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The E500 is the embodiment of a Q-car: simple but luxurious on the inside, sedate (verging on boring) on the outside – and gut-wrenchingly powerful under the bonnet

THE MERCEDES-BENZ E500 has been dead for eight years but was probably a classic from the moment the first one rolled off the production line. The fact that this low-volume super-saloon was built by Porsche at Zuffenhausen only adds to the myth.

Launched in 1990 as the 500E (among a bumper crop of great cars that included the Lotus Carlton and Lamborghini Diablo), in essence the über-Merc used the drivetrain and suspension of the new 500SL roadster but was clothed in the utterly innocuous W124 saloon body, an outline already six years old. It could have been a cab on the Stuttgart airport rank, although perhaps Mercedes missed a trick by not building an estate version. Now that would have been a fabulous Q-car.

At a massive £58,949, the 500E was £20,000 more expensive than the BMW M5. The same money would have bought two 3.0-litre 300E saloons, themselves not notably cheap at the time. Outwardly, only the mildly-flared wheelarches, fatter rubber and a discreetly lower stance gave away the secret of this 5.0-litre V8-engined W124. In fact, all four wings were different to the standard W124's and the underpinnings required radical surgery by Porsche to make the V8 engine fit, with strengthening to the floorpan and front structure.

SL suspension and massive ABS-equipped brakes were grafted in, but to ensure adequate spring travel the 500E had self-levelling at the rear. It had the same 32-valve, 326bhp V8 as the SL but with a little more torque (347lb ft at 3900rpm) channelled through a Bosch-developed engine management system that governed brakes, automatic transmission and traction control.

Big catalysts meant the gearbox tunnel had to be widened, reducing the car's official seating capacity from five to four.

Inside everything feels sharp and tight, with sober, rattle-free plastic trim and supple leather (an obscenely expensive £1729 option) on the

HOOLIGAN IN A BUSINESS SUIT

*Sober saloon on the outside,
supercar on the inside, the Mercedes
E500 lives up to a tradition of Q-cars
beloved by racing drivers*

WORDS: MARTIN BUCKLEY
PHOTOGRAPHY: MALCOLM GRIFFITHS

hip-hugging sports seats. Electric seats, cruise control and air conditioning were standard when the car went on sale in the UK in 1991.

The great thing about the 500E – badged E500, like this car, after the W124's 1992 facelift – is that it looks so normal at first. Something about the stance, the wide wheels and (on this car) the lack of badging tells the cognoscenti all they need to know. The facelifted cars, available to special order only in the UK, had three-pointed stars on restyled bonnets rather than the top of the grille.

The E500 is not exactly a hot rod to drive, more a devastatingly effortless and refined

ground-coverer. The ASR traction control device (which you can't switch off) does the necessary when you attempt to deploy the full 326bhp through the rear wheels, so a floored throttle blasts 3800lb of Teutonic anonymity off the line with barely a squeak.

Top speed is governed to 156mph and 60mph appears from a standing start after 5.9 seconds, with a refined multi-valve growl from the V8 as it winds out to 6200rpm. Huge thrust doesn't begin until 3800rpm so, using the close ratios in the smooth-changing automatic, you have to rev the engine quite hard.

The traction control can be a bit frustrating. Power oversteer on demand seems like the whole point of a big V8-powered rear-wheel drive saloon like this, but the ASR raps your knuckles with a flashing triangle on the dash should you attempt to deploy too much power at the wrong moment.

Through faster corners it just feels massively poised and capable. It doesn't roll to any significant degree, yet somehow the ride is excellent. The steering is rewardingly meaty in feel, well-weighted and communicative through the large, unpromising-looking helm.

The E500 should make the shortlist of anyone looking for a quick, practical, modern classic that will probably gain value in the future. It remains entirely practical today, although it was only ever available with left-hand drive. Robert Schmitt, the Swiss Cottage Mercedes specialist, uses this car on a daily basis and says 20mpg is a reality with sensible driving.

A budget of £10,000-12,000 will buy a good one just now and the 500E appears to have few durability problems. It comes from an era when Mercedes still took great pride in its build quality. My guess is your biggest problem might be finding somebody who wants to sell their E500.

It was a favourite with racing drivers of the day, in much the same way the 300SEL 6.3 and 450SEL 6.9 models had been in the Sixties and Seventies. That's quite a tradition to live up to. **OC**

1994 MERCEDES-BENZ E500

Engine 4973cc, V8, dohc per bank, 32-valve, variable inlet timing, Bosch electronic fuel injection and engine management **Power and torque** 326bhp @ 5700rpm; 347lb ft @ 3900rpm
Transmission Four-speed automatic, rear-wheel drive, traction control **Suspension** Front: independent, MacPherson struts, lower wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar. Rear: independent, five-link axle, coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar **Steering** Recirculating ball, power-assisted **Brakes** Front: vented discs. Rear: solid discs, servo-assisted **Weight** 3740lb (1696kg)
Performance Top speed: 156mph; 0-60mph: 5.9sec **Cost new** £58,949 **Value now** £12,000