstandingly competent transportation tools, designed for comfortable travel over the widest possible range of road conditions.

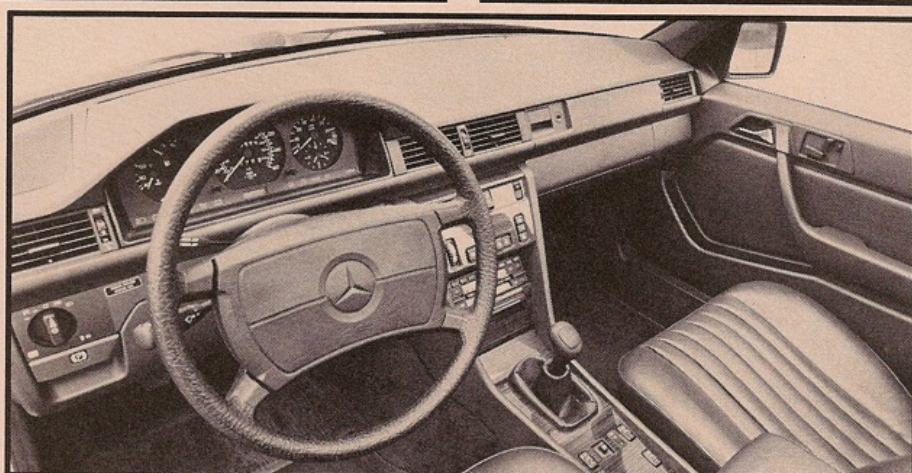
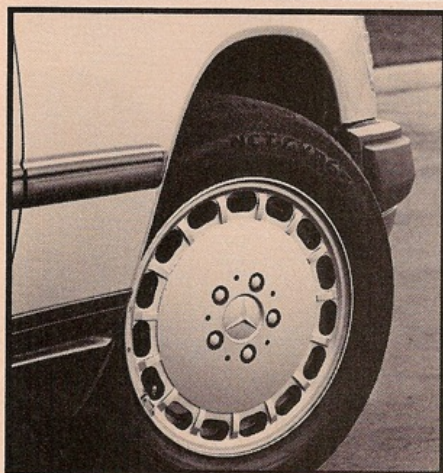
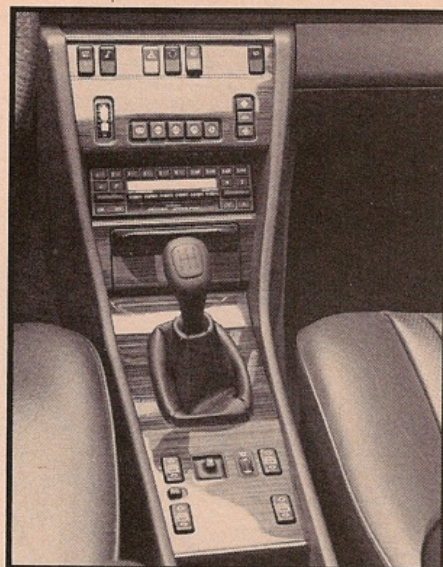
Our view is well supported by Mercedes' new mid-sized sedan, the 300E, which fits into the lineup between the small 190-class and the larger S-class. Its \$33,900 price tag immediately suggests luxury, yet the car's exterior is as unadorned as a government-motor-pool special. The only chrome parts decorating the coachwork are the ra-



diator shell, two obligatory Mercedes stars, and some identifying badges. The 300E also lacks trim around its side windows, and the few moldings that it does have are starkly black. Even the door handles are gray plastic. Obviously, the Mercedes stylists feel that typical automotive ornamentation serves no important purpose. We don't disagree, but the Mercedes approach is certainly at odds

with conventional luxury-car design—and, we suspect, with the expectations of many luxury-car buyers.

The shape of the 300E does little to reassure traditional luxury-car customers, for it eschews the long, low, wide look. In fact, the new Mercedes is slightly shorter, narrower, and taller than its predecessor; for that matter, it's taller than nearly every other sedan on the market. And while



many high-buck cars are still formally attired in sharply sculptured sheetmetal, the 300E wears a more avant-garde, molded-soap-bar look. What's more, its tapered and rounded rear quarters conspire with the diagonal cut-lines of the trunk-lid opening to produce a distinctly unusual rear appearance.

