

Reach for the stars

From limousines and the first super saloons to bechromed roadsters and pillarless coupes, there is a modern classic Mercedes-Benz for everyone – and now it's time to meet the stars of the show

WELCOME TO THIS MONTH'S Modern Classics Special, where over the coming pages we indulge ourselves by focusing solely on some of the best loved and most sought after Mercedes. We define modern classics as those cars built between 1975 and 1995, those not yet old enough to be considered true classics and not young enough to be at the mercy of the used car market. Hence these often mean a lot of car for your money, the added bonus being that as this era covers what many believe to be a golden age for Mercedes-Benz, many represent a chance to own cars you never thought your budget would allow.

We start with a celebration of a real enthusiast's favourite, the W124 500E/E500, 20 years on from its first public outing at the Paris Motor Show in October 1990. Next we drive this month's cover car, an R107 450SL to discover if this gorgeous model can be a sensible ownership prospect, share tips from the experts about the essential pre purchase checks and advise how best to care for R107s to ensure a long and happy ownership.

Moving on, it is time for our Top 10 Future Classics where we reveal 10 Mercedes that are not only enticing ownership prospects today, but that we think might also be strong investments, maturing in time to become desirable classics. Then we up the tempo with this recreation of a Brabus 190E 3.6S, a real pocket rocket of a modern classic that goes every bit as well and is just as feisty as it looks.

This is followed by a trip Stateside to drive a collection of 116-series S-Classes. Once hailed as the world's greatest cars, these past masters show they still have much to offer as we drive three very different models. And finally we enjoy a sunny day out with a handsome 560SEC. Still as elegant and enchanting as the day it was built and with a hearty V8, its style, presence and pace make it the perfect reminder of what modern classic motoring is all about.

We hope you enjoy our Modern Classics Special and the glittering array of three-pointed stars we have in store – perhaps it might inspire your next automotive choice? Please turn over and get stuck in!

“Many of these modern classic Mercedes represent a chance to own cars you never thought your budget would allow”

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SPOTLIGHT – 20 years of the 500E
Two decades after it first broke cover, Mercedes' V8 engined W124 500E/E500 still has the power to excite and delight



USED ROADTEST – 450SL
Living the modern classic dream with this stunning R107 SL – and giving you all you need to know so you can do just the same



TOP 10 FUTURE CLASSICS
Many modern classics might not only be great to own now but could also be top investments in years to come – here are 10 likely candidates



TUNER CAR – Brabus 190E 3.6S
Strap yourself in, this recreation of a tuned 190 is a potent reminder that age is no barrier when it comes to having some serious fun



GROUP TEST – 116s
Driving three models spanning the 116-series range shows they have lost none of their ability to waft and cosset in first class style



TOP PICK – 560SEC
Still with all the presence and elegance it had when new, the flagship 126-series coupe cannot fail to charm

courtesy of 500espot.com

MODERN CLASSICS SPECIAL

SPOTLIGHT – 20 years of the 500E



“While still looking much like a regular 124 saloon, it used so many different parts it was almost a new car”



Forever young

Two decades have passed since Mercedes first unveiled its now legendary 500E – any excuse for an indulgent trip down memory lane

WORDS DAVID SUTHERLAND **IMAGES** TERRY OBORNE/PORSCHE

NO ONE DOES UNDERSTATEMENT QUITE LIKE MERCEDES-Benz. And few cars have concealed their performance credentials more bashfully than the V8 powered, W124 500E/E500, produced for just over four years until April 1995. A bystander's innocent comment aimed at these three examples lined up for photography is a reminder of just how innocuous they seem to those not immersed in the world of Mercedes modern classics. "To me, they just look like old cars."

But these "old cars" – Stuttgart's answer to the original BMW M5 of the 1980s – were the most thrilling version of the 124-series sold in a Mercedes showroom, capable of embarrassing the E36 AMG models that would follow in 1993. And now 20 years on from the 500E's unveiling in October 1990 at the Paris Motor Show (customer deliveries began the following year), the story of its unusual development is more fascinating than ever now that an historical perspective is available. ▶

JUST THE FACTS

Mercedes-Benz 500E (W124)

Engine M119 4,973cc V8
Power 322bhp@5,700rpm
Torque 354lb ft@3,900rpm
Transmission 4-speed auto, RWD
Weight 1,700kg
0-62mph 6.1sec
Top speed 155mph
Fuel consumption 16.1mpg
Years produced 1991-1993

Mercedes-Benz E500 (W124)

Engine M119 4,973cc V8
Power 316bhp@5,600rpm
Torque 347lb ft@3,900rpm
Transmission 4-speed auto, RWD
Weight 1,730kg
0-62mph 6.1sec
Top speed 155mph
Fuel consumption 16.7mpg
Years produced 1993-1995

