

three pointed stars

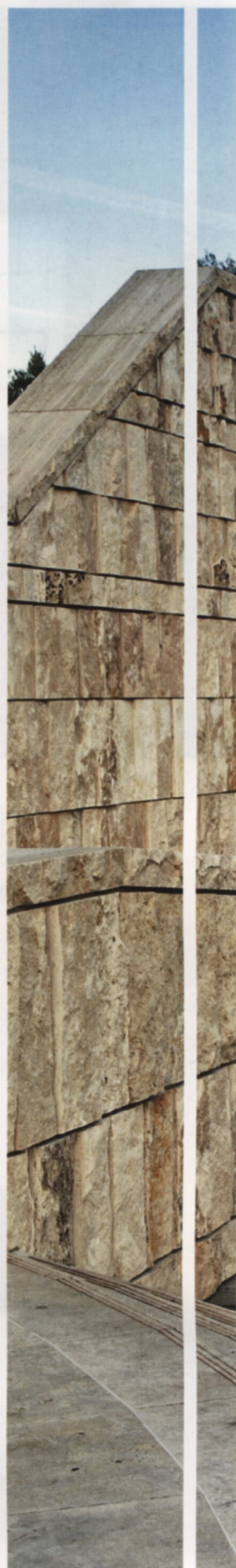
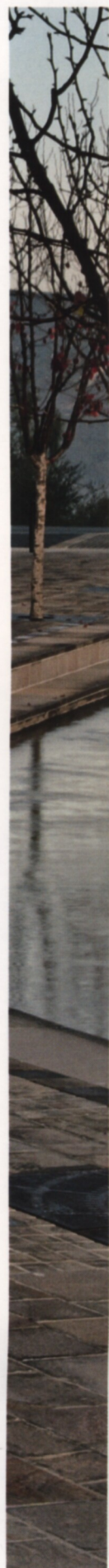
MERCEDES-BENZ WAS IN THE SUPERSEDAN
BAHNSTURMER BUSINESS LONG BEFORE AMG

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Front left: 300SEL 6.3 Front right: 6.9 Rear: 500E



<MERCEDES-BENZ 300SEL 6.3 / 7.6.9 / 500E> <DRIVE>



1971 MERCEDES-BENZ 300SEL 6.3

SPECIFICATIONS Engine 386.4-

cu-in./6332cc SOHC V-8, Bosch

mechanical port fuel injection **Power**

and torque (SAE gross) 300 hp @ 4000

rpm, 434 lb-ft @ 2800 rpm **Drivetrain**

four-speed automatic, RWD **Brakes**

front: vented disc; rear: vented disc

Suspension front: control arms, air

springs, anti-roll bar; rear: swing-arms,

air springs, adj. shocks, anti-roll bar

Dimensions L: 196.9 in.,

W: 71.3 in., H: 55.5 in. **Weight** 3828 lb

Performance 0-60 mph: 7.0 sec (w/four

on board) *Motor Trend*, June 1968

Price when new \$10,000

RESTORING/MAINTAINING:

Engineered and built to last, but you'll be constantly chasing a worn-out example.

Parts supply good, well supported by Mercedes-Benz. Several body panels and some trim can be sourced from cheaper models. Wood/leather interior will increase cabin-restoration costs.

BEWARE: Air-suspension bags age, leak, and die; brutally expensive to put right. Mechanical fuel injection also long-lived but costly to restore.

EXPECT TO PAY: Concours ready:

\$35,000-\$40,000; solid driver: \$20,000;

tired runner: \$8000

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OUR TAKE

THEN: I consider the 6.3-liter Mercedes to be the safest, fastest, and most comfortable four-door sedan made today,

in view of the fantastic speeds you can achieve in full safety and relaxation.—

Bernard Cahier, Motor Trend, June 1968

NOW: The German equivalent of a 1967 Chevy Impala post sedan wearing dog-dish hubcaps, yet packing a 427 big-block. An expensive piece to own and drive, but satisfying in a subtle manner.

