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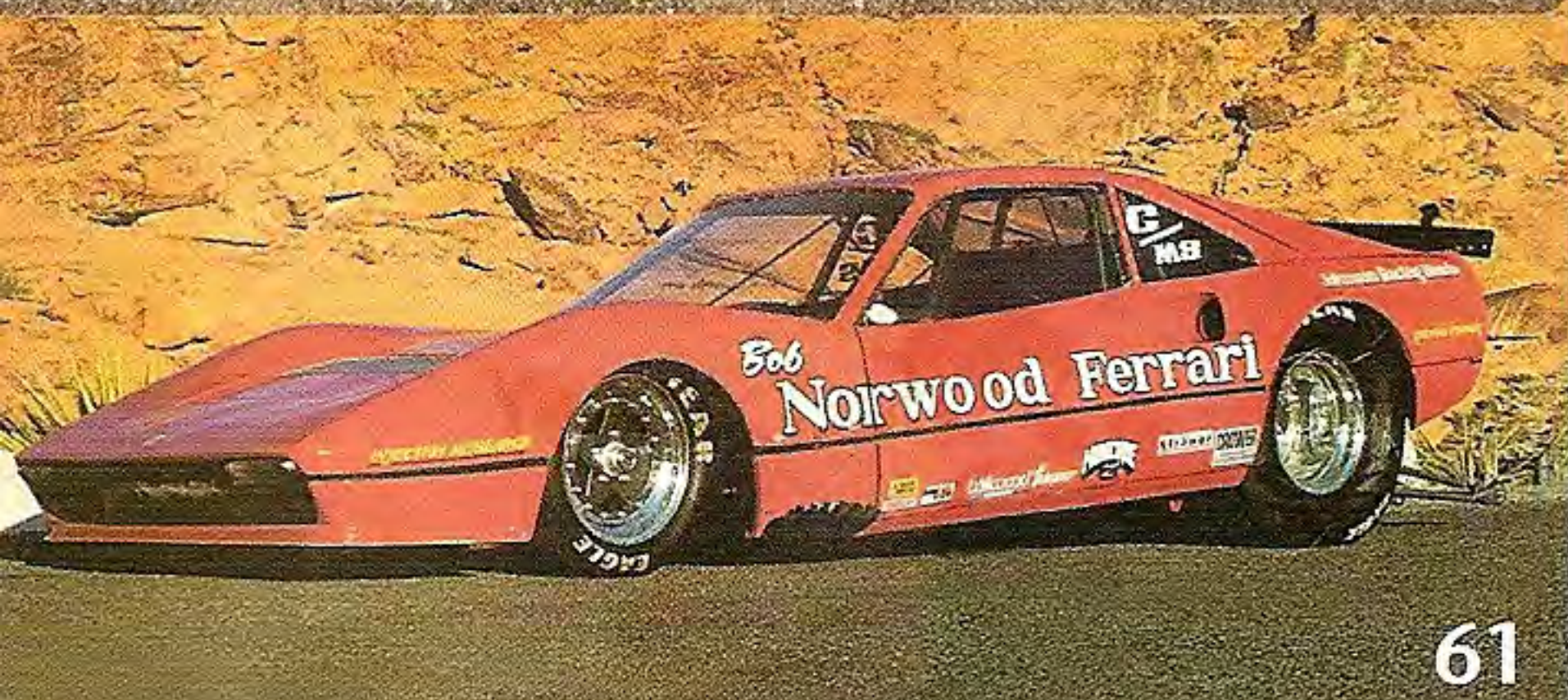