Such departures from popular styling themes are to be expected from Mercedes-Benz. At this company, the engineers hold sway over the bean counters, the marketers, and the stylists, and they naturally give a higher priority to performance than to the design expectations of well-heeled buyers. In the case of the 300E, one of the engineers' principal goals was to enhance all aspects of its performance with an aerodynamically efficient design. As a result, the new Mercedes slips through the air with an outstandingly low drag coefficient (0.31), which combines with a modest frontal area to minimize air resistance. The 300E's high tail section may look ungainly, but such a design serves a dual purpose: it helps smooth the airflow into the wake of the cars, and it allows for a large cargo volume. The usefulness of the cargo hold is also aided by a low liftover height and by a lid that swings open to an unusually high position.

Like the trunk, the 300E's passenger

compartment is spacious and practical. The two front occupants are treated to bucket seats that offer excellent support, usefully shaped side bolsters, and a full range of power adjustment by means of Mercedes' door-mounted seat controls. These best-in-the-industry controls are supplemented by electrical adjustments for headrest height and steering-column extension. In addition, two sets of driver's-seat and steering-wheel adjustments can be stored in and recalled from a memory.

The rear seats are every bit as comfortable as those up front, but the accommodations are a bit tighter. Six-footers have adequate legroom even when the front seats are far back, but their headroom is limited. Their feet may be a bit crowded, too, because of the sheer bulk of the seat-adjusting machinery under the front seats. When three passengers occupy the rear, width is also on the tight side.

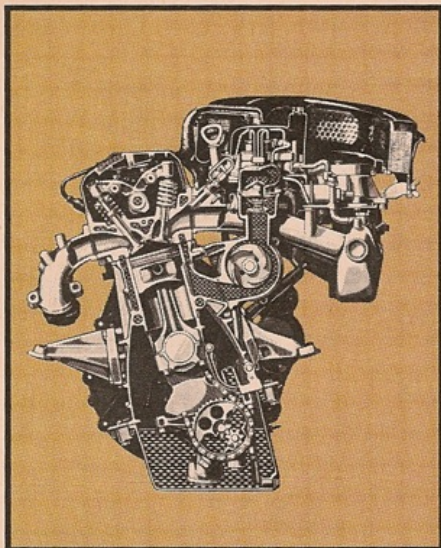
The 300E's interior space may not be quite on par with larger luxury sedans, but its creature comforts leave little to be desired. In addition to power seats, standard equipment includes electric assists for the sunroof, the windows, and the door locks; the trunk and fuel-filler lids are also secured by the power-lock system. Cruise control, automatic climate control, an air bag for the driver, and an elaborate Becker

Grand Prix Electronic sound system are all included in the base price.

The 300E is luxurious, but its list of amenities stops short of the frivolous. There isn't an automatic headlight-control mechanism or electronic message center to be found. For convenience' sake, the passenger-side rear-view mirror is electrically operated, but the one on the driver's side is manually controlled—supposedly to provide more fail-safe operation.

The styling of the interior follows in this serious vein, with function definitely receiving more emphasis than form. All of the materials seem to be durable and of the highest quality. The dashboard and the console are free of vibrations and squeaks, no matter how hard a bump the car encounters. The seats are so rigidly framed that they won't flex a bit, even if you shift all your weight suddenly to one side. The door panels remain flat and still when the power windows are operated.

The 300E's interior, in short, is all smoothness and efficiency. But something seems missing. The combination of cleanly sculptured shapes and cold man-made materials produces a feeling of starkness, particularly when everything is dressed in the light-blue color of one of our test cars. Except for a token strip of artificial-looking wood on the console, this interior offers