IT'S A FORMULA

as old as the musclecar itself: Stick a big engine in a car smaller than it was intended for, and the result goes faster. The first Pontiac GTO. The Shelby Cobra. A skateboard with a motorcycle engine. You know the deal.

If any company has the recipe nailed these days, it's Mercedes-Benz. Drive a 493-horsepower SL55 AMG and you'll understand. Drive the twin-turbo V-12-powered CL65 AMG, which ripples out 738 pound-feet of torque, and you'll really understand. Even the pint-size SLK55 AMG roadster boasts a 355-horse, 5.4-liter V-8; it looks like a kitty but roars like the MGM lion. If the bits are mixed right, the handling, braking, appearance, lux factor, and exclusivity get sexed up to match the dragstrip prowess.

Everyone's gotten used to Mercedes offering an AMG version of nearly every platform it makes. But the practice of big V-8 power hiding in a conservative German four-door predates the company's purchase of previously independent performance tuner and race team Aufrecht Melcher Grossaspach in 1999. The first example was the 300SEL 6.3.

Remember the old W109 chassis Benz? Staid. Upright. Boring to look at, if nice to drive. The workaday 250/280/300 S/SE/SEL versions were powered by Mercedes's sturdy inline-sixes. The semi-rare 3.5s and 4.5s got V-8s, sized to match the labels. But 6526 long-wheelbase (SEL) W109s, built between late 1967 and the end of the 1972 model run, were injected with the M100-series 6.3-liter SOHC V-8 borrowed from the engine compartment of the 600 limo.

It wasn't so much the 300 gross horsepower that impressed; it was the 434 pound-feet of torque that got the car moving. A four-speed automatic transmission with a gated floor shifter was the only transmission choice. Another important techno touch was an air-suspension system. High-pressure airbags replaced conventional steel springs, the goal being improved ride quality. The rears leveled the car when it was loaded heavily or towing a trailer. Larger vented discs, beefier high-speed rolling stock, and a structurally stiffened chassis also were among the mechanical upgrades.

As the 6.3 was the company's top mainstream offering (the low-volume 600 fills a spot that today is occupied by Maybach), it benefited from every upgrade Mercedes could muster. Leather-trimmed seats were standard, and genuine burled walnut covered the dash, A-pillars, and several other interior surfaces. Power windows and vacuum-operated door locks, a Behr A/C unit, and Webasto sunroof were standard.

Simply put, it was the fastest production four-door available at that time, with a 0-to-60 time of less than seven seconds and a top speed on the strong side of 135. It would turn its tail on many sports cars of the day, and no sedan—with the possible exception of a manual-trans Maserati Quattroporte—could keep up with it. Contemporary stories of 6.3s running 120 on the German autobahns for hours on end are numerous.

When the streamlined W116-platformed S-Class



came along in 1972 (as the 450SE and SEL in America), it made the old Benz look Paleolithic. The new sedan was longer, lower, wider, and the design left the 1950s and 1960s behind. It was a few years before Mercedes put the 450SEL on protein powder, but the recipe was much the same, and it was worth the wait. Launched in 1975, the newly crowned 6.9 used an updated version of the 6.3's engine, punched out to 6.9 liters, good for 281 SAE net horsepower and 405 pound-feet of torque. Remember, this was just after the first gas hoax of 1973, and just about the time power ratings were hitting new lows, as carmakers struggled to deal with emissions and fuel-economy requirements. So this kind of punch was astounding; the 6.9 outgunned even the new Porsche 930 Turbo and had more than 100 horses on the 1975 Corvette.

The differences were subtle, maintaining the previous car's sleeper nature, yet adding an ominous presence. The bumper caps were unique, wheels and tires were bigger, and the rear seats grew headrests to match the fronts. The suspension was replaced with an even more complicated hydropneumatic design, in the name of even more sophisticated ride and handling. The final touch on U.S. models? One badge, mounted on the passenger side of the trunklid, simply denoting "6.9." It made sense to put the car's single identifier on the tail. That's the view most people got.

