

# UNDERCOVER OPERATIVE

They may be thin on the ground, but the mighty V8 500E and E500 are a compelling used buy, writes *David Sutherland*

**W**hen Mercedes-Benz brings out a hot version of one of its cars, it's frequently for the same reason: BMW. The M3 was why the Cosworth-engineered 190E 2.3-16 came into existence, while the BMW 750i was the spur for the V12 W140 S-Class.

In 1990, the W124 was half-way through its production life, and delivering its maker massive success in Europe. From taxi rank to boardroom, the mid-range Merc crushed the opposition and, with a queue of eager buyers forming behind every car coming off the line, it seemed the model range was pretty well sorted.

But there was just one problem. Since 1980, the brand's neighbour in Munich had been experimenting with quick versions of its 5-Series. This fast but flawed package evolved into the M5 of 1986, by common consent the definitive prestige performance car of the day. Its special 3.5-litre engine pumped out 286bhp at a time when the top W124, the 300E, couldn't even muster 200bhp. ☺







**Mercedes-Benz 500E/E500**

ENGINE 4,973cc V8

POWER 322bhp@5,700rpm  
(post-'93 316bhp)

TORQUE 354lb/ft@3,900rpm

TRANSMISSION 4-speed auto

WEIGHT 1,730kg

0-62MPH 6sec

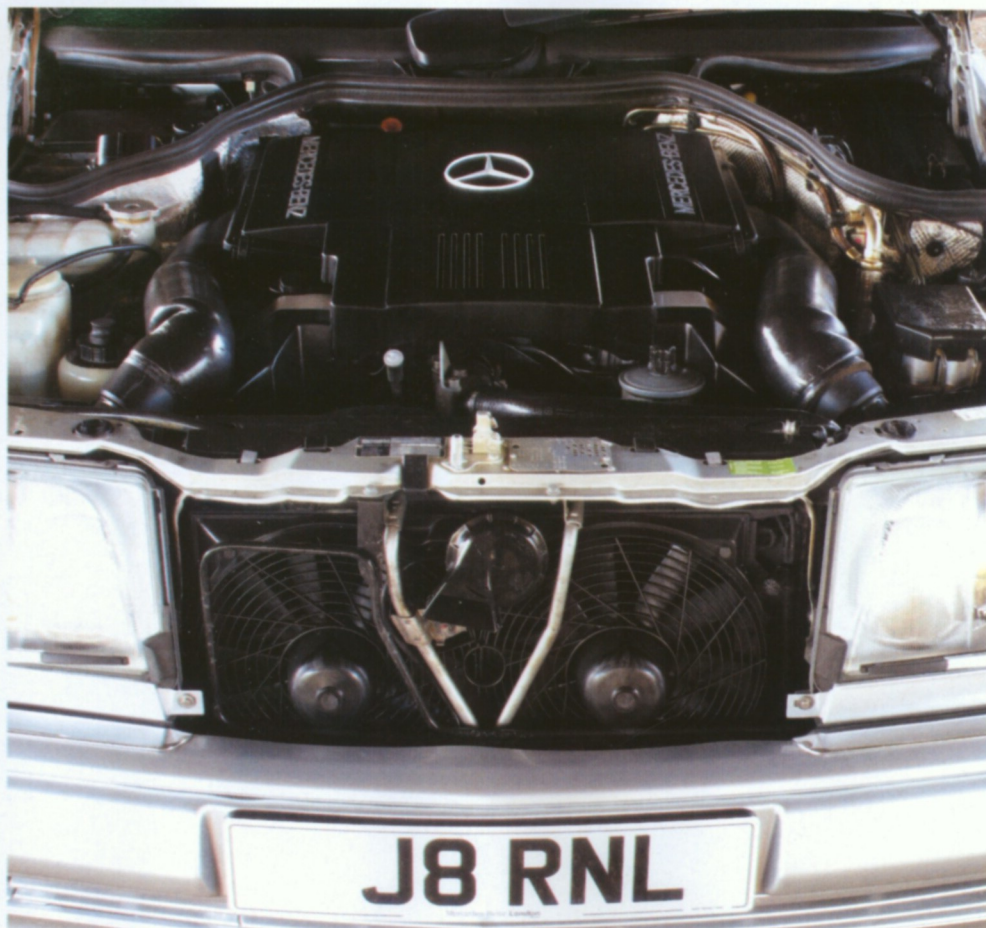
TOP SPEED 155mph

PRODUCED 1990-94

NUMBER BUILT 10,355

OFFICIAL UK IMPORTS 29





With such intense rivalry between the two car makers, this horsepower shortfall must have been tough for some Mercedes people to take. And, by the time the next M5 appeared in 1990 – based on the E34 model 5-Series and with 315bhp on tap – Stuttgart was ready.

In the same year, at the Paris Motor Show, Mercedes unleashed the 500E, powered by the 5-litre, four-valves-per-cylinder V8 taken from the SL500. Packing the same 322bhp as the roadster, but with a seven per cent torque increase to 354lb/ft at 3,900rpm, it made the M5's 265lb/ft look comparatively puny.

But there was a third illustrious marque involved in this auto-industry grudge match: Porsche. This was before Mercedes could call directly on the engineering and chassis expertise of tuner AMG (now, of course, an in-house concern), and also at a time when Porsche sales were on the floor. Thus in the spirit of 'Germany Incorporated', Mercedes handed Zuffenhausen an assembly contract for the 500E.

This, it's reported, entailed W124 bodies being delivered from the Mercedes factory to the nearby Porsche plant, where floorpan and engine bay were modified and the powertrain installed. The cars then returned to Mercedes for painting, after which the final assembly took place

