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MERCEDES-BENZ 500SL BY RENNTECH

Taking Mercedes' star car to the next power

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THREE DAYS IN THE SLAMMER



*Add a six-liter engine
to a 500SL Mercedes,
and what do you get?
More than you
probably need.*



Delray Beach, Florida—

It's spring break in Florida, so the usual conditions prevail. You know, airplane-towed happy hour ads flapping in a bleached blue sky, wet-T-shirt contests, high-season hotel rates, and lots of firm collegiate flesh. With the North still shrouded in low-temperature air, its landscape decorated with dead-stick trees, what better place is there to promenade a jet black Mercedes 500SL with gnarly AMG wheels and a muscular 6.0-liter V-8 warbling quietly under the long shiny hood?

Why six liters of V-8? you might ask. Weren't the original five liters enough? In answer we refer to the movie *Arthur* and Dudley Moore's riposte when somebody told him he'd had enough to drink. He said, "I want more than enough." This car is for people who want more than enough. More than enough torque to break the big ten-inch-wide Pirelli P7s loose and spin them to the engine cutout point before the car has run twelve feet. More than enough to reel the SL from 65 to 100 mph, like *that*, without even kicking down. And it's certainly enough to convince the on-lookers that the driver is a person of substance and undoubted good taste.

Even without the seventeen-inch three-piece wheels and AMG body kit, a Mercedes-Benz 500SL has presence. But this Renntech car is in the spirit of the AMG 300E Hammer conversion; we

could call it the SLammer. So there was no need for the designer of the aftermarket moldings you see on this car to go overboard for a more aggressive look. The result, we think you'll agree, is a subtly revised exterior that lends the mildest element of venom to the SL's already squat stance. The effect was readily apparent when we were shooting sunset shots in the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Preserve. Parked on the brow of a boat-launching pad, the SL hung like a poised obsidian predator, looking every bit as menacing as the languid alligators cruising the nearby Everglades.

The exterior appearance is enhanced by bits that came in a box marked AMG, but most of the Renntech conversion is in-house work. And although it's true that company president Hartmut Feyhl is a former assistant manager of the AMG engine department, there is no formal licensing arrangement between his Florida-based corporation and the German aftermarket giant. Call it a gentleman's agreement, if you like. However, Renntech's SL conversion is based on AMG's format, which in turn was developed with a lot of Mercedes-Benz oversight. The relationship is pretty symbiotic these days. In fact, a German equivalent of our antitrust laws is all that prevented a recent attempted buyout of AMG by the Stuttgart carmaker.

Thus, when Mercedes said it did not want AMG to modify the suspension, the suspension went unaltered. No prob-

BY BARRY WINFIELD

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG JAREM



Three-piece AMG wheels (left) are better-looking, much wider, and—at \$1300 apiece—a lot more expensive than the stock items. Burlled walnut interior trim (right) looks rich and demands equally wealthy owners. In motion (below), the Benz is a powerful statement of style and prestige.



With a shorter, brighter final-drive ratio, the car gets off the line fast, easing away from traffic on a mere whiff of throttle.

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lem—it's certainly good enough for the road, if a touch too soft for a racetrack. We discovered *that* after the managers of Moroso Motorsports Park and a Skip Barber Racing School instructor named Bruce MacInnes allowed us a few laps between instruction sessions and pointed out a few neat cornering procedures besides. The car is fast, no mistake, but its roll-soft setup, comparatively lazy engine (redline 6000 rpm), automatic transmission, and overtaxed brakes do not equip it for the harsh demands of a track like Moroso. Still, it was a good opportunity to test the car's handling, demonstrating the SL's safe understeer; we also learned the car can be coaxed into oversteer with judicious application of its 406 pounds-feet of torque.

Despite the generous grip afforded by the low-profile P7s, the SL does not have the snappiest turn-in we've ever seen. In fact, the combination of weight and good yaw damping makes the car less than responsive on a track, but these characteristics well suit its role of grand tourer, making the car extremely stable at high speed. Designed to cosset its passengers, the car does not feed back detailed minutiae about the workings of its various parts. The elemental stuff comes through, but the subtextual nuances of ride and powertrain are considered undesirable clutter by the makers of genteel sports cars, so the big two-seater's speed is deceptive. When you're

floating into the esses at the end of the back straight with only a muted V-8 overrun basso and some wind noise to warn you, it's advisable to pay close attention to the velocity you've encouraged from this 4000-plus-pound roadster. Its cushioned poise and well-disciplined suspension give it safe handling characteristics, but the SL will still mow down several acres of saw grass before depositing you in the bog if you get it wrong.

