

# Q-Car cruisers

**Mercedes' mid-range performance saloons packed serious muscle into an otherwise sedate W124 model series. *Reed Hitchcock* makes a belated Q-Car discovery.**





## Comparison W124 400E & 500E

Mercedes	400E	500E
ENGINE	4,196cc V8	4,973cc V8
POWER	275bhp@5,700rpm	322bhp@5,700rpm
TORQUE	295lb/ft@3,900rpm	332lb/ft@3,900rpm
TRANSMISSION	4-speed auto	4-speed auto
WEIGHT	1,620kg	1,700kg
0-62MPH	7.2 sec	6.1 sec
TOP SPEED	135mph (limited)	155mph (limited)

**I** think my wife is going to disown me. Not that I've engaged in illicit activities or anything like that – no, it's much worse. I have tasted Mercedes' W124 vee-eights, and the taste is sweet!

Not that the inline-sixes aren't great cars, quite the contrary. In fact, the later dual overhead cam sixes are nearly the performance equals of the V8s. But as we say stateside, "there is no replacement for displacement" – the smoothness and torque makes a well-engineered V8 an absolute joy to drive.

But here we have two very similar cars with two very different characters. The 400E is a gentleman's saloon – quick and elegant with an overall character utterly familiar to anyone who

has ever driven a W124 chassis, but maybe a little heavier. The 500E is extreme – a brutal reminder to the motoring public that Mercedes-Benz builds the best cars in the world.

I recall a time when Japanese cars were considered flimsy econoboxes without mass appeal to Western markets – the way that many think about Korean cars today. However, that tide shifted in the 1980s. As German cars became increasingly complex and expensive, with systems like anti-lock braking and airbags, the Japanese companies focused on build quality and durability.

Having tackled the American (and to a lesser extent the English) car industry, the Japanese set their sights on Germany. The Germans were

considered the ones to beat – in design, technology, longevity, and prestige. The major Japanese manufacturers launched new marques to compete against the Germans in their most fertile market – America.

Interestingly, it seemed that each of these marques was aimed at a different manufacturer. Acura (Honda), with front-wheel drive and modest engines was directed at Audi. Infiniti (Nissan), with brutish power and an emphasis on handling, would take on BMW, and Lexus (Toyota), with impeccable build quality, a silky-smooth V8, and large chrome grilles, drew a bead on Mercedes.

In 1988, Mercedes-Benz responded. The design brief was simple: a mid-sized car with a

Ilanah Saradai





**Clockwise from top:** Stateside demand for V8s was one of the driving factors behind Mercedes creating first the 400E and then the 500E; muscular 500E is the more extrovert of the two and follows the tradition set by cars such as the 300SEL 6.3 and 450SEL 6.9; 400E (foreground) looks identical to other W124 E-Classes but offers new thrills.

super-sized engine. And so the 400E was born – originally conceived exclusively for the US market, but released in Europe when Mercedes discovered just how well the formula worked.

Shoehorning the 4,196cc motor into the 400E required substantial modifications to the W124 chassis. The transmission tunnel was widened, motor mounts were changed, and suspension was borrowed in part from the new R129 SL. At the same time, the car remained identical in appearance to the US-market 300E.

The 400E came equipped as well as one would expect from a luxury car of the early 1990s – leather, power accessories, climate control, sunroof – all wrapped in the relatively austere W124 package. In fact, to anyone familiar with the 124-series, sitting in a 400E is like donning an old glove – it fits just right, and everything is where you expect it to be. The seats are standard 300E fare, the controls are the same, and even the tyres are the same, though many consider the standard 195/65 R15s a little small given the car's potential.

## POWER GAMES

On the road the 400E stands apart from its lesser brethren. The motor roars to life and then settles comfortably to an almost inaudible hum. The

familiar rhythm of the inline-six is nowhere to be heard. It is considerably quieter than my last 124 – the 300CE-24 (but then that particular car was a disaster from the start). A tap on the accelerator reminds me that the car is running, and I engage the transmission.

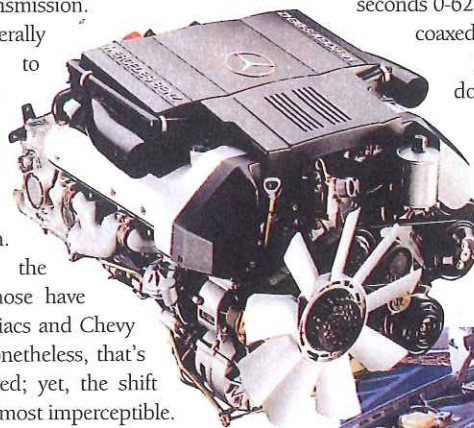
I'm generally accustomed to large V8 motors that grab the transmission with a grunt and lurch. Granted, the majority of those have been old Pontiacs and Chevy trucks, but nonetheless, that's what I expected; yet, the shift into Drive is almost imperceptible. Again, a quick check of the shifter assures me I am in gear, and letting my foot off the brake confirms it.

