



IT'S HARD TO IMAGINE Mercedes building a car in the tradition of an American muscle car. And if you suggested that the 500E was such a machine, you'd doubtless be drenched in a flood of denials from Mercedes personnel.

I mean, it doesn't look like a muscle car. It does not sport loud stripes, mag alloys or a rather stringy cartoon bird (the road runner) on its flanks. Instead, the 500E comes looking as sober as the next Mercedes, the whiff of excitement no stronger than you'd savour when climbing aboard any other opulent four-door machine. Apart from some slightly scooped-out wheel-arches, a different set of alloys and the fact that you must drive from the left-hand side, the shout of performance is fainter than a British Rail announcement of delay.

But it does qualify as a muscle car in the most important way of all – it is a middle-sized saloon, with a motor robbed from the engine bay of its bigger brother the S-class. This lends the W124 a rather startling new personality.

It does not take long, for instance, to be disabused of the notion that this is another boringly faithful Benz. The accelerator produces uncharacteristically instant action. Instead of that lifeless, wooden feel it seems alive, directly connected to the V8's lungs and able to deliver a convincing spurt without your size 10 getting anywhere near the underlay. So, a Mercedes with the capacity to excite, and, what's more, in a slightly irresponsible style.

The source of these frissons (and sometimes they're a little more than that) is the quad-cam 5.0 V8, which first appeared in the 500SL and now propels versions of the S-class. It delivers 326bhp at 5700rpm, and 354lb ft of twist action at the 4000rpm crest of a promisingly horizontal torque curve. Since the 500E

weighs less than either of its confrères, it's no surprise that it gives rather a good account of itself when the small pedal is sunk.

Transistors and diodes rein in the top speed to the standard 155mph limit the German makers restrict themselves to when they're pretending to be responsible with well-endowed machinery, but in unfettered state it's reckoned the 500E would climb to 178mph. Of more interest is its ability to depart in a swift and startling manner, 60mph arriving in under 5.9 seconds – and it feels like it, too.

Of which more later. Achieving figures like these has not been the easiest of tasks, because this engine does not fit, in normal circumstances, beneath the bonnet lid of a W124. Extraordinary circumstances see the Benz mid-liner being built at Porsche's Zuffenhausen plant on the line that once bore 959s. That the Mercedes Sindelfingen factory is already stretched is one reason for the transfer, but the main one is that creating a 500E is an unduly complex business, the bulk of its new engine forcing considerable change on its structure.

The engine bay needs to be widened to house the eight-banger, a measure which calls for reinforcement not just of the sheet steel around the motor but the floor, too. The metalwork carrying the rear suspension is beefed up as well, and four completely new wings are fitted, their flanks swollen to envelop a set of 225/55ZR16 tyres and their accompanying alloy wheels.

The body is reworked at Porsche, and is then sent to the Mercedes paint plant for a course in corrosion protection and a change of hue, before being returned to Zuffenhausen for final assembly. Changes to the entrails amount to more than the installation of the bigger engine, because the more sophisticated suspension of the SL is bolted up in favour of the standard W124 assemblies, and there are modifications to this, too.

Principle of them, and the most obvious, too, is a lowering of the ride height, by

The 326bhp V8 motor is a tight fit, requires much reworking of surrounding metalwork. Beautifully finished and presented

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almost an inch all round. Since the likelihood of the wheels running out of travel is increased, new bumpstops, designed to provide more progressive cushioning, are installed. But in a bid to avoid regularly compressing them, a self-levelling device is included in the rear axle.

The V8 motor, whose potency is the reason for all these changes, does not arrive unaltered from the SL, either: the injection system is changed (to Bosch LH-Jetronic) and longer inlet manifold pipes are fitted, bolstering the torque curve.

Inextricably linked to the engine's Jetronic feeders is the ASR (acceleration skid control) system, which is also wired to your right foot via the accelerator, and to the brakes. The whole system is said to be highly complex, and achieves an automotive first in that many of the microprocessors communicate with each other through a databus, electronic cabling that allows speedy information exchange, refining the brain's responses.

Get the 500E on a dry road, and you soon learn that they're honed to a frustratingly complete degree, in that it is next to impossible to cock the car's tail through a tight twist.

What happens instead is that the flow of power is stanchied, almost as if the car has run out of fuel. Which, in a sense, it has. It's probably a split second before drive is reinstated, but it seems an age at the time, and a frustrating one, too. You end up pussy-footing instead, trying to see how fast you can go before the bionic bore intervenes, imposing restraint whether you want it or not.

Eventually attention runs to other qualities, such as the Merc's ferocious capacity for launching itself towards the

BEYOND THE BENCH