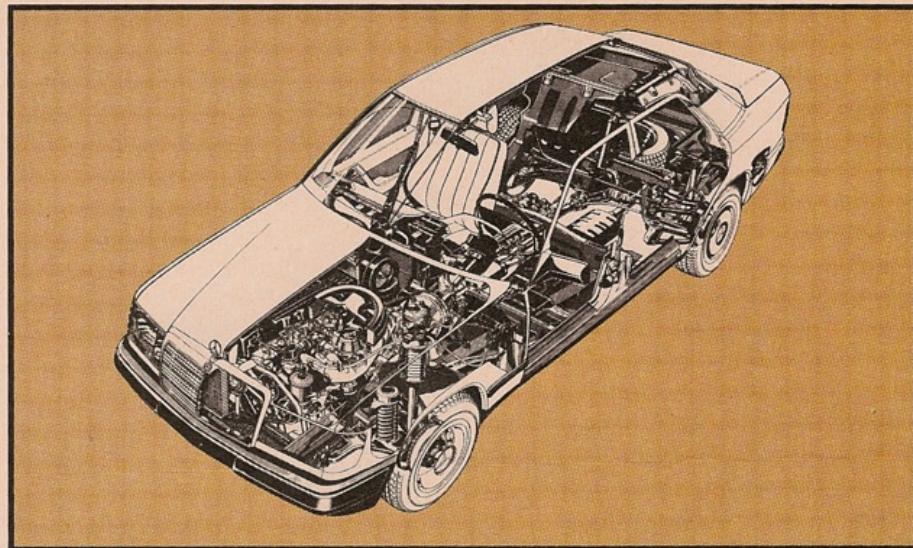
about as much warmth as the eyes of a Swiss banker.

Of course, those who regard Mercedes as sports sedans will point out that such pure functionalism is in keeping with the marque's serious driving nature. In the case of the 300E, that nature is very serious indeed. With a top speed of 140 mph, this is the fastest Mercedes we've ever tested. And the 300E can lunge from rest to 60 mph in eight seconds flat and sprint through the quarter-mile in 15.9 seconds at 87 mph. Those acceleration figures are just a few ticks of the clock slower than those of Mercedes' full-out sixteen-valve 190E sports sedan.

Despite its impressive performance statistics, though, the 300E doesn't feel particularly hot-blooded. One of the reasons for this is that the ratios in its five-speed gearbox are tall and very widely spaced; in fact, the 300E's lofty top speed is achieved in fourth gear, not fifth. Although the overhead-cam, 3.0-liter in-line six produces a healthy 177 hp at 5700 rpm and 188 pounds-feet of torque at 4400 rpm, it feels strong only in the lower gears. Fifth is strictly for highway cruising, as the sluggish top-gear acceleration times show, and even fourth is often too tall for urban use.

Furthermore, shifting the 300E isn't very satisfying. The clutch is certainly smooth enough, and we can't fault the transmission's light effort or precise action, but the motion is rubbery; it lacks the positive, snick-snick feeling that can make shifting a sensuous pleasure. We did try a 300E with the four-speed automatic and found it to be faultless. Because of its smooth, positive shifts and rapid response to manual inputs, we would probably choose it if we bought a 300E. The other side of the coin is that the manual gearbox offers better EPA highway fuel economy: 25 mpg, versus 22 for the automatic. Both are rated at 18 mpg in the EPA city cycle; we recorded 21 mpg in our testing with the manual-transmission 300E.

If the powertrain's soulless competence leaves you confused about the 300E's



COUNTERPOINT

• It's really gotten to the point where there is nothing else like a Mercedes. No company seems as driven as Daimler-Benz by its own vision of what an automobile should be—and to hell with what the rest of the world thinks. And no Daimler-Benz product embodies the company's thinking better than the new 300E.

This car has me talking to myself. The thunk-hum-whir of the driving experience is a mechanical symphony. From the heft of its controls—which include the world's most expensive-feeling turn-signal lever—to the deep-down solidity of the body, this car oozes quality. Spend just an hour behind the wheel and you'll believe this Mercedes is worth every red cent.

But just when I get wound up about the 300E, it lets me down. The suspension is tuned more for taking the sting out of bumps than for threading through ess-bends. And how could anything so expensive look so plain? The interior sets some sort of record for starkness. You'd think you were sitting in the world's best-built, best-equipped taxicab.

So I don't know about the 300E. There is certainly plenty to love here. I just don't pretend to understand it all.

—Rich Ceppos

The 300E is what a Cadillac would be if it were built in Germany. You really couldn't ask for much more in a luxury cruiser. The ride is great, road and noise isolation is terrific, and there is an abundance of clever touches, like the seat-and-steering-wheel memory and the remote-controlled collapsing rear headrests.

Just like a Cadillac, however, the 300E falls short in a number of critical areas, keeping me from really getting

excited about it. Overall, it feels way too much like a marshmallow. Its suspension is soft, its steering feels too remote, and the power delivery through the five-speed to the rear wheels feels as if it has to go through a couple of yards of warm oatmeal. What's missing is that mechanical immediacy I've come to associate with German cars—the sense that you're in charge of an assembly of steel and aluminum. In this regard, Audi seems to be doing a much better job of making four-door luxocars interesting and exciting to drive.