**Above left: Bulging front wings among few giveaways.**

**Above: SL's 5-litre V8 is a tight fit in the W124 engine bay.**

back at Zuffenhausen. From late 1990 until 1994, the Porsche factory succeeded in turning out 10,355 500E models, each one of which was hand-built over 18 days. Peak production was the year 1992, during which 4,416 were assembled. All of them were left-hand drive.

The price on its arrival in Britain in March 1991 was £56,000 (£10,000 more than the BMW M5), rising to £60,000 by the time imports ceased. The car is one of the rarest Mercedes models in Britain, with only 29 officially imported, according to DaimlerChrysler UK (21 in 1991; four in '92; two in '93; and two in '94).

## ENGINEERING

The V8 produced its extra torque thanks to revised intake manifolds and Bosch LH- rather than LE-Jetronic fuel injection. There were also detail modifications to the engine block, crankcase and piston con rods. This was a tight fit in the W124 platform. To accommodate it, battery had to be moved out of the engine bay and into the boot while, to take the larger, 500SL rear differential, the transmission tunnel had to be rearranged.

The engine came with the SL500's four-speed automatic gearbox, switchable between Sport and Economy; a manual



**Pre-facelift 500E has orange indicators and grille-mounted star.**





transmission wasn't offered. Mercedes' traction control hardware of the time, ASR (Acceleration Skid Control) came as standard, as did self-levelling rear suspension; both items were cost options on the 260E and 300E.

Larger, SL500-sourced brakes were fitted, while the suspension was lowered 23mm and the front and rear track widened slightly. To accommodate this change, and the wider 225/55 tyres on new, eight-hole 8Jx16-inch alloys (standard cars used 7Jx15 wheels), the wheelarches were extended. This was about the only visual clue to the 500E's elevated status and gave the car a subtly aggressive stance. The other identifiers were the sporty front spoiler, with halogen fog lamps, slightly more pronounced side skirts – necessary to marry up to the flared wheelarches – and, of course, the 500E badge (or E500 on post-1993 models).

The most noticeable interior differences between the 500E and regular W124s are the seats. The front and rear seats have more pronounced side bolsters than the standard items, but aren't the normal Sportline sports seats; a sticker on their underside reveals them to have been made by Recaro. In the rear, you see individual rear seats with a walnut-capped stowage compartment in between, rather than the

**It takes a keen eye to mark a 500E out from other W124 E-Classes.**

usual one-piece bench, an arrangement made necessary by the 500E's larger transmission tunnel. Fabric/half-leather trimmed seats were standard, with full leather a £1,729 option. Some of the carpeting is thicker in the 500E.

