

INSIDE AMG

(Mostly) serious cars for (mostly) serious people

We've seen the AMG look: Mercedes-Benz's or BMW's done up in Eurotech monochrome—preferably black or white—including rubber molding, chrome trim and wheel rims. Besides the custom color treatment, the full body package includes fender flares, front and rear spoiler-airdams, side skirts and custom wheel-tire packages.

That's the AMG look, now with more active copiers than there are Cobra replica makers; But AMG is far more than a style-become-a-trend. A close look at the AMG plant in Affalterbach, a tiny village about 20 minutes outside Stuttgart, shows an impressive, 140-employee industry that combines aspects of Holman & Moody, Shelby American, and an individual automotive custom-tailoring service with no real American counterpart.

Seeing that no one in the United States is doing exactly what it does, AMG plans to fill the gap.

"Our motto," says engineer Alfred Bajohr, like AMB founder and owner Hans-Werner Aufricht, a former Mercedes-Benz engineering staffer, "is serious cars for serious people."

The AMG customer product range encompasses the 360bhp 5.6liter V8-powered Jabberwock 300-series sedan I drove, stretch-bodied, bullet-proofed, customer-painted leather-lamb's wool, rootwood and solid gold interior-trimmed 560SEs, souped-up V8-powered G-model Mercedes-Benzes (the M-B 4wd off-road Range Rover type vehicle) for luxury, full powered falcon hunting in Middle Eastern oil states.

Not all these cars seem serious. Nor do some of the customers seem to qualify for that description. A tour through the engine dynamometer room (one chassis dyno for rear-wheel horsepower, two static dynos in a NASA-grade booth for computer monitoring of vital functions under operating stress), the milling and boring machinery for producing AMG designed four-valve heads for 5.0liter M-B V8s

makes the point.

"Our customers expect the traditional Mercedes-Benz quality, luxury and absolute reliability," Bajohr says, "in addition to the added power, performance and styling we offer."

Occupying 100,000sq ft of industrial space, AMG has come a long way from its start as a two-man Mercedes-Benz hotrod-ding operation co-founded by Hans-Werner Aufricht in 1967. Like a Mercedes-Benz counterpart to the Kremer Brothers of Porsche racing fame, AMG began with engine and suspension modifications, and focused on racing engines for Mercedes-Benzes in European saloon racing. They still do. It is the competition-bred engineering refinement, applied to street-performance modification packages, which are the basis for the quality reputation AMG strives for.

That reputation crosses the Atlantic under recently announced plans to expand the US distribution network. Since 1981, only AMG of North America and AMG West, a subsidiary of Beverly Hills Motoring Accessories, have been authorized distributors. The new system adds regional warehouses in Fort Lauderdale, Dallas and New York City, with plans for 75 subdistributors in major metropolitan areas. Subdistributors will be able to order parts from either the warehouse or direct from the AMG factory, while sending their personnel for training either in Chicago or West Germany.

AMG of North America president Richard Buxbaum notes the expansion is from two outlets to 80 and says, "the numbers prove that the 'Eurotech' look AMG created has gone beyond that of a trend. We believe it's here to stay."

There's more than a look to the AMG operation, though.

"We produce a competition engine for the 190SE in European saloon racing," says AMG executive Dominguez Piedade, Aufricht's right-hand man. "We are also producing a boat-racing motor based on the

four-valve head 5.6liter V8, in a 500bhp version, to compete with Lamborghini in unlimited powerboat racing."

Piedade, Bajohr and Aufricht point out AMG's forward-edge research and development of performance technology, some of which they hope to see adopted, eventually, by Mercedes-Benz.

"As a much smaller company," Piedade says, "we can move faster and try things that are not practical for a company the size of Mercedes-Benz, but which can nevertheless be adopted if they prove successful." As an example, he points to the Volkswagen 16valve four-cylinder head originally developed by Oettinger, now available as a factory option.

"The infrastructure of Stuttgart is very good for our needs," Aufricht says. "Mahle and Bosch, besides Mercedes-Benz (not to mention Porsche) are located here, so the tools for our research and development programs are close by and easily available."

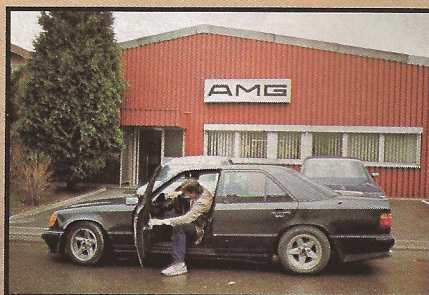
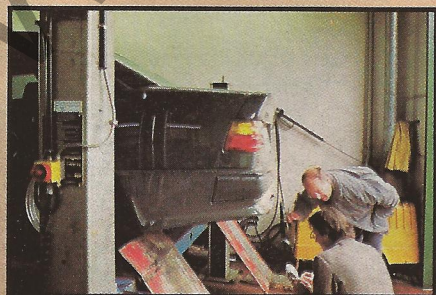
AMG's most obvious problem is image, not unusual for a company whose image became a trend embraced by customers AMG could do without. Like the TV villain customers who drive AMG-style Mercedes-Benz's on *Miami Vice*. The mention of the show brings ironic smiles from Aufricht and Piedade, both immaculately tailored and groomed men, both well attuned to the current popular tastes in the car's varied national markets.

"Our cars were very popular as gigolo cars (I think his word gigolo is our word 'pimp') a couple of seasons ago," says Piedade. "This year, Camaro IROC Z-28s seem to be the popular make, and in Italy, the Jeep or the Samurai and the Lancia Thema Turbo."

"For some reason," Herr Aufricht says, "our cars have become identified with the underworld element in Japan. There is nothing we can do about that."

Such is the price of success.

— D.B.



Ginger Neumann photos