—Tony Assenza

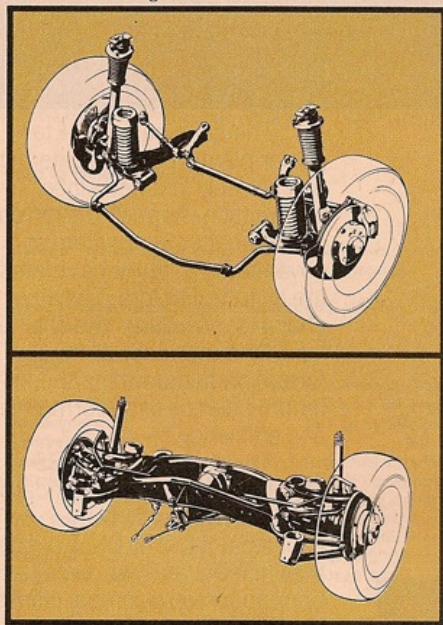
I once had a chance to buy a Mercedes coupe at a great price. M-B was selling a gleaming 280CE press car. Prep couldn't have amounted to more than a tune and a wax, because I had put most of the miles on it myself and it was in terrific shape. From a summer intro at New York's Westchester Country Club, the CE and I arrowed home to California, and love for the German six-cylinder had me by the horns by the time we hit Ohio. That car had legs on it and a body around it that gave new meaning to the saying "She flies like a brick out-house with wings... big wings!" Her price was a sweaty, lip-licking tease, even for a busted writer. But I stared at the ocean long enough to make myself say no. Then, within a year or so, the list price shot up 50 percent. Go on, ask me for investment advice.

Now, dammit, here's the 300E. A piece nothing short of brilliant. Twice the price I considered, but shoot fire, it drives like four times the car, shows its skivvies to the wind, and scoots like spit on the griddle—and here comes summer once again, with waves of asphalt to carry us away. Now what?

—Larry Griffin

sporting nature, the car's suspension characteristics throw little light on the subject. The 300E's suspension has an uncanny ability to cope with any road surface. On smooth pavement, its front struts and multilink rear suspension (a scaled-up version of the 190 design) provide a well-controlled ride; when the road deteriorates, the 300E never loses its cool. No matter how bad the bumps and holes are, the suspension keeps all four wheels planted and the car never crashes into its bump stops. Over rough surfaces, the ride is nothing short of magical. Such competence is no surprise in a Mercedes, but the 300E also deals with sharp little bumps, such as expansion joints, less harshly than other models from the same maker.

On winding roads, the 300E reveals a



shift in Mercedes' handling philosophy. Instead of cornering with steady understeer, as its predecessors typically did, the 300E is very neutral; it never grinds its front tires very hard, yet its rear end always stays in line. As a result, the 300E gets the most from its high-performance tires (195/65VR-15 Goodyear NCTs on our test cars), and it develops 0.79 g of grip without any white-knuckle driving. That's a commendable performance for a large sedan, and it represents a tremendous improvement over previous Mercedes.

The 300E's capable handling is backed up by superlative brakes. The four-wheel discs are both powerful and fade-resistant. And thanks to their anti-lock control, drivers of any caliber can extract the car's best stopping performance.

With a well-controlled ride, lots of grip, stable and neutral handling, and confidence-inspiring brakes, the 300E can cover ground very quickly. Even so, it does not kindle a strong sporting flame in its driver. When pushed hard in the turns, the 300E leans more than most aggressive drivers would like, and its steering lacks the sharp off-center response of a high-strung



speedster. The 300E is designed to behave benignly and to give its best while placing only modest demands on its driver.

