
THE SEC

Grown out of a desire to be different and a demand for speed, this cult-classic car evolved into something more than a Mercedes. It became a legend.

Words_Photos **Satish Tummala**

There are a lot of them out there. The young men of the 1960s and early '70s who drove muscle cars as if the mean machines were skull tattoos needed across their exposed biceps. A decade later when *The Real World* intruded (no, not the MTV whinefest), and phenomena known as "marriage" and "family" entered the pretty picture, these Boomer-Xers often sold their Chargers, Chevelles and Monte Carlos... but were unsure what to buy next with their admittedly bigger bank accounts.

For some, the SEC by Mercedes-Benz presented a best-of-both-worlds option. Yes, it had the safety and handling for which the German automaker is famed. But this moose was also a fat, phat two-door with some real moose-worthy balls down below. Like the Ambassador of Automobiles saying, "American Muscle Car, we'd like you to meet Mr. Benz."

Add to this double-fact that the SEC had a sort of street cred, and you have yourself a very interesting thrill ride. Go back and watch *Miami Vice* reruns if you're not convinced. You'll be amazed how many unsavory elements pimped around in SECs and SELs.

The car was introduced to America a few years before Crockett and Tubbs were in hot pursuit of it, because the 380SEC actually rolled onto these shores in the fall of 1981. Rated at 155 hp, the small V-8 was smooth and silky. But it lacked the performance prowess of its European high-compression counterpart.





Pictured throughout the story is a customized 560 SEC.



TUMMALA SEC – MODERN DAY AUTOBAHN DEMON

Our writer/photographer's SEC has been updated with an engine and other parts from the 1992 (and thereafter) models. The M119 32-valve, DOHC V-8 exhibits variable cam timing, anti-knock sensors, and digital communication between the ignition EZL and fuel-injection brain. From this conversion, horsepower has increased from 238 hp to 335 hp— without catalysts, which means it's a substantial gain to say the least. Engine dependability, efficiency and longevity have further been realized with the conversion project as have some creature comforts: one-touch windows, remote entry, true xenon lamps, DVD-based navigation system with MP3 playback capability, first-gear start transmission, sport-tuned valve body, Kevlar transmission bands, AMG 18-inch staggered wheel and exhaust improvements, a 3.07 limited-slip differential and H&R springs. The result? A modern locomotive with M-B reliability and serviceability in an ageless design. —S.T.

For Euros, a 500SEC with larger 5.0-liter SOHC V-8 was also released that year. This 231 hp motor combined with its 2.24:1 rear axle ratio made for a rocket on Europe's speed-limitless autobahns. The popularity of the 5.0-liter V8 resulted in Mercedes-Benz unveiling the 500SEC in North America in the fall of 1983 as an '84 model. Although its horsepower jumped from 155 to 188, the SEC was still less powerful than its 231 hp big bro across the Atlantic.

AMERICANS FLEX GERMAN MUSCLE CAR.

Stateside consumers wouldn't be deterred in their quest for all things European including handling and power. Many U.S. enthusiasts simply imported Version-1 500SEC.

Mercedes caught on. In 1986, it introduced the 560SEC to meet the U.S. market demand. The new 5.6-liter derivative offered Americans 238 hp and 279 lb/ft. of torque. The increase was welcome; now European 560s were available in 300 hp versions. Such variants remained elusive if not mythic and were never offered stateside because of U.S. smog regulations. The 238 hp version lasted until the end of production for the North American marketplace in 1991.

Code-named W126C, the SEC coupe (and SEL sedan) was first conceived by then-M-B chief designer Bruno Sacco. He maintained that while Mercedes had long followed a styling policy of retaining coherent lines of evolution or identity as a BENZO, the look and feel would shift some for the SEL/SEC. When this model left the drafting table, it would have exclusive styling and an unmistakable appearance.

That it did. The car was unveiled at the 1979 Motor Show in Frankfurt, Germany. The coupe derivative that hit the streets three years later was an instant sales smash, and has been a cult classic ever since. Few cars from any maker have pillarless side windows (no partition between front and rear windows when lowered) as the SEC did. This difference meant an airy feeling when all the windows were lowered and the sunroof opened, providing Yanks with the cool, carefree appeal they got accustomed to in their *American Graffiti* heyday.