430 SCUDERIA

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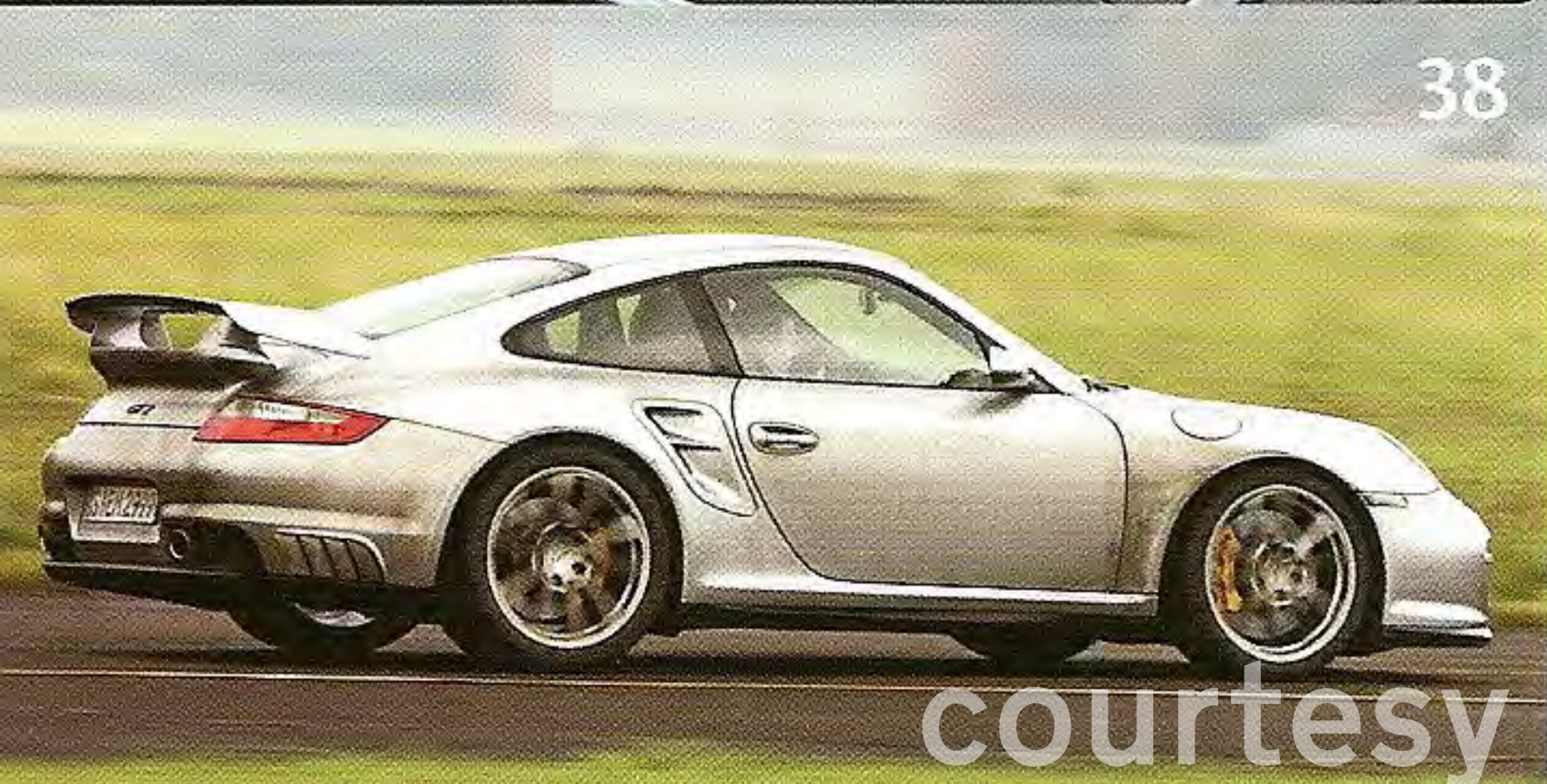
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courtesy



Can't Touch This

For a sedan to hit 188 mph back in 1987 was a very big deal.
No wonder the Mercedes-Benz 300E 6.0 AMG was called the Hammer.

by ALEX PALEVSKY
photography by ERIC SIMPSON



It was pretty much a given that AMG would drop the V8 from the large S-Class sedan into the mid-size W124-generation E-Class chassis. After all, the Affalterbach, Germany-based company had built its reputation modifying and racing the V8-powered 300SEL 6.3 in the late 1960s, so the concept of a modern AMG super sedan must have made perfect sense to founders Hans-Werner Aufrecht and Erhard Melcher in the post-OPEC-embargo 1980s. What the two men could not have predicted, however, is that their 300E 5.0 AMG and its subsequent larger-capacity variations would quickly become automotive icons of such notoriety that they would acquire a very special nickname: The Hammer.

