

WHEN LESS MEANS MORE

Sound examples of the 124-series coupé are becoming both increasingly affordable and increasingly sought-after.

David Sutherland discovers why.



Main: Pillarless windows and chunky C-pillars are Mercedes coupé trademarks.

Below: Two-door W124 is a more graceful and characterful car than its four-door brother.

Mercedes	220KE	230KE	300KE	320KE
ENGINE	4/2194cc	4/2299cc	6/2962cc	6/3199cc
POWER	150bhp@5500	136bhp@5100	188bhp@5700	220bhp@5500
TORQUE	155lb/ft@4000	151lb/ft@3500	192lb/ft@4400	229lb/ft@3750
0-62MPH	10.5 sec	10.4 sec	8.4 sec	7.8 sec
TOP SPEED	128mph	124mph	139mph	144mph
FINAL NEW PRICE	£33,250	£29,187	£38,980	£47,749



The cynical view of coupés is that they're less car for more money, aimed at those with vain rather than practical needs. Well, that analysis may apply to some of the more hastily-conceived coupés that have graced – or disgraced – the world down the years, but hardly to any Mercedes.

Like the rest, Mercedes charges you more – no, a lot more – and gives you two fewer doors and a less spacious rear seat. Yet, in this case, less is more. A Mercedes coupé takes on an almost entirely different character from the saloon it's derived from.

It's hard to be precise about what makes any Merc coupé so superior. Perhaps it's the discreet yet slightly sexy styling; maybe it's the known thoroughness of the engineering that makes it more than just a re-bodied saloon. Perhaps it's simply the exclusivity of the car. Somehow, a Mercedes coupé is one of the few that those of a certain age can and do drive without fear of ridicule.

Mercedes went to town on coupés in the 1980s, with two separate four-seaters on the price list by 1987: the vast but gloriously-proportioned W126 S-Class SEC, and the W124, smaller but still with plenty of presence.

"A MERCEDES COUPÉ TAKES ON AN ALMOST ENTIRELY DIFFERENT CHARACTER FROM THE SALOON IT'S DERIVED FROM"

The multiplicity of coupés continued into the 1990s, with a new (if less good-looking) S-Class introduced in 1992, and running until 1999 when it was replaced by the CL range, by which time the C-Class-derived CLK had been around for a couple of years.

SECONDHAND VALUES

You'll probably be well aware that Mercedes-Benzes don't age like most other cars. After a decade, if maintained correctly, they look nicely run in. And that's reflected in values, which can still be high – very high in the case of coupés.

However Mercedes coupé values do eventually obey the laws of gravity. It was probably about five years after production ceased that SECs became affordable. They are now to be seen for £5000 or less, although this is temptation of biblical intensity. The feeling among classic car watchers is that good SECs are at or near the bottom of their depreciation curve, and must rise before long.

The latest Mercedes coupé to begin looking affordable is the W124. It was built from 1987 to 1996, and eight years on there are plenty on the market at £5000-£10,000, with older and rougher examples sliding towards £3000.

If you've always fancied buying a W126 SEC but are worried about the complexity and potentially horrendous running costs, the E-Class



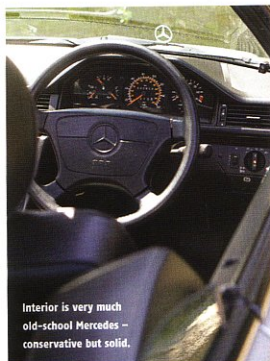
Clockwise from top left: On the move the W124 coupé is solid rather than stimulating; dropping all the windows gets some air into the cabin and is next-best to a convertible; six-cylinder cars offer refinement and status befitting a car of this nature; shape is conservative but manages to cleverly blend the modern and the classic in equal measure.

model could be a sensible compromise. Think of it as the same thing but on a more manageable scale: a similar style of pillar-less body and more or less comparable equipment spec, but four and six-cylinder engines rather than big thirsty V8s, and a car that's likely to be newer and with fewer big repairs looming.

Mercedes Enthusiast ran a full W124 Coupé/Cabriolet Buyer's Guide in the October 2002 issue, so we won't give a blow-by-blow account of range or evolution. As far as early cars are concerned, your choice is basically the four-cylinder 136bhp 230CE or the six-cylinder 3.0-litre 300CE. All six-pot cars came with four-speed automatic gearbox, and most if not all 230CEs did too, even it was listed as an £835 option.

In 1989 the 300CE-24 arrived, running a four-valves-per-cylinder 3.0-litre engine with 217bhp, and both models gained plastic cladding on the lower doors, which, if questionable aesthetically, at least provided protection against stone chipping. By the time production gave way to the CLK in 1996, the 230CE was the E220 with a 16-valve 2.2-litre 150bhp engine and the 300CE the 3.2-litre 220bhp E320. Two years before that the body had been mildly facelifted, one easily spotted identifier of a later car being the three-pointed star on the bonnet rather than the grille.

"WOULD IT SATISFY THOSE WHO REALLY WANT AN SEC BUT HAVEN'T THE BOTTLE TO TAKE ONE ON?"



Interior is very much old-school Mercedes - conservative but solid.

THE PICK OF THE RANGE

So what sort of car is the W124 coupé to drive? Does it still feel modern or, in the light of the new generation of more aggressively styled Mercedes, does it seem to belong to a past, more staid era? And, would it satisfy those who really want an SEC but haven't the bottle to take one on?

