

PHOTOGRAPHY: DICK KELLEY

Mercedes-Benz 560SEL

The big kahuna rides again.

• It's been another long day on Wall Street. Your clients will never know what you've gone through to keep them from taking it in the neck. You loosen your tie, throw your jacket over your shoulder, and saunter down to the parking garage. Good thing you called ahead, because a dozen people are waiting, even at this late hour. The attendant wheels up a shiny new Mercedes—yours. The onlookers glance at you, then at the car, then back at you. The door thunks home and your mood begins to lift. As you ease out onto the dark street, the last thing they see is the twinkle of the three-pointed star on the rear deck. Yeah, maybe life isn't so bad after all.

This psychic payoff is brought to you by the Mercedes-Benz 560SEL, the undisputed big kahuna of European luxury sedans. At a base price of \$63,900, the 560SEL is the most expensive mass-produced four-door sedan money can buy. And there is no question of its cachet; aside from Rolls-Royce, no other big-name brand wields as much unadulterated, greenback-encrusted clout.

There's more to the 560SEL's exalted station in life, however, than a price sticker inflated to the size of a hot-air balloon. For most of the last year and a half, the 560SEL has also been the big kahuna in terms of pure performance. Until BMW's M5 and M6 sports models came along this spring, nothing in the megabuck luxury class was quicker or faster than the barrel-chested Benz. And the 560SEL isn't even trying to be a sports model. It's simply the biggest, fleetest people mover Daimler-Benz knows how to build.

"Big" in Mercedes parlance means "massive." The 560SEL stretches 208.1 inches from bumper to bumper, rides on a 120.9-inch wheelbase, and tips the scales at 4035 pounds. (The short-wheelbase SE

sedans have been retired.) Lest you think that these bargelike statistics date the seven-year-old design, consider that the latest rejoinders from BMW and Jaguar, the new 735i and XJ6, are within 150 pounds of the old M-B warhorse.

The power to make all of this steel, glass, and leather move like a howitzer shell was not available until last year. Back in the Fatherland, the Green party had maneuvered the German automakers into offering catalyst-equipped cars, so the engineers finally got serious about making big horsepower on unleaded fuel. The result was a pair of impressive all-alloy V-8s for the European S-class cars that run cleanly enough for use in American models: a 201-hp, 4.2-liter sweetheart for the 420SEL and a 238-hp, 5.5-liter powerhouse for the 560. Since U.S. and German emissions standards are now very similar, American Merc buyers get the same power levels as the European customers. What's more, the new engines make the S-class's previous top-dog V-8—the 184-hp 5.0-liter—seem like a chihuahua.

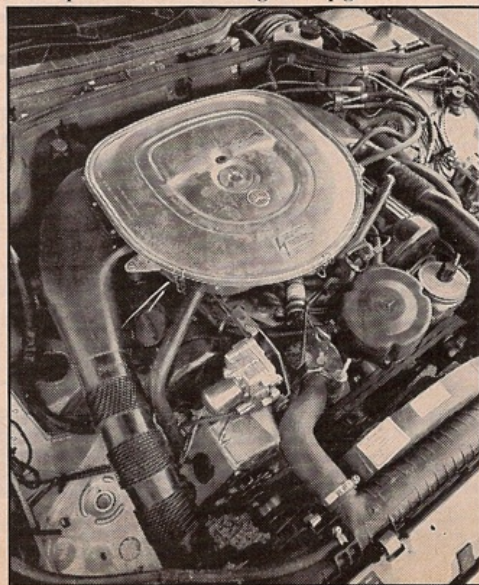
Apart from the engine upgrades and

the corresponding revisions to rear-deck nomenclature (for some reason, Daimler-Benz rounds the size of the 560's 5547cc engine up to 5.6 liters), there are only a few changes since we last checked on the big Merc. The new bits include fifteen-inch wheels and tires and more aerodynamic—but still ungainly—headlamps. The interior has been doled an electrically powered telescoping steering column, and the climate control has been improved. The S-class received ABS brakes and SRS (self-tensioning front seatbelts and a driver's-side air bag) back in 1985, so all the latest safety gear has been on board for some time.

