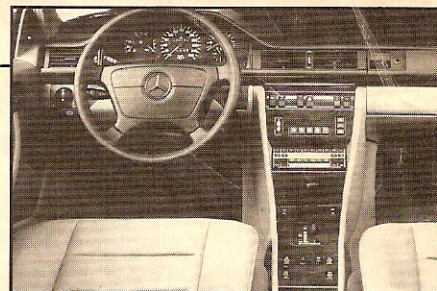


MERCEDES-BENZ 500E

A car for the connoisseur



The Mercedes-Benz 500E would disappoint 90 or 95 percent of the driving public. How you react to this fact is crucial in determining what you think of the car.

Few people will notice those things that separate the 500E from a standard mid-size Mercedes-Benz. At the wheel, fewer still will appreciate why it costs about \$30,000 more than a

300E. The 500E is hard and—superficially—frigid. It doesn't scream wealth or youth or fashion. Its gold-chain index is lower than that on just about any car you must spend \$80,000 (plus gas-guzzler and luxury taxes) to own.

On the other hand, the 500E is built like a Tiger tank. It seats four comfortably and goes like hell to the second or third power. But only those who know understand, and those who know are a distinct minority.

If it bothers you that most people couldn't spot the 500E among a dozen German taxicabs, then driving one of the most satisfying cars in production might not mean much. This car is as close to "hand-built" as it gets at Daimler-Benz circa 1993. Automobile lovers will recognize in the 500E a pedigree few 1993 models can match.

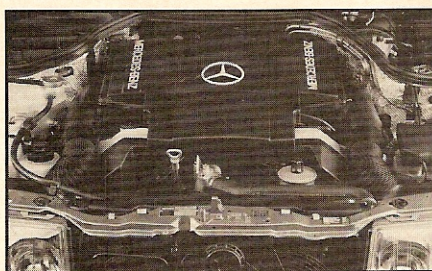
Remember the four-door that Porsche was going to build? The 500E is probably the best facsimile we'll get, in spirit and in fact. About four years ago, when Mercedes decided to make a limited-production, high-performance midsize sedan, the company subcontracted much of the engineering work to Porsche. It was Porsche that restructured the E-car chassis to accommodate Mercedes' (then-new) four-cam, 5.0-liter V8. Apparently Mercedes was impressed, because it also chose Porsche to assemble the 500E.

Assembly includes major suspension modification. The 500E gets heavier wishbones, steering linkage and rear-axle cross-members from the SL roadster. Ride height is lowered approximately one inch and controlled by a hydraulic self-leveling system, and spring rates are increased.

The 500E is like a Porsche in one significant way: not because the doors thunk soundly or because the seats are stitched properly (though it is sound and proper),



Interior sets theme for 500E: It's all business, with few soft edges. Jane Q. Public may miss the point, but M-B's hottest V8 sedan is a gold mine for enthusiasts



but because the most important thing is the driving. There are very few soft edges. The left seat is all business, the cabin (despite yards of polished walnut) more efficient than arty. In the 500E, you just tune in Wagner or Corea or Guns N' Roses and fly.

This car covers miles as quickly as you can get away with. Jab the gas pedal and there is immediate, turbine-like thrust; with 347 lb ft in reserve, there's almost always more. Yet more speed does not make the 500E more tentative. It relishes, even demands, wonderful, supra-legal speed.

The 500E is anything but a tail-out, slash-and-burn boy racer. It is smoothness, stability and flexibility defined. You probably will not *look* fast driving it. With standard (and no-defeat) traction control on the drive wheels, going quickly is basically a point-and-go affair. Limits are high enough to reward drivers of above-average skill. Yet the 500E can please anyone with desire and reasonable concentration. It is fast, but also easy and secure.

Perfect it is not. Many find the steering a little thick below 40 mph. Then there's the Mercedes four-speed automatic. The 500E has more than enough pull to overcome clunky second-gear starts, but downshifts

SPECIFICATIONS

Base Price:	.....\$80,000
Wheelbase (in):	.....110.2
Length/width (in):	.....187.2/70.7
Curb weight (lb):	.....3855
Powertrain:	.....Front-longitudinal, 32-valve, injected, 5.0-liter/302 cid V8, aluminum block and heads, 315 hp @ 5600 rpm, 347 lb ft @ 3900 rpm, rear-drive, four-speed automatic transmission
0.6 (sec.):	.....5.6 (est)
Top speed (mph):	.....155 (governed)
Suspension:	.....Ind. front, struts, lower control arms, coil springs, antiroll bar; ind. rear, multi links, coil springs, antiroll bar
Brakes:	.....Power vented discs front/rear, ABS
Tires:	.....255/55ZR-16
Passive restraints:	.....dual airbags
Mpg/range:	.....17 mpg (EPA comb) x 23.8 gal = 404.6

require nearly full pedal application, and often produce a bigger surge of acceleration than intended.

Still, the real problem with the 500E may be the psychological effect on those who drive it. Spend time in a superior automobile and you may develop an attitude of superiority. People nested in the left lane in mundane appliances grow particularly annoying. There's an overwhelming urge to hang a few feet off their rear bumper and prod them.

Then there is price. It guarantees few people will ever enjoy this sedan. Many who could afford it would not even consider it. There are excellent sedans with computer-perfect welds and two-thirds the performance at half the price or less. In most places, any two-seater and a lot of coupes will have more sex appeal.

But the 500E is one of a kind. If not the best car in the world, it may be the best compromise of utility, comfort, safety and thrilling performance. If you own one, you *know*.

—J.P. Vettraino