OVERVIEW

Still a joy to drive, these sought after saloons are now prime modern classics for the enthusiast

Figures are for a pre 10/92 500E and for a post 03/94 E500; fuel consumption is according to EEC urban; both the top speeds are electronically limited



▷ Work on the 500E is said to have begun quite soon after the 124-series appeared in 1984, the idea being to lightly modify the then flagship 300E. But the project became ever more ambitious, the end result something that while still looking much like a regular 124 saloon, used so many different parts it was almost a new car. For example, of the bodywork only the bootlid, roof, front doors and glass remained standard, while fastidious attention to detail saw, for example, the installation of a larger fuel tank (90 litres) and the battery moved from the engine bay to the boot to help even up weight distribution. The 500E received the 32-valve engine from the R129 500SL, but for this installation it benefited from a series of updates including a new induction system and inlet manifold, which although leaving power unchanged at 322bhp increased torque by 22lb ft to 354lb ft. This was mated to a sole transmission option, a four-speed automatic. The suspension was retuned with new shock absorbers and a new front anti roll bar, and the ride height lowered 23mm. The 16-inch wheels wore 225/55 tyres, the larger diameter set up allowing bigger brakes to be fitted.

Reports at the time said Mercedes had investigated installing its forthcoming V12 in the car but it wouldn't fit. As it was, the engine bay, bulkhead, floorpan and transmission tunnel had to be modified to accommodate the V8 powertrain, hence Mercedes contracted Porsche to carry out the necessary re-engineering and install the

engine at its factory in nearby Zuffenhausen, after which the cars returned to Mercedes for final assembly. The sports car maker was in crisis at the time, making it quite likely that Mercedes was trying to aid its stricken compatriot and perhaps in the process forge closer links, which could be helpful if – as seemed likely at the time – Porsche became available for purchase. It must have been a useful earner for Porsche because 10,479 cars were built in total, although Mercedes' favoured tuner AMG did pick up some crumbs. From 1993 until 1994 AMG converted a small but unspecified number of E500s into the E60 AMG by taking the V8 up to six litres and 376bhp.

FROM STUTTGART WITH LOVE

Identifiable at a glance only by its flared front and rear arches, the 500E perfectly answered the description of a Q-car, but this blend of low key appearance and a potent V8 was not destined to be a common sight in the UK. First, it was never built in right-hand drive and second, it arrived here priced at over £57,000 – some £22,000 more than a 300E-24 – in the depths of a recession. It is believed that 29 were imported to the UK, though of course more have been personally imported from mainland Europe.

Since 1990 – when Mercedes seemed almost coy about building performance cars, lest its conservative customers take umbrage that the mindset had changed at Stuttgart – the unfettered expansion of the AMG range resulted in ▷

“This blend of low key appearance and a potent V8 was not destined to be a common sight in the UK”



◁ The rarity of these models means they are already sought after.

◁◁ In total, 10,479 500E/E500s were made – some became E60 AMGs.



▷ models with double the 500E's output. Today its direct descendent, the W212 E63 AMG, has around two thirds more power and a third more torque. So how does this leave Mercedes' original hot, mid range saloon? Is it a now quite genteel and tame classic, or still a member of the sledgehammer club?

The silver car shown here, owned by Christopher Montana but now for sale, is the facelifted model introduced in mid 1993. Like the other two cars pictured, it is a German import – were it a UK car it would have side indicators on the front wings and a speedometer in miles per hour. Apart from the badge change from '500E' to 'E500', it is most obviously distinguished from earlier cars by the two key visual updates made to all 124s from this point: the three-pointed star was repositioned from the grille to the bonnet and it has full rather than part colour matched bumpers. The updated cars also have a slightly detuned engine, down 6bhp to 316bhp and with 7lb ft less torque at 347lb ft, although this was actually a revision implemented in October 1992.

The two other examples are the original 500Es. Or at least we know that WDM 331, which belongs to Wayne McDougall of Mercedes specialist WDM Cars in Birmingham. It has the later grille and bonnet, but the pre 1993 bumpers with thick, black inserts. It was quite common for owners to convert earlier 500Es to look like

facelifted versions, the considerable amount of value left in them making it economically feasible, but in this case it seems the job was never completed.

THE NAME GAME

Absurd as it may sound, it would take more research, possibly involving a long paper trail back to Germany to establish beyond doubt whether the all black car, E500 WKF, for sale at another Mercedes specialist Avantgarde, is an E500 or a modified 500E. It looks like the latter but such records that are available describe it only as a '500E/E500' and date it as a late 1992 car, which, given the overlap sometimes found in Mercedes-Benz archive records could make it either. Avantgarde's proprietor, Jonathan Aucott, who has traded many of these cars over the years simply cannot decide and perhaps wisely declines to describe it specifically as one or the other. Incidentally, its six-spoke wheels are the 17-inch items with 245/40 tyres as fitted to the final batch of cars, the E500 Limited models.