We were driving what has to be one of the nicest E320s around, from the stock of classic and modern Mercedes specialist, Silver Arrows in Putney. A 1995, M-registered car, it benefited from the facelift improvements including twin airbags, and carried leather, electrically adjusted driver's seat, air-conditioning and an electric sunroof.

It didn't have the optional five-speed automatic, but Silver Arrows' Michael Lavers argues that you're better off without it, because it doesn't make a huge difference to the way the car drives, but is more costly to rebuild if there's trouble. The silver, 39,000-mile car, with full service history, was being offered at £13,950.

To sit in this E320 is to leave behind the modern generation of Mercedes cars, with their wind-tunnel slants and curves, and soft-touch interiors, and return to a previous Mercedes era. The E320's cabin is not so different to a Mercedes of a decade or more before it. The instrumentation is formal, the yellow and white needles

HOW MUCH TO PAY?

Look at our 'Mercedes for sale' adverts at the back of this magazine, and visit the *Auto Trader* website, and you'll find a decent selection of W124 coupés, possibly at lower prices than you might have expected. There are usually some around for £3000-£4000, mostly 230CEs with six-figure mileages.

Tempted? You may well strike lucky and find something that's leggy but sound. However there is a strong argument that spending more on a decent car is a better long-term strategy. "The cars in best condition are always the cheapest ones," insists Silver Arrows' Michael Lavers, "because once you've bought one you don't have to do much to it."

It's easy to define the 'best' cars: they're the facelifted E320s from 1994 on, and with verified mileage and full service history, possibly still being looked after by a Mercedes main dealer. For these you'll pay between £10,000 and £15,000.

There are some modified cars around, perhaps AMG-look, and early cars dressed up to look like 1994 facelift models. Learn the golden rule: a modified Mercedes is rarely worth more than a standard one, possibly less. Check out the price guide below:

£3000-£5000 1987-89 230CE, 280CE, six-figure mileage, don't expect service history

£5000-£7500 1989-91 300CE 24v, average condition, last of 230CEs (1992)

£7500-£10,000 first E220s (1994), last of pre-facelift 320CEs

£10,000-£15,000 top condition facelifted E220s and E320s, full history and sub-50,000 miles

and markings a recognisable Benz trademark. So too is the large steering wheel, the single column stalk (which, frankly, has too many controls loaded on to it), the neat array of minor switches, and the awkward hand/foot-operated parking brake.

There's a wonderful quality of construction evident all over the cabin, whether it's the classically looking hide of the seats, the perfectly fitted Zebrano veneer cappings on doors and centre console, or the switches that click with a solid, crisp action. It's been said so often and it's true: Mercs of previous years simply feel more durable, even if current ones may be just as well built.

Mind you, the debate over whether Mercedes quality is wobbling is nothing new. At the time of the coupé's international launch in the summer of 1987, Stuttgart found itself severely embarrassed when a bunch of Cologne taxi drivers took to the streets complaining about a multitude of problems on their 200 diesels, which they felt were due to manufacturing problems. It couldn't have been coincidence that the uproar - which Mercedes-Benz was reluctant to admit was taking place - came at a time when its car production was fast rising to break the two million barrier.

FAMILIAR CABIN COMFORT

If the E320 has the aura of a scaled-down SEC on the outside, the resemblance inside is even more marked. The fascia and switches are not the same, but they don't seem much different. Glance back, and you follow the same continuous waistline to the rear of the cabin, which is smaller than that of the SEC, but probably not by much.

And with its bigger brother, everything about the E320 is centred on making it a relaxing drive.

"IF YOU FANCY A FOUR-SEAT MERC COUPÉ, THIS HAS TO BE THE BEST AND MOST SENSIBLE BUY AT THE MOMENT"

The driving position is perfect, and if the seats initially feel a little shapeless, they locate you well, especially if the car has the optional electric adjuster control next to the door handle. The seat-belt buckle automatically slides out to greet you.

The engine fires up quietly and smoothly, and a dose of throttle sees the straight-six deliver seamless and unobtrusive acceleration. You could hardly say the E320 feels fast but it immediately puts the four-cylinder cars, with their undistinguished engines, to shame.

The E320 seems to have magical powers to make you want to drive in a considered and less frantic way than you might otherwise. It's not

just the sweet engine and automatic gearbox (with economy/sport settings, but it doesn't make a big difference), as the chassis has a lot to do with. The ride is on the firm side, but

you waft along, bumps absorbed without drama. The steering is vague and has little feel but, at the same time, the recirculating ball system keeps road shocks from your fingertips.

The W124 coupé offers its rear passengers a reasonable deal, enabling two average-sized people to sit in the back without the front occupants having to bring their seats forward.

If you fancy a four-seat Merc coupé, this has to be the best and most sensible buy at the moment. It has much of the enduring style of the SEC but should trouble your wallet less. It has the traditional Mercedes feel, yet is still relatively modern. Buy one with six cylinders, plenty of spec and a decent history, and you'll have not only a richly rewarding car, but one that may soon become an appreciating classic. Enjoy one while you can.

Thanks to **Silver Arrows Automobiles**, south-west London TEL 020 8789 8525 or [WEB www.silverarrows.co.uk](http://www.silverarrows.co.uk)



Clockwise from above: Facelifted coupés get flush boot lid and clear indicators; dials are logical and easy to read; six-cylinder 320 is very smooth, refined and powerful.