



Mercedes-Benz 500E

Hugely subtle and very rare: is this mega-Merc the ultimate Q-car?

This is an ageing Benz with rather a lot of the things that the advanced car nut tends to fall for. It isn't what it seems to be, for a start, unless you assume that all Stuttgart taxis are capable of a 6.3-second sprint to 60mph. And identifying it is a challenge best satisfied either by asking the owner of every W124 saloon you see (tedious, difficult and an activity that might lead to prosecution) or by staring unhealthily hard at its wheelarches.

If they're subtly flared and house 255/50 16in tyres then you could be looking at a 500E. It's also absurdly fast, though not quite so impressive in these days of AMG Mercedes with earth-mover torque. And it's rare. Only 7200 or so were built between 1992-94, and few made it here because it was searingly expensive and only came in left-hand drive.

But all this was enough to produce knowing nods among people like us, who would also enjoy the fact that the 500E was part-built by Porsche using assembly methods that would have had Toyota production types giggling in bafflement. The cars were part-built by Mercedes before being carted to Porsche, where the V8 motor was installed together with modified suspension and an upgraded interior. The process took 18 days, one reason why the 500E was so damn expensive.

Besides a 326bhp V8 you got lowered, self-levelling suspension, upgraded brakes, Recaro front seats

and more wood, the full-length central console turning the Benz into a four-seater, eliminating any role it might have had as a steroidal taxi.

Heavily puckered leather door inserts – they looked like they'd been artfully arranged by the John Lewis fabrics department – completed this modest makeover to produce a very Germanic product. And one in which efforts to exploit the E's scope for entertainment were limited. Why? Because the ASR traction control was too effective at stifling the gyratory potential of 354lb ft of torque.

But there were solutions, I discovered, during a long, rain-soaked trip in a 500E. One was to fling the car at bends with sufficient momentum that the ASR couldn't cope, producing the desired slither. The other, more sensible strategy was to have an on/off switch added by a tuning company.

Even without this mod the 500E's combination of gargantuan go and indulgent luxury was a compelling prospect, its appeal only heightened by its rarity and Porsche genes. And how much do you pay for these beasts today? Around £13,000. I found a handful, the best a UK 65,000-miler for £15,900. Most tempting of all was a 125,000-mile car in Germany for £4700, which seemed insanely cheap. But it looked genuine, and had me wondering if I know anyone who speaks German. **B**

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'The 500E was built using methods that would have had Toyota types giggling'

WANT ONE?

MERCEDES-BENZ 500E

REASONS TO WANT ONE

That unexpected zest, its rarity and opulence

WHY YOU SHOULD RUN A MILE

Cabin resembles a '70s chairman's office, thirst

ONE WE FOUND

125k miles, £4700, Auto-Nostaglie, Germany (www.classicdriver.com)