Though the origin of this moniker isn't definitively known (it probably comes from the German expression "das ist die Hammer," which roughly translates as "that's the bomb"), there can be no doubt that the 375-horsepower 300E 6.0 AMG, as the most potent iteration of the Hammer was officially known, stunned the world when it became the first production sedan to top 300 km/h (186 mph) during a 1987 top-speed test organized by *Road & Track*. To put that into perspective, a stock 300E, powered by a 188-hp inline-6, topped out at a measly 136 mph. Especially for American enthusiasts, the Hammer is the car that put AMG on the map.

At roughly four times the price of a standard E-Class—its sticker was \$161,422 back in '88—only 50 Hammers were produced and they are now highly sought-after by collectors, making any opportunity to drive one exceptionally rare. So when this

pristine, European-spec example was shipped Stateside to help celebrate AMG's 40th anniversary, we jumped at the opportunity to experience the car that caused such a sensation two decades ago.

Most AMG products from the '80s wore the company's trademark monochromatic paint scheme, and this 6.0-liter Hammer is no exception. All the factory chrome has been sprayed to match the body color, leaving the polished lips of the AMG Monoblock wheels as the sole flashes of silver in a sea of metallic black. Though the one-piece AMG Monoblock wheels could be tucked under the standard bodywork, this particular Hammer sports the later three-piece alloys that measure a substantial 8.5 x 17 inches up front and 10 x 17 inches in the back—wide enough to require that AMG flare the fenders to accommodate them. This broadened stance brings some much-needed aggression to the rather staid E-Class styling, and we have to wonder if it is merely a coincidence that Mercedes-Benz chose a very similar aesthetic for its own 500E just a few years later.

In keeping with the exterior theme, black is also the dominant color inside the cabin. The Recaro "Classic" front seats may be almost as much of an '80s icon as the Hammer itself, and they are vastly superior to the flat and unsupportive Mercedes items from that era. Most adjustments are still made via the factory power seat controls, which remain the most intuitive in the world. Other AMG-specific interior upgrades include a four-spoke steering