But if the cars can suffer a minor identity crisis you would not notice it from the driver's seat, a beautifully sculpted and leather trimmed item. As with any high spec 124, the 500E/E500 feels luxurious and cossetting, but goes further by featuring two individually contoured rear seats with a walnut veneered compartment in between (a configuration said to have been necessitated by the

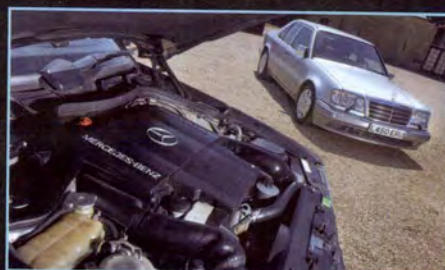


△ These 17-inch alloys were fitted to the last of the line, E500 Limited models.

▽ Hydro-pneumatic level control was added at the rear to help composure.

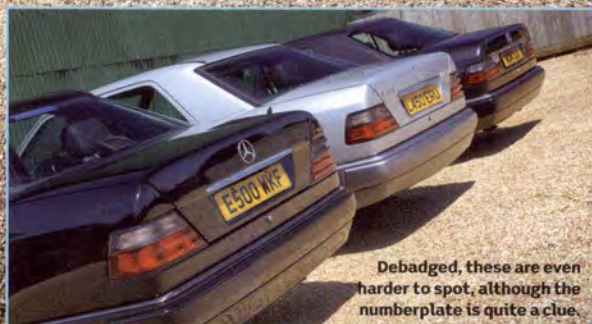
▽◁ A modified version of the R129 SL's V8 features in these super saloons.

▽◁◁ A proper four-seat Mercedes with sporty, sculpted rear seats.



SPOTLIGHT – 20 years of the 500E

“Extend it beyond 3,000 to 4,000rpm and you feel the silken wallop the car is so reluctant to advertise”



Debadged, these are even harder to spot, although the numberplate is quite a clue.

▷ bulkier transmission tunnel). Getting comfy behind the wheel is easy, thanks to the extra support of the electrically adjusted seat plus the better pedal positioning of left-hand drive. But the smile truly breaks out when the ignition key is turned and the big V8 hums into life. Comparisons with the 3.6-litre motor in the E36s are inevitable, and while that straight-six engine is vibrant and enjoyable, the 500E/E500 motor is simply in a different league.

WHEN THE MOOD TAKES YOU

In normal driving the car will purr quietly along, with little more than a slight brush on the accelerator needed to change the tempo. The V8's refinement makes it a joy to use even like this. But extend it beyond 3,000 to 4,000rpm and you feel the silken wallop the car is so reluctant to advertise. An effortless stream of torque is released, the delivery continuing right up to the 6,000rpm redline. Even at this point the engine remains as sweet as you would wish for. They say there is no substitute for cubic capacity and the 500E/E500 certainly supports that theory. Another respect in which these cars are so different from the E36 is ride quality. While the AMG cars are so firmly sprung they are almost uncomfortable, the 500E/E500 retains the suppleness of the regular 124s. And a much larger engine

does not leave the car feeling nose heavy. On the practical front, the 500E/E500 represents value for money at the moment. Being left-hand drive and heavy on fuel limits its appeal, therefore it should be possible to find a good, useable example for a little under £10,000 (obviously their specialised nature has mostly prevented them from descending to banger status).

They called it the 'supercab' in celebration of the similarity in looks to that typically found in a Frankfurt taxi rank at the time – and two decades on the 500E/E500 retains all of its discreet charm. It is also still a particularly enjoyable driver's car even if the steering is vague and the brakes feel far less powerful and reassuring than would be expected in a modern Mercedes. The 124-series was a popular, well liked Benz, but the 500E/E500s were and still are the ones you could fall in love with.



△ Inside, these models still have much in common with lesser powered W124s.

► Thank you to *Avantgarde* Tel 07968 694448 Web www.avantgardecars.co.uk, *WDM Cars* Tel 0121 356 1020 Web www.wdmcarsmercedesspecialist.co.uk and owner *Christopher Montana* Tel 07958 192186 for the loan of the cars – all are for sale. Thank you also to *The Great Barn* Tel 01869 810823 Web www adayinthecountry.co.uk and www.thegreatbarn.net for the photoshoot location



◁ Understated but with a lot more to offer than the average 124-series saloon.

◁◁ Wider wings and a lower ride height are two of the signs of a 500E/E500.