As with its predecessor, the cabin had the works: Lots of real wood trim, textured leather-trimmed orthopedic seats (with those wonderful pictogram adjuster switches on the door panels), power sunroof/windows/locks, and automatic climate control are just some of the 6.9's amenities. It wasn't any faster than its predecessor, due to increased weight and the challenges presented by emission controls. But when a 6.9's high beams heated up your rearview mirror, you moved to the right. Some 7380 examples were produced worldwide, with perhaps a fourth of them coming here.

Big V-8s were standard fare by the time the 6.9 went





MERCEDES-BENZ 300SEL 6.3

1978 MERCEDES-BENZ 6.9

SPECIFICATIONS Engine 417.0-cu-in./6834cc SOHC V-8, Bosch mechanical port fuel injection **Power and torque** (SAE net) 281 hp @ 4250 rpm, 405 lb-ft @ 3000 rpm **Drivetrain** three-speed automatic **Brakes** front: vented disc; rear: vented disc **Suspension** front: control arms, coil and hydropneumatic air springs, anti-roll bar; rear: semi-trailing arms, coil and hydro-pneumatic springs, anti-roll bar

Dimensions L: 199.2 in., W: 73.6 in., H: 55.5 in. **Weight** 4260 lb (mfr) **Performance** 0-60 mph: 7.3 sec (mfr), quarter mile: 17.1 sec @ 90 mph (MT, January 1980)

Price when new \$51,000 (1979)

RESTORING/MAINTAINING: Many components can be sourced from standard 450SEL. M100 E69 engine is sturdy, but expensive to rebuild once worn out.

Automatic climate control can be finicky.

BWARE: As with earlier 6.3, the two main costly-to-rebuild issues are the fuel-injection system and the suspension, which is hydropneumatic on the 6.9.

EXPECT TO PAY: Concours ready: \$20,000-\$25,000; solid driver: \$15,000; tired runner: \$7500

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OUR TAKE

THEN: The masses will know it's a car for the rich, but not necessarily for the rich who like to go fast in the best sedan this side of Alpha Centauri.—*Ro McGonegal, Motor Trend, January 1980*

NOW: There's something strange about a car with this much presence and performance costing less than a new V-6 Camry. It's another sleeper; most won't know it isn't just a clean old 450—until you blow by them at 140.



out of production at the end of 1979, replaced by the new 126-platform S-Class in 1980. The mainstream 500SEL, and particularly the later 560, performed well by the standards of the day, negating the need for a limited-production, big-motored version. But then that pesky, cross-country rival from Munich—BMW—began producing a ripped midsize sedan called the M5. It drew more applause than Mercedes-Benz may have cared for.

Whether Mercedes-Benz responded directly or by coincidence isn't clear, but the result, launched in the U.S. in 1992, was called the 500E. It's unusual in at least two ways. As the 500E predated the later, mainstream-produced 400E, it was the first midsize Mercedes-Benz powered by a V-8. And Mercedes-Benz engaged a Stuttgart local—Porsche—to aid in its design, engineering, and production. The sturdy W124 platform was strengthened structurally, the engine cradle revised, and the trans tunnel widened. It put on some weight in the process: Between the chassis bolstering, larger rolling stock, and high equipment levels, a 500E weighs about 400 pounds more than a six-cylinder 300E. No biggie, as it had more than enough grunt to compensate.

The engine was a 5.0-liter version of Mercedes new all-aluminum, DOHC, four-valve/cylinder V-8. Packing 10.0:1 compression and a 6000-rpm redline, it spooled out 322 horsepower (the engine was rerated at 315 beginning in 1993). It was backed by a four-speed automatic transmission. Porsche was involved in the design of the suspension, too, which included revised geometry, stiffer springing, load leveling at the rear, and 0.9-inch-lower ride height. Beefier 16-inch wheels replaced the standard 15s, and the battery was relocated to the trunk. In the tradition of the 6.3 and 6.9, exterior mods were subtle, limited to a revised front fascia and flared fenders. The E-Class's straightforward cabin got the usual treatment: more leather and wood and all the power goodies Mercedes offered at the time.