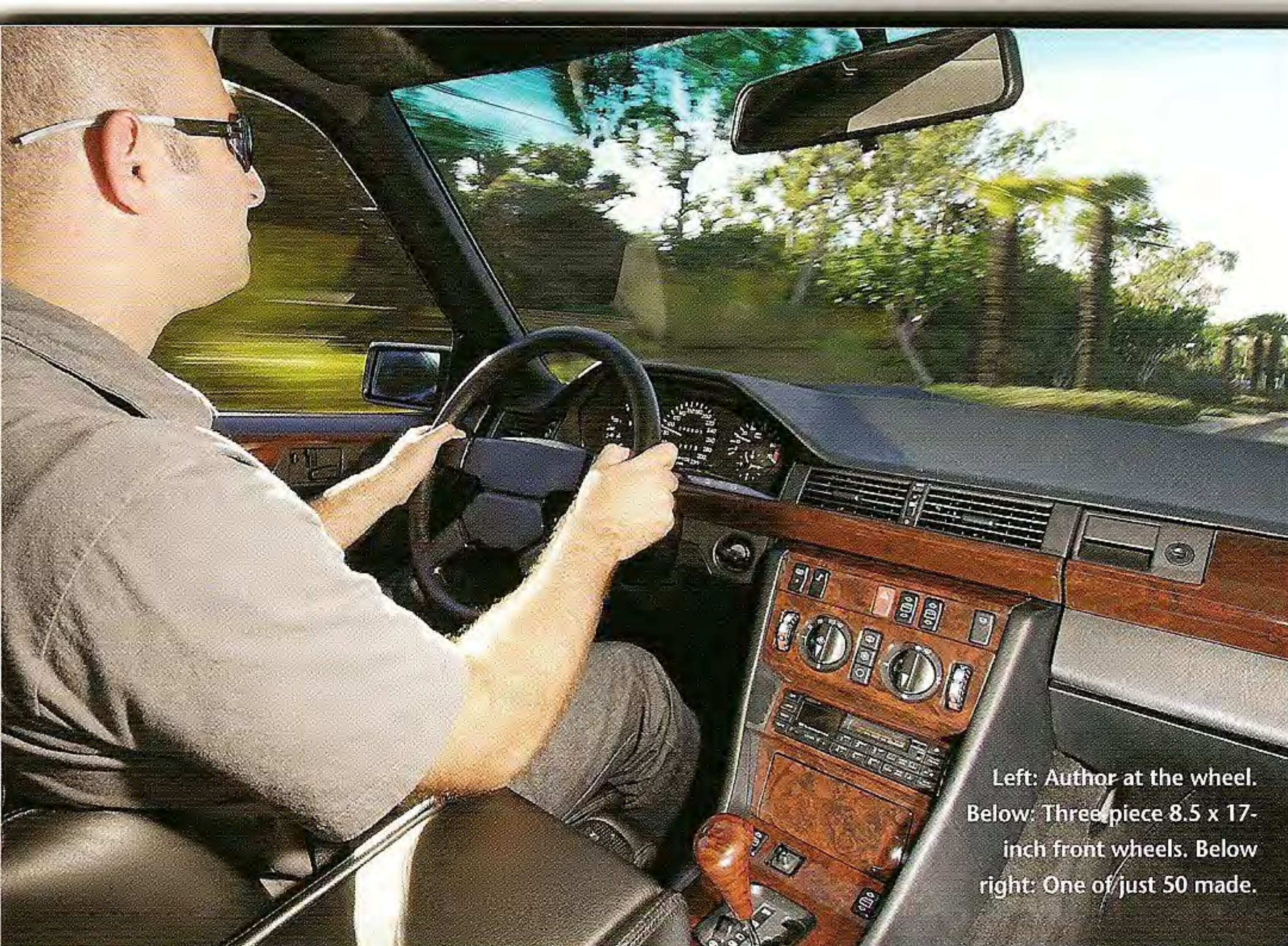


Above: Blacked-out AMG look. Below, left to right: AMG steering wheel, Recaro seats, 375-hp 6.0-liter V8.