What this adds up to is a heady blend of quality and quantity. The fit and finish are nothing short of extraordinary. Inside the leather-lined cabin, each passenger is treated royally. Every amenity is present and accounted for. The rear seat is fitted with a power recliner and is electrically heated. Rear legroom is past big-car and closing in on limousine. Front-seat riders get firm, wide, bun-warmer buckets with Mercedes' magic seat-shaped power controls. With the new adjustable steering column—long overdue—there's no excuse for not finding a perfect driving position.

The 560SEL moves like a blue blood, too. At sedate, after-dinner speeds, the SEL glides along as if its every part were coated with Teflon. The engine is as smooth as Kentucky bourbon, and the transmission would die of embarrassment if you noticed it shifting. At 70 mph, the SEL is one of the quietest cars we've ever tested, with a noise reading of just 66 dBA. Only the solid *thwack!* of expansion joints and pavement cracks intrudes. Overall, the 560SEL's bearing is regal, and we don't mean Buick.

If the spirit moves you, you can also raise a little high-class hell in a 560SEL. Just depress the right pedal and hold. The





big Mercedes lunges off the line and leaps to 60 mph in a scant 7.0 seconds, sears the quarter-mile in just 15.5 seconds at 90 mph, and climbs up, up, all the way up to 140 mph before it levels off. A 5.0-liter, port-fuel-injected Camaro IROC-Z with a five-speed will not be able to keep up, should you deem to engage one in a speed contest.

The 560SEL does a couple of other things remarkably well, too. Its ABS brakes haul it down from 70 mph in just 185 feet, and it generates 0.78 g on the skidpad—no small accomplishments, considering the car's spindly 205/65VR-15 tires.

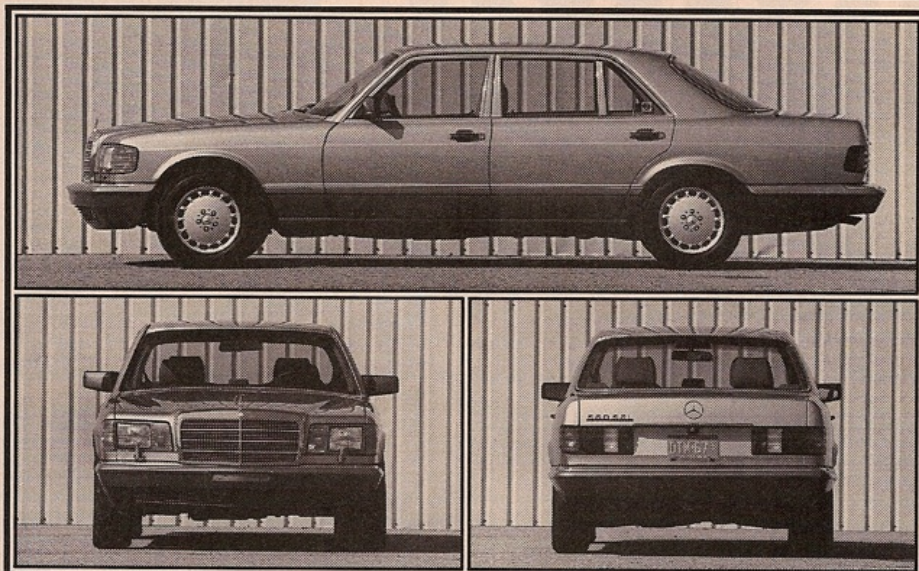
On the autobahn—er, highway—the 560 lopes along at license-revocation speed the way your average Chevy goes down the road at 65 mph. It's that relaxed. Only in aggressive back-road driving does the 560SEL feel out of its element. Its supple suspension soaks up the big lumps beautifully, but the list angles are enough to scare a seasoned seaman. Ignore the vast body roll and push on to the absolute limit and you'll find that the Merc has a taste for lurid tail-out slides in fast sweepers. Going sideways in 64,000 bucks' worth of sedan isn't our idea of a day at the beach.

Aside from that, our complaints are few. The rear edge of our test car's sunroof popped up at 130 mph, which we suspect is not what the factory intended. And even Mercedes hasn't figured out how to build a big, fast car that's not thirsty. The 560's 13-mpg EPA city rating earns it a \$1500 gas-guzzler tax.

Any negatives, however, pale to insignificance after even a short exposure to the 560SEL. Its effect is almost druglike, and anyone who appreciates fine automobiles will want one fix after another. Sure, the 560SEL costs a fortune, but given its sheer bulk, its room, its appointments, its quality, and its performance, it's probably worth about four times as much as your average twelve-grand sedan.