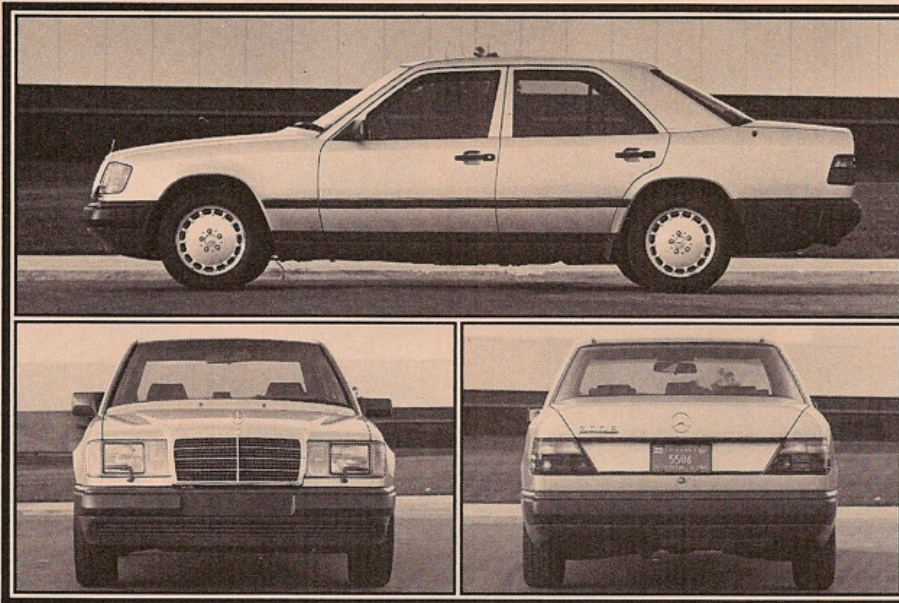
These contradictions in character, however, are apparent only if one insists on fitting the 300E into a luxury niche, or a sporting niche, or any other kind of niche. If one instead regards the 300E as the Mercedes engineers do—as a transportation tool—the contradictions vanish. And the engineers gave their new car the means to be an outstanding transportation tool. Since efficient transportation requires speed, the 300E was given the ability to go very fast. Since roads come in all combinations of straight, curved, rough, and smooth, the 300E has a suspension that can cope very capably with any road at high speeds. Since transportation often requires several hours, the interior was made spacious and comfortable for its occupants. Since there is a failure to transport if the occupants don't survive the trip, the 300E was equipped with excellent active and passive safety features. Since a car can't convey anyone if it doesn't run, the 300E was built solidly and from the most durable materials. And since fuel is often

scarce and expensive, the 300E was engineered to do all of the above relatively economically.

A warm, cozy interior, a slick-shifting gearbox, delightfully close gear ratios, and elegant designer bodywork would not help the 300E to achieve these functional goals; therefore, it does without them. After all, while some people buy Mercedes to maintain their status among their neighbors in Beverly Hills, others depend on them to live through the harsh driving environment of war-torn Beirut.

This kind of multifarious competence comes at a dear price—especially when less expensive sedans, such as the Audi 5000 Turbo Quattro and the Saab 9000 Turbo, can equal the 300E's speed and spaciousness while offering additional features to boot. But buying a Mercedes-Benz is like buying an IBM computer. Some competitors may have an edge in technology or price, but the Merc and the IBM will deliver long-term satisfaction, great dependability, and a maximum return on investment at resale time. As a bonus, the 300E will even deliver your neighbors' envy and admiration.

—Csaba Csere



Vehicle type: front-engine, rear-wheel-drive, 5-passenger, 4-door sedan

Price as tested: \$33,900

Options on test car: none

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

Sound system: Becker Grand Prix Electronic AM/FM-stereo radio/cassette, 4 speakers

ENGINE

Type 6-in-line, iron block and aluminum head
Bore x stroke 3.48 x 3.16 in, 88.5 x 80.3mm
Displacement 181 cu in, 2962cc
Compression ratio 9.2:1
Fuel system Bosch KE-Jetronic fuel injection
Emissions controls three 3-way catalytic converters, feedback fuel-air-ratio control, chain-driven single overhead cam, hydraulic lifters
Valve gear chain-driven single overhead cam, hydraulic lifters
Power (SAE net) 177 bhp @ 5700 rpm
Torque (SAE net) 188 lb-ft @ 4400 rpm
Redline 6200 rpm

DRIVETRAIN

Transmission 5-speed
Final-drive ratio 3.07:1
Gear Ratio Mph/1000 rpm Max. test speed
I 3.86 6.1 38 mph (6200 rpm)
II 2.18 10.7 66 mph (6200 rpm)
III 1.38 16.9 105 mph (6200 rpm)
IV 1.00 23.4 140 mph (6000 rpm)
V 0.80 29.2 135 mph (4600 rpm)