During the reign of the SEC coupe, Mercedes added smooth lower panel bodywork, standard driver's and passenger's side airbags, a tilting sunroof, a more reliable climate-control system with recycle feature, an improved cruise control system, and two memory presets were available for each front passenger's seat and steering wheel. Each front passenger had the luxury of power adjustments to the front seat height, rake, recline angle, and headrest height. For the driver, the steering column was adjustable.

The SEC revolution continued until 1991, and models began offering the option of ASR traction control. Enthusiasts multiplied. They swarmed to aftermarket tuners like Brabus and Lorinser to boost horsepower and handling limits, add stylistic updates, and install custom sound systems.

"They are not just about image, but have serious

substance under that image, and in the right hands, they deliver the goods," says SEC owner and enthusiast Jim Baubel. "If you want a real highway hauler, this is one to look at."

GERMAN STRUCTURE PAVES NEED FOR SPEED.

The SEC is big. It's a two-door with rear-wheel drive and a smooth V-8. It sports that unique appearance—did we forget to mention the toothy grille?—and it holds four adults. It also boasts a large trunk, can be used year-round, is capable of cruising at 155 mph, and has a full-size spare.

You could say many of these things about any popular muscle car of the 1960s or '70s. Nearly all





these features hooked owners on their SECs.

When one factors those attributes into German construction, superb balance and road-feel, it's simple to see why the coupe has become a legend. Of course, when such an auto attracts so many car lovers, the phrase "need for speed" comes to mind. The North American marketplace never received the 300 hp version of the 5.6-liter SEC engine. As a result, modifying them became all the rage of the contemporary SEC collector.


Plus, the large two-door coupes have always been the priciest models. In turn, their owners usually had the resources to finance posh modifications. So why didn't Mercedes cater to the power-hungry masses of North American owners?

The stern fuel-economy laws in the United States. Yet Benz engineers had nonetheless built a platform for a phenomenal car.

"The car was simply 'detuned' for the marketplace," says another SEC owner and enthusiast, Max Moussalli. "So the end version of the SEC in many enthusiasts' opinion was nothing more than a bastardized version of the actual original vision by Daimler engineers succumbing to brand image and auto-economic issues in North America."

Today, SEC buffs use this SEC robust platform to make modifications for achieving modern horsepower and suspension handling characteristics. Perhaps they also use it to relive their youth, in a vicarious but no less vivid way. Who wouldn't? 🏎️



SPECS		560 SEC	
<i>U.S. Engine</i>		<i>Euro Engine (High-Compression)</i>	
○	5.6-liter V-8	○	5.6-liter V-8
○	Maximum Speed: 6000 rpm +/- 50	○	Maximum Speed: 6000 rpm +/- 50
○	Engine Output: 238 hp / 4800 rpm 287 lbs./ft. @ 3500 rpm	○	Engine Output: 300 hp / 5000 rpm 335 lbs./ft. @ 3800 rpm
○	Compression: 9:1	○	Compression: 10:1
○	Fuel Injection: BOSCH CIS-E	○	Fuel Injection: BOSCH CIS-E with with anti-knock ignition control (post-1987)
○	Fuel Type: Unleaded 91 octane	○	Fuel Type: Unleaded 93 octane
<i>Additional Features</i>		<p>“Get in, and it’s the go-go ’80s all over again. You be Crockett, I’ll be Tubbs.”</p> 	
○	Body Length: 4935 mm		
○	Overall Width: 1828 mm		
○	Overall Height: 1407 mm		
○	Wheelbase: 2845 mm		
○	Curb Weight: 1760 kg		
○	Turning Diameter: 11.55 m		
○	Transmission: 4-speed automatic with torque converter		
○	Differential Ratio: 2.47:1 (2.65 in Euro models), limited-slip	<p>“If I wanted a pimpmobile, I’d opt for the stretch SUV limo, yo.”</p> 