

# BELIEVE THE HYPE

Sometimes a long dreamt of drive in a car with a big reputation can end in disappointment - not so with the mighty 500E it would appear

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**A** REPUTATION IS A DANGEROUS THING. BEING the stuff of legend is just fine – so long as that's the realm in which you stay. After all, is there really anyone or anything that entirely lives up to the hype?

Then of course there's the little problem of unreasonable expectations. When for years you've heard nothing but outpourings of praise and adulation, the expectations go up and up. After all this, the trouble is that a more intimate acquaintance is almost always going to bring disappointment. Reality has a very hard time living up to myth. And the 500E has one hell of a reputation.

I've been lucky enough to have driven just about every Mercedes model built since the war. Some have been fabulous, some a little dull, and there were just a few where I wondered what on earth all the fuss was about. But the 500E had always eluded me. Until recently that is.

I was worried that the car I was going to drive might not be the best example around and not be representative. After all, due to a sky high mileage the price was a little less than most examples offered for sale. I was concerned. I was about to pop my 500E cherry, and I wanted the earth to move – fast!

The car wasn't quite standard either. I couldn't help wondering who would dare to mess with a car that had contemporary reviewers reaching for their thesauruses in an effort to dig out yet more superlatives. So as I set off, my great expectations were tempered with a little real world scepticism.

## DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH

Perhaps it's time I cut to the chase, because the 500E is a car that takes very little time to tell you all about itself. In probably less than a minute behind the wheel you will know, without any shadow of a doubt, that this is one of the greatest cars that you've ever driven, or indeed that you're ever going to drive. Everything you've heard about the 500E is true.

The 500E is such an improbable gem. The W124 series of saloons were some of the best engineered, toughest, most durable cars ever made. A 200D taxi I rode in from Stuttgart airport a couple of years ago had a mileage on the clock that made me laugh. Something like 550,000km (over 340,000 miles) I seem to remember. It looked to have at least another 550,000km left in it. It isn't easy to think of this supremely functional >

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## JUST THE FACTS

### Mercedes-Benz 500E (W124)

Engine	M119 4,973cc V8
Power	322bhp@5,700rpm
Torque	354lb ft@3,900rpm
Transmission	4-speed auto, RWD
Weight	1,700kg
0-62mph	6.1sec
Top speed	155mph (limited)
Fuel Consumption	16mpg
Years produced	1991-1993

#### OVERVIEW

The description 'Q-Car' gets banded about a lot but the 500E/E500 is the genuine article with its advanced 322bhp 5-litre V8 engine and Porsche provenance hidden beneath almost standard W124 bodywork

Figures for a 1992 car as pictured; fuel consumption according to EEC urban cycle

▽ The W124 was never designed to hold a V8 so mods were needed.

▷ Flared wheel arches a hint to this debadged car's identity.



▷ bodysell being shared with one of the greatest driving cars of all time. The range topping 300E feels very different, with a smooth six up front and leather lined luxury within. But even driving the 300E gives no hint to the extraordinary qualities of the 500E.

The car must have caused a bit of a shock when the covers were pulled off at the Paris Mondial Autoshow in October 1990. It just wasn't the sort of thing that Mercedes did. Of course if your memory went as far back as the 300SEL 6.3 and 450SEL 6.9, there were precedents. However, the monster S-Classes had been super cruisers that were simply too big ever to have felt at home on a twisting B-road. The new offering could take super cruising in its high geared stride, but it was plainly intended to cut it just as well as a B-road brawler. The 500E was aimed squarely at the equally quick BMW M5, and was often put together with the Lotus Carlton. This really was the first generation of four-door supercars.

Another surprise was that Mercedes had gone knocking on the door of its Stuttgart

neighbour for help with building the 500E. Production took W124 shells across Stuttgart to Zuffenhausen for sheet metal modifications, then back to Sindelfingen for painting, and back again to Porsche for assembly. The connection made with Cosworth in the design and development of the 190E 2.3-16 had been improbable enough, but working with Porsche? The connection certainly didn't do

the 500E's street cred any harm, though you'll be looking in vain if you expect to find a 'Built by Porsche' badge anywhere on the car.

The specification was exotic, and there was never any doubt that this was going to be an E-Class like no other. The engine alone sees to that. An all alloy 4,973cc V8, it had four cams opening 32 valves, the inlet cams giving variable valve timing. Lifted straight from the R129



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△ Big numbers on the odometer are no struggle for the 500E.

▷ Aftermarket racing calipers peek out behind Evo II wheels.

◁ 0-62mph in 6.1 seconds is properly fast with executive looks.

500SL it shared its impressive output of 322bhp. Where the 500E scored was in being a full 100kg lighter than the SL. That's equivalent to one very hefty passenger, or indeed two whole supermodels and a small dog.

Brakes were also from the 500SL, and were later upgraded to the 600SL's specification. Wheels were 8x16, and the suspension was basically that of the SL. Perhaps the only disappointment for enthusiastic pedallers was the lack of a manual option. It was four automatic gears and that was that. In fact there was one other minor disappointment. For track use the permanent ASR traction control was found to be a little intrusive. There can be little doubt that the survival rate of 500Es would have been lower without the system. However, it didn't take long for tuners to develop an 'off' button.

On the outside it was only the wheels and a slight flare to the wheelarches that gave anything away. That flare is so subtle that you have to look hard to see the difference. The major sheet metal alterations were less visible. A V8 had never been considered in the design

of the 124 body and considerable changes had to be made to the front end. There were also modifications to the rear transmission tunnel as this was the only place found to put the catalytic converters. All 500Es have individual rear seats, as there simply wouldn't be space for a central passenger's feet. There was also some strengthening above the rear suspension.

### TASTEFUL TRIMMINGS

This side of the Venus de Milo, or Venus in Furs, there isn't much that can't be improved. In the case of this particular car the previous enthusiastic Italian owner had fitted suspension and a stainless exhaust from Carlsson, along with a special steering wheel. Enormous front brake rotors and six-piston AP racing calipers suggest track use, and show that he wasn't afraid to spend some big money on the 500E. The most obvious mods are the delicious 17-inch wheels from the later E500 Limited, as shared with the 190 Evo II.

The 500E is fast. Of course it is. Six seconds to 60, and an ability to reach 178mph without

the 155mph limiter are impressive numbers. But it's the completeness of this car that really impresses. Everything about it is just so right. The handling and feel tell you in 100 yards that there is more grip on offer than you're ever going to use on a public road. The 500E flatters. It's just so easy to drive fast. Perhaps a little too easy. A lack of acquaintance means a surprise almost every time you look at the speedo, and exemplary self control would be needed to preserve a clean licence.

Gripped by the black leather Recaros and serenaded by a perfect deep, yet sophisticated, V8 growl, this is a car it would be impossible to become blasé about. It might be a few years old, but it would simply be greedy to want for more than the 500E can give.

So just for once reality lives up to myth, and while sitting behind the wheel on a hot summer afternoon, driving Hampshire's finest B-roads, all is right with the world. ■

► Thanks to Charles Ironside Tel 01420 520635  
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