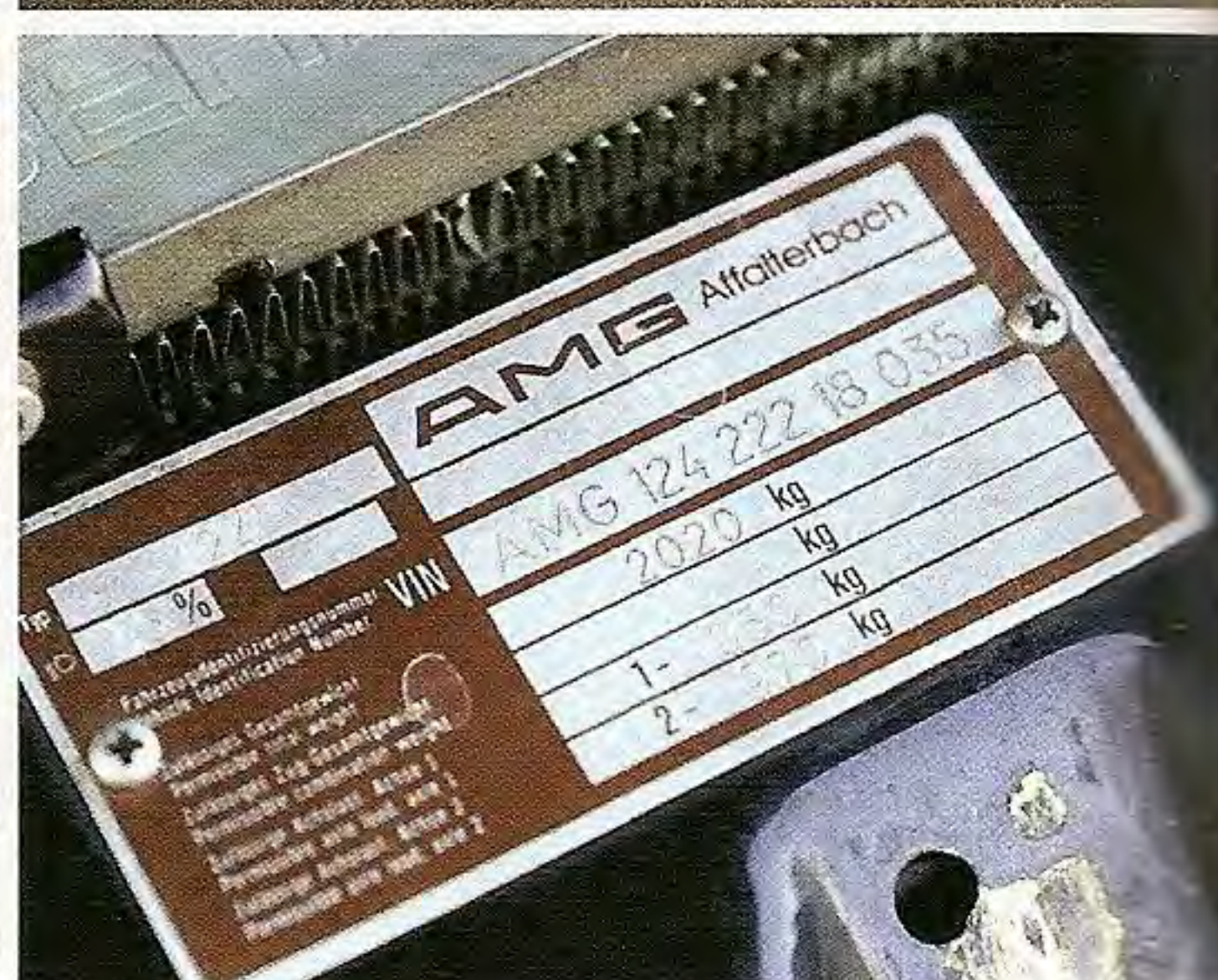




courtesy of 500espot.com



Left: Author at the wheel. Below: Three-piece 8.5 x 17-inch front wheels. Below right: One of just 50 made.



wheel and 320-km/h speedometer, plus a very large secondary ashtray mounted just behind the gear selector, trimmed in matching walnut wood. This addition necessitated that the front window switches be relocated to just ahead of the shift lever, while the rear window controls are now positioned above the ventilation knobs, next to the other auxiliary functions.

A brief whine of the starter motor brings the Hammer to life. The hand-built engine sounds downright mean even at idle, where the aggressive cams bestow the exhaust note with an uneven burble that would be right at home at a Detroit-area drag strip, circa 1969. You'd think such a beastly machine would want to blast into hyperspace with just the smallest prod of the accelerator, but the Hammer is actually quite docile once on the move. In fact, it doesn't launch off the line with anywhere near the same kind of brute force as a modern E55 or E63. That's because AMG's four-valve V8 is actually a relatively rev-happy motor that does its best work at the top end. Thanks to the blueprinting and balancing it received, it's smooth at

high rpm. Unfortunately, the automatic transmission has just four forward ratios and Autobahn-biased ratios, so it's hard to keep the revs up—though with no electronic traction control, the tall gearing helps preserve the life of the rear tires.

This is a very frustrating car to drive in congested Southern California. Just when the motor starts to really open up, you have to slow down for traffic or the threat of law enforcement. It's a vehicle that longs for uninterrupted stretches of open highway and a driver with a blatant disregard for the cost of fuel. Nonetheless, we were able to sample the raw strength of the Hammer on several brief occasions. Once it hits its stride, this is one ferocious sedan.

We found the best way to extricate all 375 horses is to cruise along at a gentle 40 mph or so, then stomp hard on the accelerator. After a fairly brutal kickdown, the snarling V8 explodes and the speedometer starts to spin at a startling pace. Keep the throttle planted and the motor will pull like a runaway freight train all the way to the 6,000-rpm redline. You better have lots of open road

ahead because by that time the Hammer will be traveling well into triple-digit speeds.

