

COGITO ERGO ZOOM

instead of "muddling through," an enterpriser can just muddle in deeper and deeper until it drowns.

Just before those two companies bit the dust, I spent a week in Switzerland and Germany driving the new **Porsche 968** and the new **Mercedes-Benz 500E**. I only made one mistake. I spent three glorious days in the Porsche 968 prior to driving the Mercedes, but the Mercedes was so remarkable that I had to struggle to remember the things I'd loved so much in the Porsche. The Mercedes-Benz 500E is like a drug, folks. It is so good that you simply cannot get enough.

I stayed in the Waldhotel Schatten, which sits right at the edge of the old Solitude racing circuit near Stuttgart. Solitude was billed as a "little Nürburgring," back in the Fifties and Sixties, and it must have been wonderful indeed. I did seven laps of the 7.1-mile circuit in the 500E on a Sunday afternoon, before driving out to the German national automobile museum at Langenburg. Solitude, even at relatively sedate touring speeds, makes modern Grand Prix circuits look like the go-kart tracks they've become. Long, swooping straights knife through thick forests. Fast turns feed into faster turns and are followed by nasty off-camber hairpins. It's not difficult to imagine sitting in front of the old Waldhotel Schatten watching Dan Gurney and Jo Bonnier run away from the field in their Porsches on a summer afternoon in 1962.

We've given you the details of the Mercedes-Benz 500E (December 1990), and our Mr. Lawrence C. Crane returned from Geneva this year, where he drove the 500E, calling it "the best car in the world." He may well be right. It is certainly the most exciting sedan in the world. I did 700 kilometers (435 miles) in the two days I drove the 500E, and I don't know of another car like it. Its top speed is chip-limited to 150 mph, but it will do 150 all day if traffic allows. Even when traffic proved obstructive, the thrill of accel-

erating back to top speed from 90 or 100 mph made the temporary delays worthwhile. The 500E is the result of a collaboration between Mercedes-Benz and Porsche—Mercedes designed and developed the car and Porsche builds it in the same little old plant where they built the 959. It was no doubt inspired by the AMG Hammer, but it is a much nicer and more civilized automobile.

The Porsche 968 is a wonderful upgrade on the 944. It is not a totally new car, but it is vastly improved dynamically and aesthetically. In two hard driving days, Jim Kenzie, of the *Toronto Star*, and I drove a coupe over Switzerland's famous Klausen Pass, scene of some classic hill-climb competitions in years gone by, and drove a convertible all the way from Switzerland to Stuttgart at absolute full chat. The convertible was our favorite. On the run north to Stuttgart it maintained an indicated 225 kph (140 mph) going uphill with the top down, and we were impressed. We were less impressed by the Tiptronic transmission, which seemed to emasculate a powerful and enjoyable engine. The 968 will come in at around \$44,500 for the coupe and \$53,000 for the convertible (with the standard six-speed transmission, which we'd recommend), and despite the now commonplace exorbitant German prices, it may be good enough to again test the market for four-cylinder Porsches in this country, and perhaps revive it. I always loved the 944, and the 968 is a considerably better car. I hesitate to say this, but if it doesn't succeed here, it could mean that Porsche might follow Peugeot and Sterling back across the Atlantic—not a happy prospect.

The young seagull who has been monitoring my progress here went to sleep some time ago, after doing a discreet little dump on the carpet, but I'm going to Fed Ex this manuscript to Ann Arbor, despite his behavior. What do critics know?



GRAND TOURING

BY PHIL LLEWELIN

Sporrans meet Spiders at the gathering of the Clan MacAlfa.

Aberdour, Scotland—"Daddy, is that man trying to eat an octopus?" the boy asks. "No, son, he's playing the bagpipes."

Sassenach jokes about kilts, sporrans, and cabers mingled with respectful references to the likes of Vittorio Jano and Juan Manuel Fangio when the Clan MacAlfa gathered at Aberdour Castle, the oldest parts of which had been standing for about 200 years before Columbus sailed the Atlantic. We were greeted by a piper and a sword-dancing maiden whose toes twirled between the gleaming blades of crossed claymores. The guard of honor for this Alfa Caledonia get-together consisted of a long tail Spider, a Montreal, a two-liter GTV, and, taking pride of place, Will Grime's new and mind-boggling SZ coupe. Boded by Zagato, the SZ is a prime example of the love-or-hate school of automotive styling. "The Monster" is its nickname.

Grime is the ebullient secretary of the Pictish branch of the Alfa Romeo Owners' Club. He also edits its *Quadrifoglio* newsletter and, this being a serious business, subtles his column "More ramblings from the loony at the helm." We first met in Milan five years ago, when the city staged a Grand Prix retrospective to help celebrate the automobile's centenary.

Accepting the Alfa Caledonia invitation,



Top: The Mercedes-Benz 500E, without question the most exciting sedan in the world. Quick as hell with lovely manners. Bottom: The Porsche 968 coupe. A wonderful upgrade on the 944, vastly improved dynamically and aesthetically.



TIM WIKEN