Right away I notice that the front end of the 400E, at least at low speed, feels heavy compared with normal 124s, although once accustomed to it, this could be any 300E as you motor around

town. I cannot say the same on the highway. First, the owner of this particular example insisted that I floor the car to extract its full potential on the on-ramp. So I did. All 275 horses came to life as the car wound up and rocketed up the ramp. At 7.2 seconds 0-62mph, this car's got balls and, when coaxed just right, shows them with pride.

Before I knew it I was hauling down the road at an indicated 95mph; however, deciding that my licence did not need that

**Left and below:** Both cars use variants of the quad-cam, 32-valve M119 V8 motor and both blend refinement with muscle.







kind of pressure, I backed off to a reasonable 70. At cruising speed the car is as relaxed as a man in a woman's prison with a fist full of pardons. Even an unexpected lorry taking his share out of the middle of the road does nothing to ruin the day, since this car – even at 70 mph – has gobs of passing power just waiting to be extracted.

In comparison with the modern E-Class, the 400E is merely adequate. Its styling is dated, its controls are archaic, and its climate control system is absolutely abysmal. In contrast, the W124s have the unmistakable feel of being honed from a single block of steel. There is a solidity that is simply not conveyed in a new Mercedes. It also gives the impression that, even from a car as thoroughly packed-in as this, I could do at least some maintenance myself – a feeling I do not get with any of the current offerings from Sindelfingen.

After my romp through the Virginia countryside, I felt like Adam after a healthy bite of apple. Automotively speaking, the power of a large engine in a small saloon is as intoxicating as any narcotic – and as addictive. I couldn't imagine a better all-round combination of class, luxury, and performance at such a reasonable price on today's market. That is, until I met the 400E's big brother...

### HAMMER TIME

I knew going in that the 500E was more powerful than the 400E. After all, it has another 47 horsepower – right? Yeah, maybe it's a bit quicker 0-62 than the 400E, but isn't it just, well, redundant? Especially when you consider the price difference. Brand new, a 500E cost over US\$20,000 more than a comparably equipped 400E. How could such a similar car be worth that steep a premium?

The answer is in the question. In a nutshell, there is very little that is similar about these cars at all. They share bodywork from the A-pillar back, but very little else.

The 500E started life as a concept in 1988. AMG had previously introduced their Hammer – a W124 body with a 5.6-litre motor, but the price of admission was beyond the reach of most mortals – over US\$160,000. Other carmakers also sensed that the market was ready for storming powerhouse saloons – BMW had the M5, Audi had the 200, but at Mercedes, slow and steady seemed to be the name of the game.

This was out of character for a company long perceived as innovators in the auto industry. In the 1960s, they put the 6.3-litre V8 from the Grosser 600 into the much smaller and lighter 300SEL – thus creating the first 'Banker's

Hotrod'. For round two, they took that same M100 motor, bored it out to 6.9 litres, and dropped it into the W116 450SEL of the 1970s. The 6.9 was the last of the Mercedes Q-ships until the long overdue 500E.

AMG was not yet a part of the Daimler conglomerate when plans for the 500E came about. Furthermore, they did not have the capacity to produce cars in the numbers that Mercedes wanted. Instead, Mercedes rang-up the folks at Porsche, whose engineers were given free reign to evaluate and re-engineer the physical structure of the 124, as well as conduct crash testing and production engineering. The facilities at Porsche were far better suited to the rigors of performance development – not to mention that Porsche specialised in limited-production cars.

Ultimately, the 500E became the last of the coach-built Mercedes. Raw parts were sent to Porsche at Zuffenhausen, where bodies were assembled. From there, they were transported to Mercedes' Sindelfingen facility for painting, then sent back to Porsche for assembly of the remaining pieces. Finished cars made one final trip back to Sindelfingen for final inspection. The price difference was starting to make a little more sense.



## OWNERS' VIEW MICHAEL PULIDO



Michael Pulido's 400E has been in the family from the 30,000-mile mark. Since then, between Michael and his granddad, the car has covered well over 100,000 miles. He considers the car an "effortless high-speed driving tool – it pulls hard right past 100mph". I have to concur.

Beyond sheer performance, Michael was taken by the styling. He prefers the pre-1994 front-end, calling it "more aggressive than that of the '94-'95 cars."

His enthusiasm carries into the car as well. "The seating is excellent in typical M-B fashion. The seats are firm and nicely bolstered – a definite improvement over the 123."