In other respects, the Hammer feels much like any conventional '80s Mercedes. The recirculating-ball steering is smooth and nicely weighted, but not exactly brimming with feedback. The suspension, though noticeably more taut than usual, remains more than comfortable enough for everyday driving. Only the upgraded brakes have a distinctly firmer feel than a standard 300E's, lacking that soft initial bite that was typical of Mercedes stoppers back in the '80s. Considering the speeds that this car is able to attain, it's reassuring to know the brakes can slow things down in a hurry.

It's hard not to have immense respect for what AMG accomplished with the Hammer. A top speed of 188 mph was impressive enough for any car in 1987, let alone one that could seat five people in air-conditioned comfort. Even today, there are only a handful of sedans that could force a Hammer to yield its position in the inside autobahn lane. Not coincidentally, most of them also happen to hail from Affalterbach. ●

Building a Hammer

THERE ARE VERY FEW PEOPLE LEFT at AMG who worked on the Hammer back in the day—long before AMG became a subsidiary of Mercedes-Benz—and fewer still who remember enough to paint a comprehensive picture of this seminal car. But Hartmut Feyhl, owner of Florida-based Mercedes tuner RENNtech, is one of them. Feyhl worked for AMG in the mid-'80s and went on to head the technical department of AMG North America.

"The first Hammer we ever built in Germany was based on a 4-cylinder 200E," Feyhl explained. "We experimented with the 5.0-liter engine from the W126 S-Class first, as we were already tuning it. In the ensuing months, we developed 5.2-, 5.4- and then 5.6-liter versions in two-valve form.

"Mercedes brought out the M117 5.6-liter engine in the S-Class in 1986, which effectively put paid to our enlarged displacement motors. But by this time we had our new 4-valves-per-cylinder DOHC heads, though they were very expensive and not all our customers ordered them." It would be several more years before Mercedes offered its own twin-cam, 4-valve V8.

The 5.6-liter four-cam motor in the 300E 5.6 AMG had the standard Mercedes bore and stroke of 96.5 x 94.8 mm; it made 360 horsepower at 5,500 rpm and 377 lb-ft of torque at 4,000 rpm. The enlarged 6.0-liter engine had a 100 x 95.8-mm bore and stroke. With a 9.2:1 compression ratio, the U.S. version was good for 375 hp at 5,500 rpm and 407 lb-ft of torque at 4,000 rpm; the European version had slightly higher 9.8:1 compression and produced 385 hp and 417 lb-ft of torque.

The making of a Hammer involved stripping a donor car, cutting into the metal in the engine bay for clearance, fabricating new bulkhead sections and reinforcing the engine bay and some other parts

where necessary. "The frame rails toward the rear of the engine bay had to be modified to take the larger V8," Feyhl told us. "We welded in stiffeners and made up a new firewall that was also removable. Clearance was particularly tight at the rear left side where the exhaust manifold had to miss the steering box. The rear subframe, propshaft and driveshafts were upgraded to take the much more potent engine, and we also added a U.S.-made Gleason-Torsen differential."

According to Feyhl, driving the early Hammers was quite an experience, as they were very much works in progress. "I personally built the second-ever Hammer," he recalls. "When I had finished, I was supposed to bring it down to Estoril. The Hammer was to be the medical car for the Formula 1 race, and so I set off, hoping to make it in record time.

"This was the first high-speed long-distance run I did with the car, and believe me, it was an adventure," Feyhl continued with obvious emotion. "The car had standard single-piston 300E brakes and very lightly uprated suspension. With nearly double the standard power and a ton more torque, it was really scary. A couple of times when trucks pulled out on me on the autobahn, I thought I was not going to make it. When I reached the French border, I had to brake hard from over 200 km/h, and by

the time I pulled up beside the French customs officer, the brakes were almost on fire. I used up one set of brakes going down to Portugal and one coming back!"

In 1990, right at the end of Hammer production, the last few cars left the works fitted with the 326-hp 5.0-liter 32-valve DOHC V8 from the new 500SL. The use of this motor brought the Hammer concept closer than ever to the production 500E that Porsche began building for Mercedes in 1991. AMG had paved the way.—*Ian KuaH*



Above: Hartmut Feyhl.
Below: Ultra-rare, right-hand-drive Hammer.



PHOTO IAN KUAH