These aside, the car could otherwise be a well optioned 260E or 300E, with air-conditioning, electric seat adjustment and cruise control standard on all 500Es. This example also has an electric rear sunshade, fire extinguisher, outside temperature gauge and walnut consoles between the front and rear seats, all of which were optional extras.

#### EVOLUTION

In October 1992, Mercedes launched a 'special offer' version of the car, the 400E, a worthwhile saving of DM50,000 over the 500E. Also assembled by Porsche, it used the 4.2-litre V8 from the S-Class, producing 278bhp. Acceleration from 0-60mph was fractionally longer at 6.8 seconds, but top speed was the same.

The 500E, however, received only minor modifications during its life. In 1992 there was a slight power reduction for the V8, which was de-tuned by 6bhp

to 316bhp after the full throttle enrichment was taken out.

Along with all other W124s, the 500E was given a facelift for the 1994 season, including a new bonnet and grille, with the three-pointed star shifting to a new position on the bonnet rather than on top of the grille. The front and rear lamp clusters no longer had orange indicator lenses.

This point also marked the badge changeover, the 'E' becoming a prefix rather than a suffix.

A final batch of 500 cars, the E500 Limited was built, but none of them officially came to the UK. Together with

special paint finishes, the most obvious giveaway was the use of the 190 Evo 2's beautiful, six-spoke 17-inch wheels, running 245/40 rubber.

#### DRIVING THE E500

On the road, the 'Super Cab' feels as subtle to drive as it is to look at. The engine hums quietly like any other Mercedes V8, giving no indication of just how fast it will propel the 1,730kg car; indeed, at low revs the 32-valve engine doesn't seem particularly responsive. ➔

**"ALONG WITH ALL OTHER W124s, THE 500E GOT A FACELIFT FOR THE 1994 SEASON"**





But as the revs rise past 3,500rpm, so does the urgency of the engine note, and the Benz takes on a whole new character. There is effortless performance for overtaking, even without kicking the gearbox down.

Contemporary road tests clocked the sober-suited car from standstill to 60mph in just over six seconds, while top speed was a well and truly academic, electronically limited 156mph.

It's clear that Mercedes wanted to give the 500E handling to match its performance, but at the same time avoid subjecting occupants to a rock hard ride. The chassis is certainly firmer and less compliant than, say, a 300E. But roll and slop are much better controlled and, for all its bulk, the 500E feels agile.

Road tests at the time took issue with the ASR, which couldn't be overridden, complaining that it cut in at the first sign of power oversteer, thus preventing the excellent chassis set-up to be fully exploited. Maybe, but it has probably also helped preserve the 500E population down the years.

Inevitably, comparisons were made with the M5 which – on account of its uncommunicative steering and brakes, and manual-only transmission – did not receive the resounding praise that might have been expected. The Merc emerged as more comfortable and refined, an “exquisitely crafted and understated super-saloon”, as one magazine put it.

**Clockwise from above:** Interior dark but well built; separate rear seats thanks to bigger diff; battery moved to boot for space reasons.

#### WHAT TO LOOK FOR

For such a powerful and once-expensive car there seem to be remarkably few problems associated with it. “Brilliant build quality” is Mercedes specialist George Fraser’s verdict of the way Mercedes-Benz and Porsche put the cars together.

The V8 engine is as strong as an ox while the transmission, if not generally regarded as in quite the same bulletproof

league, is long-lasting. Note, though, that given the tight fit of the box, working on it takes a long time because this requires removing the exhaust first.

The one problem pertaining to the engine is the wiring under the bonnet, according to Fraser, with the massive heat generated by the V8 tending to make the wires go brittle. “The wires can short out, and that can lead to a blown engine management unit,” he warns. “The ECU is a special order from Germany and very expensive.” To check the health of the wiring, Fraser suggests examining the various connections to the fuel-injection

#### “THE ECU IS A SPECIAL ORDER FROM GERMANY AND VERY EXPENSIVE”

system. If you notice that these do not look good, it's time to tread carefully.