Porsche assembled the 500E in the same facility previously used for its 959 supercar. Bodies in white were shipped to the Roessle-Bau assembly plant for stiffening and modification. They were then sent back to Mercedes's Sindelfingen factory for painting. Then they were schlepped back to Roessle-Bau for final assembly, including installation of the Mercedes-built powertrains. No wonder 500Es cost \$80 grand.

Zero-to-60 mph occurs in the low six-second range; it has midrange passing power that'll make easy work of any gun-and-run maneuver and an electronically limited top speed of 155. Urban legend holds that, if the electronics were unplugged, the 500E would hit 170. It lived three short years, being phased out at the end of 1994. 10,479 were built, including a special run of E60 AMG models, which signaled that the relationship between the parent company and the then-independent tuner had begun to tighten. About 1500 500Es were imported to our market.

To best understand how the genre evolved, we boarded the 6.3 first. Sliding into this upright sedan is like taking the helm of a proud, old motor yacht. There's a wonderful sense of hand-hewn quality about it. The steering wheel

is huge, the dash is expansive, and the satin-varnished walnut fascias add warmth. Chrome, stainless steel, and bright surfaces gleam. The seats are large, comfy, and supportive. Some of the switchgear is mismatched and haphazardly placed, and the clock is off center with the two main gauges, all of which strikes us as odd in a German automobile. But overall, it's a handsome cabin, looking more a product of the 1950s than the 1960s.

The M100 V-8 idles and gurgles out the sounds of an expensive motorboat, too. Mat the pedal, and any notion of day cruisers is replaced with the pull of a 1960s musclecar. The sub-seven-second 0-to-60 run is no lie, and it pulls well and strong to 100. The transmission shifts smoothly, and although the ratios are set far apart, the engine's ample torque curve can cover the spread. The 6.3's blunt nose versus the wind means aerodynamics begin to slow forward progress around the century mark, but we see no reason this thing wouldn't run a buck-ten all day long. It corners far better than any American sedan of the day, with more steering feel, too, although there's a fair amount of body roll. You can feel the air suspension doing its thing, as the ride is supple, but without the heaving and bounding exhibited by a car with too-soft springs.

If the 6.3 looked and felt vintage when new, the 6.9 seems as modern as tomorrow. The interior has less chrome and a bit more black plastic than that of its predecessor, but feels more harmoniously designed. The white-over-black gauges are easy to read, although there's still plenty of wood and leather to go around. What isn't leather is MB-Tex, a high-quality textured vinyl that looks like it'll last forever. The stretched-wheelbase SEL platform means plenty of legroom, front and rear.

This engine is quieter than the 6.3's and doesn't feel as quick, although in reality, it is. Some of this impression is due to the taller gearing and even smoother ride. But in no time, you've passed 60, then 80; 100 still feels like loafing. The 6.9's high-speed stability inspires confidence; this is a trait Mercedes AMG cars have since become known for. The trans shifts lazily, as perhaps this example's internals are aging. The steering wheel is smaller than the earlier car's, but still feel bus-like in your hands. There's a bit of off-center slop in the steering, but once the car takes a set, there's good feedback from the road. No complaints in the braking department. These binders are superior to anything offered at the time and, other than not having ABS, feel up to the job today. Our only gripe is that the suspension is too ride-biased for fast running. A 6.9, built on the short-wheelbase platform (thus saving a few hundred pounds) with modern 17- or 18-inch rolling stock and stiffer underpinnings, would be the stuff of autobahn dreams.