Conversely, Michael thinks the car would be better suited with 16-inch wheels with 225-series tyres. "I mean 195s? The car overpowers the rubber too easily." He also finds the front end a little heavy, especially compared to the 300E. "But," he says, "that's the trade-off for the power." And don't get him started on the Becker stereo.



The motor in the 500E is the same basic M119 from the contemporary 500SL, albeit with revised intake and fuel injection systems and pumping out an alarming 322bhp and 332lb/ft of torque. Also borrowed from the 500SL were the larger front brake discs with four-piston calipers. The larger brakes mandated larger 16x8-inch wheels, which in turn necessitated front wing flares.

### ROUND TWO

Peeling open the 500E, I notice the same vault-like doors granting passage, as if to lock me away for centuries. Easing into the seat, I feel very much at home, although I notice that I am sitting closer to the ground in this car, largely due to the sport suspension. The front seats are

also farther apart than in lesser 124s – due to the widened transmission tunnel.

As in the 400E, everything is right where I expect it to be – except in this car, there's more of it. The row of rocker switches across the dashboard contains everything from the power rear sunshade to the anti-theft system indicator. On the console, I spot the seat heater switch,

which I immediately engage in light of the arctic temperatures currently absorbing the Eastern Seaboard.

It all looks so familiar, but the small differences are scattered throughout. In place of the standard bench seat in the back is a pair of

individual sport seats and a wood console – very similar to the 124 coupé. Grabbing the wheel, I note that despite its appearance, it too is different – smaller diameter and thicker rim.

A quick twist of the key and the 500E fires to life much like the 400E – a roar settling to a very faint thrum. The gears engage the same, and around town it feels the same. At this point, I'm still not fully understanding the difference. Order a 400E with Sportline and you've got, well, this – right?

Wrong. Very, very wrong. And I should have known better. I took to some fairly intense back roads first – roads I know intimately, which are infrequently patrolled largely because there's just nowhere for the coppers to hide. I stomped on the gas and nearly broke the seat back. To say I was caught off-guard is the understatement of the century. After recovering from the trauma of

**"ORDER A 400E WITH SPORTLINE AND YOU'VE GOT, WELL, THIS – RIGHT? WRONG. VERY, VERY WRONG"**



## OWNERS' VIEW MARK ELIE



Mark Elie bought this 500E on a whim with 35,000 miles on the clock. "I traded a Lexus LS400 because I wanted something that wasn't so numb on the road." Simply stated, "the 500E does what it doesn't look like it could do and does it with style and grace." He has added a scant 9,000 miles since making the purchase.

Mark considers the 500E "civilised excitement and a gentleman's racecar." He appreciates the style and quality of a Mercedes coupled with the performance and handling of a Porsche. "I also like the fact that this was

truly the last of the "coach built" Mercedes – requiring approximately 18 days to assemble versus 3–5 days for an ordinary car."

Modifications to Mark's 500E include: Lorinser springs/Sachs struts, Brabus exhaust, painted body cladding, '94/95-style indicators and 19-inch alloys with beefy covers.



my first go, I braced myself and gave it another shot. Unbelievable! I will say that the standard traction control does a very good job of not letting morons like me destroy the car right out of the gate, but it does become intrusive as you pull your handling tricks out of the basket.

Alright – confession time. I have been known to be tempted by – ahem – Bavarian fruit from time to time. More than once I have considered purchasing an E34 M5. I always considered that an exquisite machine. And it is. But, where the M5 is harsh and heavy, and makes sure you know you're abusing the speed limit, the 500E is so subtle and so sublime that it's as if the rules have changed and nobody told

you. "75 miles per hour is so four years ago – don't you know that we're up to 110?" I've always enjoyed a good run in the twisties, and the 500E is all about the twisties.

Oddly enough, it's all about the highway as well. Easing on to a motorway at modest speed, I am immediately accosted by one of those drivers who seems to go out of his way to block any attempt at conducting a simple highway merge. The obvious response? I floored it. In a matter of milliseconds, he was reduced to a pair of headlights in my mirror. Okay, really, what's an extra twenty grand?

**"PICKING BETWEEN THESE TWO CARS IS LIKE CHOOSING GOLD OR PLATINUM, CONNERY OR BROSAN"**

## JEKYLL AND HYDE

This is the sort of thing that makes this job fun. Picking the better of these two cars is like choosing gold or platinum, Sean Connery or Pierce Brosnan, the Beatles or the Stones. It is a matter of taste – what you're looking for in your monster-motored Mercedes.

For me, it's the 500E. This was – and may still be – the best car in the world, plain and simple. I'd buy one as a weekend car – otherwise the fuel consumption (14–17mpg) would probably break the bank. But I prefer the sporting character of the 500E over the reserved charm of the 400E. I'm also a sucker for the unique details – all those things that will cost four times more to replace later on because they are unique to this car. But after all, I am a glutton for punishment. Just ask the wife.