Of course, this is Mercedes we're dealing with, so you can expect to pay even more than the 560SEL is worth. But in this price range, what's a few bucks between kahunas?

—Rich Ceppos



Vehicle type: front-engine, rear-wheel-drive, 5-passenger, 4-door sedan

Price as tested: \$65,400

Options on test car: base Mercedes-Benz 560SEL, \$63,900; gas-guzzler tax, \$1500

Standard accessories: power steering, windows, seats, locks, and sunroof, A/C, cruise control, rear defroster

Sound system: Becker Grand Prix Electronic AM/FM-stereo radio/cassette, 4 speakers

ENGINE

Type V-8, aluminum block and heads
Bore x stroke 3.80 x 3.73 in, 96.5 x 94.8mm
Displacement 338 cu in, 5547cc
Compression ratio 9.0:1
Fuel system Bosch KE-III-Jetronic fuel injection
Emissions controls 3-way catalytic converter, feedback fuel-air-ratio control
Valve gear chain-driven single overhead cams, hydraulic lifters
Power (SAE net) 238 bhp @ 4800 rpm
Torque (SAE net) 287 lb-ft @ 3500 rpm

DRIVETRAIN

Transmission 4-speed automatic
Final-drive ratio 2.47:1, limited slip
Gear Ratio Mph/1000 rpm Max. test speed
I 3.68 8.1 49 mph (6000 rpm)
II 2.41 12.4 74 mph (6000 rpm)
III 1.44 20.7 124 mph (6000 rpm)
IV 1.00 30.0 140 mph (4700 rpm)

DIMENSIONS AND CAPACITIES

Wheelbase 120.9 in
Track, F/R 61.2/60.1 in
Length 208.1 in
Width 71.7 in
Height 56.3 in
Frontal area 23.6 sq ft

Ground clearance 5.9 in
Curb weight 4035 lb
Weight distribution, F/R 53.8/46.2%
Fuel capacity 23.8 gal
Oil capacity 8.0 qt
Water capacity 14.1 qt

CHASSIS/BODY

Type unit construction with 2 rubber-isolated crossmembers
Body material welded steel stampings

INTERIOR

SAE volume, front seat 51 cu ft
rear seat 47 cu ft
trunk space 15 cu ft
Front seats bucket
Seat adjustments fore and aft, seatback angle, front height, rear height
General comfort poor fair good excellent
Fore-and-aft support poor fair good excellent
Lateral support poor fair good excellent

SUSPENSION

F: ind, unequal-length control arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar
R: ind, semi-trailing arm, coil springs, anti-roll bar

STEERING

Type recirculating ball, power-assisted
Turns lock-to-lock 3.0
Turning circle curb-to-curb 40.6 ft

BRAKES

F: 11.8 x 1.1-in vented disc
R: 11.0 x 0.4-in disc
Power assist vacuum with anti-lock control

WHEELS AND TIRES

Wheel size 7.0 x 15 in
Wheel type cast aluminum
Tires Michelin MXV, 205/65VR-15
Test inflation pressures, F/R 38/38 psi

CAR AND DRIVER TEST RESULTS

ACCELERATION

Seconds
Zero to 30 mph 2.6
40 mph 3.8
50 mph 5.3
60 mph 7.0
70 mph 9.3
80 mph 12.0
90 mph 15.5
100 mph 19.6
110 mph 25.6
120 mph 36.7
Top-gear passing time, 30–50 mph 3.8
50–70 mph 5.0
Standing ¼-mile 15.5 sec @ 90 mph
Top speed 140 mph

BRAKING

70–0 mph @ impending lockup 185 ft
Fade none moderate heavy

HANDLING

Roadholding, 300-ft-dia skidpad 0.78 g
Understeer minimal moderate excessive

COAST-DOWN MEASUREMENTS

Road horsepower @ 30 mph 6 hp
50 mph 17 hp
70 mph 37 hp

FUEL ECONOMY

EPA city driving 13 mpg
EPA highway driving 16 mpg
C/D observed fuel economy 13 mpg

INTERIOR SOUND LEVEL

Idle 41 dBA
Full-throttle acceleration 75 dBA
70-mph cruising 66 dBA
70-mph coasting 66 dBA