The 500E looks like your average late 1980s Benz. The interior is angular and businesslike—E-Classes have served as taxis all over the world—although, like its older cousins, the 500E gets the deluxe timber and hide treatment. In spite of that, it's all a bit somber. As noted, Mercedes was heavy into its black plastic phase; the



1992 MERCEDES-BENZ 500E

SPECIFICATIONS: Engine 303.5-

cu-in./4973cc DOHC V-8, Bosch

electronic port fuel injection **Power and**

torque (SAE net) 322 hp @ 5700 rpm,

354 lb-ft @ 3900 rpm **Drivetrain** four-

speed automatic RWD **Brakes** front:

vented disc; rear: vented disc, ABS

Suspension front: struts, coil springs,

anti-roll bar; rear: multilink, coil springs,

anti-roll bar **Dimensions** L: 187.2 in.,

W: 70.7 in., H: 55.4 in. **Weight** 3850 lb

Performance 0-60 mph: 6.3 sec, quarter

mile: 14.7 sec @ 96.9 mph, 60-0 mph:

116 ft

(MT, August 1993)

Price when new \$81,390 (1993)

RESTORING/MAINTAINING: These cars

are tough and reliable if not abused.

There's adequate supply, and they're not

that old, so no need to settle for an awful

one with too many problems. Parts supply

plentiful, new, used, factory or aftermarket.

BEWARE: Transmission not up to the

gaff of the motor and tends to wear out.

Lots of rubber bushings in the driveline

that go south, too.

EXPECT TO PAY: Concours ready:

\$20,000; solid driver \$12,000;

tired runner: \$7500

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OUR TAKE

THEN: Price notwithstanding, our long-

distance favorite is the Mercedes [as

compared with the Audi S4 and BMW M5].

It's a car for drivers who want a luxury

sedan, but with no-excuses power.—C.

Van Tine, Motor Trend, August 1993

NOW: A fast, rare, already-collectible,

Porsche-engineered sleeper. Some

consider the W124 to be among the best

cars MB has ever built, and the 500E is

the specialist among them. Its

performance and equipment levels, save

for some of the latest technoelectronic

gadgetry, are up to today's snuff.

P.S.: They're way underpriced.



only chrome to be found now is on the interior door handles. But all that plastic is of high quality, and all the switchgear and trim feels solid and tough. Finally, a normal-size steering wheel—not to mention the addition of modern safety accoutrements like dual front airbags.

This 5.0-liter powerplant is a completely different piece from the old 6.3/6.9 unit. It starts with a whir and idles like a Rolex. But zing the gas, and it responds with a ready bark. Off-the-line punch is impressive to say the least. There's no drama, just a bit of squat from the independent rear suspension, and it just goes, hitting 60 mph in little more than six seconds. The 500E isn't quick; it's genuinely fast. A hundred mph now feels like you're walking, with a solid, on-rails feel. It's the mid-range passing power (which doesn't have to overcome two tons of weight) that blows you away—and most anything else on the highway. A solid boot at 70 brings a double downshift to second gear, and this thing is just gone.

Although not up to the standards of today's best rack-and-pinion systems, the steering is sharp and communicative enough. There's plenty of handling in reserve, without the woodenness that's common among many of current overcomputerized cars. Brakes? Strong. Wind

noise? Minimal. Ride? Firmly supple. Or vice versa. Structural rigidity? Vaultlike. The 500E just can't be a decade and a half old.

All these three-pointed stars were high-watermarks of their time, and we enjoyed tracking the V-8 Benz's progress from the late 1960s to the early 1990s. The 6.3 is regal, proud, and faster than any stoic European four-door has a right to be. The 6.9 has a quietly imposing gravitas about it that says "flagship" and "don't screw with me" all at the same time. And the 500E impresses with its performance and a driving persona that was mind-blowing when it was new and remains completely relevant today. Jobs well done. ♦

Our thanks to the Mercedes-Benz Classic Center for the use of its 300SEL 6.3, to the anonymous owner of this 6.9, which originally belonged to baseball Hall of Famer Reggie Jackson, and to Jeff Cote for letting us put the spurs to his 500E.





MERCEDES-BENZ 500E