DIMENSIONS AND CAPACITIES

Wheelbase 110.2 in
Track, F/R 58.9/58.6 in
Length 187.2 in
Width 68.5 in
Height 56.9 in
Frontal area 22.4 sq ft

Ground clearance 6.3 in
Curb weight 3200 lb
Weight distribution, F/R 54.4/45.6%
Fuel capacity 18.5 gal
Oil capacity 6.3 qt
Water capacity 8.5 qt

CHASSIS/BODY

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

INTERIOR

SAE volume, front seat 50 cu ft
rear seat 40 cu ft
trunk space 15 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, anti-roll bar

STEERING

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

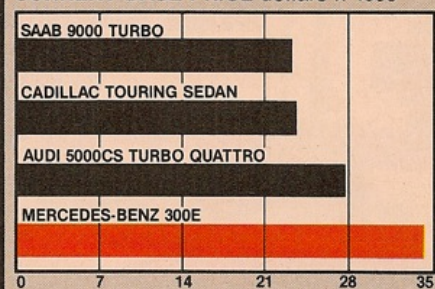
BRAKES

F: 11.2 x 0.9-in vented disc
R: 10.2 x 0.4-in disc
Power assist vacuum with anti-lock control

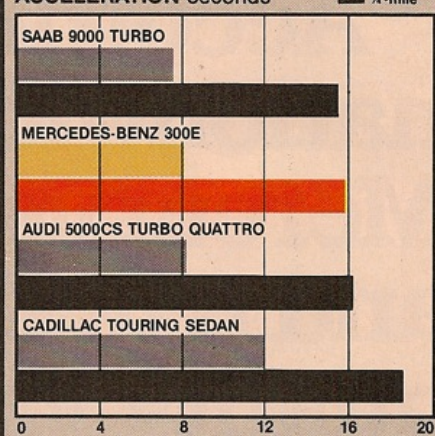
WHEELS AND TIRES

Wheel size 6.5 x 15 in
Wheel type cast aluminum
Tires Goodyear NCT VR65, 195/65VR-15
Test inflation pressures, F/R 35/35 psi

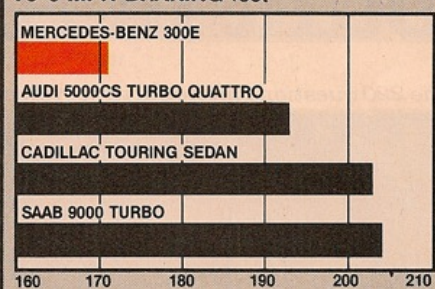
CURRENT BASE PRICE dollars x 1000



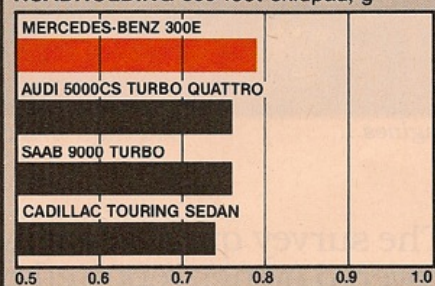
ACCELERATION seconds



70-0 MPH BRAKING feet



ROADHOLDING 300-foot skidpad, g



CAR AND DRIVER TEST RESULTS

ACCELERATION

Seconds
Zero to 30 mph 2.8
40 mph 4.4
50 mph 6.0
60 mph 8.0
70 mph 10.7
80 mph 14.0
90 mph 17.8
100 mph 22.5
110 mph 30.7
Top-gear passing time, 30-50 mph 13.6
50-70 mph 15.2
Standing 1/4-mile 15.9 sec @ 87 mph
Top speed 140 mph

BRAKING

70-0 mph @ impending lockup 171 ft
Modulation not applicable

Fade none moderate heavy
Front-rear balance not applicable

HANDLING

Roadholding, 300-ft-dia skidpad 0.79 g
Understeer minimal moderate excessive

FUEL ECONOMY

EPA city driving 18 mpg
EPA highway driving 25 mpg
C/D observed fuel economy 21 mpg

INTERIOR SOUND LEVEL

Idle 42 dBA
Full-throttle acceleration 75 dBA
70-mph cruising 67 dBA
70-mph coasting 67 dBA

EPA ESTIMATED FUEL ECONOMY mpg