As on all W124s, the suspension eventually wears at the rear arms, the bushes rotting away causing a wallowing from the rear of the car under cornering. In addition, the self-levelling unit can fail to operate fully, due to leaking gas spheres or contaminated fluid in the reservoir. The front outer ball joints can corrode, and the springs may break at the bottom, in extreme situations leading to a suspension collapse.

But the chances of coming across these failings on a 500E are small. “Owners tend to use their cars so little, they don't get a chance to wear out,” says Fraser.

### OWNER'S VIEW TALBIR BAINS

**For a Mercedes collector who's also a Porsche fan, the 500E makes plenty of sense**

Talbir Bains knows more than most about the prices to pay for Mercedes-Benz cars – he's been driving them for more than ten years and, before he bought his E500 in May 2004, his collection already comprised a W126 S-Class saloon, two W126 SECs and a W140 S-Class.

Talbir, an insurance actuary from West Drayton in Middlesex, was keen to buy a 500E because of its qualities – and because it was arguably the last of the coachbuilt Mercedes models. The Porsche link was also important, since Talbir also owns a 911 Turbo SE. “The thought of owning a car made by both Mercedes-Benz and Porsche was very appealing,” he admits.

It took a while to find the right model. “I started looking in late March, and only saw two advertised in the whole country. One

wasn't in good shape and, while the other was in decent condition, at £13,900 it was too expensive.”

Talbir then spotted a late 1993 example being offered privately for £10,000. “I did some bargaining and managed to get the price down,” he says modestly.

The 106,000-miler is totally rust-free and, apart from a slightly squashy driver's seat, drives and looks almost like new. The car hasn't needed any attention although Talbir, who's rather handy when it comes to wiring, has converted the original manual driver's-door mirror to adjust electrically by fitting a right-hand-drive passenger electric mirror.

Not surprisingly, Talbir is pretty pleased with his purchase; this much Mercedes comfort and performance for £6,400 doesn't come along every day...





**"IT'S CLEAR THAT  
MERCEDES WANTED  
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And with the cars being cosseted, you're even less likely to see rust on a 500E than on a normal W124, even though the earliest examples are now more than 13 years old. But if, for any reason, the front wings are in bad shape, bear in mind the 500E's wider items are expensive: £376 each from a Mercedes dealer, more than double the price of a regular W124 wing.

All 500Es were left-hand drive, but some in the UK will be personal imports. As nearly a decade has passed since production ended, that isn't the issue it once was. But two obvious signs of an official UK car are that it has indicator repeater lenses on the front wings, further back than the wheel and, of course, a mph-calibrated speedometer.

**Above: Run-out E500 Limited gained lovely 17-inch six-spokes.**

**Right: UK-spec cars have wing-mounted side repeaters.**

**This clean example was a canny buy for its current owner.**



## PRICES, AVAILABILITY

Because 500Es are rare, thirsty and left-hand drive, they form a very specialised market. As a result, valuing them accurately is tricky. You tend not to see more than two or three for sale at any one time, and frequently, there are none. Their

eventual selling price depends on how many people, if any, are looking at any particular time, how keen they are to buy and how keen the seller is to pass it on.

Despite their performance and exclusivity, these cars don't reach fantasy-league figures: after some deft bargaining, our featured car was bought privately a few months ago by its present owner for only £6,400 (see 'Owner's view', p53).

That was surely an exceptional bargain; we'd feel comfortable about paying up to £10,000 for a clean, accident- and rust-free 500E, but there would be little prospect of making a profit when re-selling. Car traders might begin by asking £12,000-£13,000, but at that price would probably be lucky to find a quick buyer.

Germany and the US are two countries where there seem to be quite a few 500Es, and the cars also seem to hold their value better there, no doubt because left-hand drive isn't an issue.

## VERDICT

The 500E is one for the true, discerning Mercedes enthusiast, and not a car for those who simply crave the prestige of Benz ownership. For a start, you have to put up with left-hand drive, and finding a good example in the first place can be a long and tedious process.

But what a car! Effortless performance and sporting handling (the permanent ASR notwithstanding) combined with discreet W124 looks, and with a dollop of Porsche heritage thrown in, too.

The 500E offers pretty good reliability, and the icing on the cake is the price. Mercedes value surely doesn't get much better than that.