On the road, the car offers the kind of well-isolated ride that will suit its probably patrician clientele. There's some thumping from the big tires, but it's tightly contained by the stiff structure and strong, well-cushioned suspension. The steering is the best of all Benzes', with immediate off-center response and damped, deliberately weighted action at all times. The driveline is similarly creamy, wafting the car away from rest and slurring the shifts so that nothing interferes with the express-elevator sensations. Only when you floor the throttle abruptly does the 6.0-liter car show some teeth. The box dips quickly into a lower ratio, the engine soon issuing the slightly metallic hammering of a multi-valve V-8 at full gallop.

Because the stock final-drive ratio has been changed from 2.65:1 to a shorter, brighter 3.06:1, the car gets off the line fast, easing away from traffic on a mere whiff of throttle. With full throttle and





Wide Pirelli P7 tires offer plenty of grip without hurting the ride. Add-on body parts (right) are subtly integrated in overall SL style. Hartmut Feyhl (bottom right) is a former AMG engine department man and a former kart and Formula Ford European championship contender.



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manual shifts, you can run 0-to-60-mph sprints in about 5.4 seconds. Keep going, and you'll soon bump against the speed limiter at 155 mph. Flexibility is the car's strong suit, and in top-gear cruising mode it takes only an extra inch or so of pedal depression for marked increases in speed. Clearly, the 6.0-liter conversion is for people who like the big-cube feel now celebrated mostly in memoriam by muscle-car fans. With this much displacement, a stab at the throttle equals a huge lunge into the distance, but the Renntech SL does it with suave savagery, not violence.

Credit for that is due to Mercedes for the remarkable engineering job it did on the SL, and to Renntech for not compromising the car's inherent civility. Feyhl simply fits a mildly modified crankshaft from the 5.6-liter factory V-8 and bores out the block to 100 millimeters. The latter task is trickier than it sounds, because the hypereutectic alloy cylinders require a specific etching and honing process to bring the silicon crystal elements to bear on the iron-plated, cast-alloy replacement pistons. An AMG-developed engine control module is fitted, but the rest of the engine and transmission remains standard.

That's it—the classic big-bore conversion—and it retains all of the original engine's tractability and emissions controls while providing a handy increase in response and performance. You can hear it as well as feel it: The bigger ex-

halations come down the stock exhaust plumbing with a deeper rumble than you find in a 5.0-liter car. The only other palpable evidence of Renntech's tampering is a gentle tugging from the rear end in tight turns. There's a 40 percent lockup limited-slip differential at the rear axle preventing the 381-bhp engine from smoking the inside wheel in turns.

Altogether, it's an undeniably slick piece. Mercedes cars are carefully engineered entities, and they need equally careful aftermarket work if you are to preserve that valuable sense of integrity. Feyhl is the natural replacement for AMG's prior U.S. import channel. His careful, conservative, and plainly honest approach guarantees that you will get what you pay for. Which is just as well, for the prices are steep. The engine conversion costs \$22,500, plus \$1250 for installation. Wheels are \$1300 apiece, and the body kit runs another \$7480, painted and installed. To these costly items you may add tires at \$270 each, a limited-slip diff with lower final-drive at \$3635, and a recalibrated speedometer, at \$550, to deal with the revised gearing. Finally, for that classy touch, there's a full burled walnut interior treatment (including the shifter knob) for \$2600, plus \$280 for installation.

It's all beautiful stuff, carefully fitted, and obviously not cheap. So if, like Dudley Moore's Arthur, you, too, want more than enough, it would help to have his kind of bankroll.



RENNTECH MERCEDES-BENZ 500SL

Base price \$95,150/price as tested \$145,115
(includes \$1050 gas guzzler and estimated \$6250 luxury taxes)

GENERAL:

Front-engine, rear-wheel-drive convertible
2-passenger, 2-door steel body

POWERTRAIN:

32-valve DOHC V-8, 363 cu in (5956 cc)
Power DIN 381 bhp @ 5800 rpm
Torque DIN 406 lb-ft @ 4000 rpm
4-speed automatic transmission

CHASSIS:

Independent front and rear suspension
Variable-power-assisted recirculating-ball steering
Vented front disc, rear disc brakes
235/45ZR-17 front, 265/40ZR-17 rear Pirelli P7 tires

MEASUREMENTS:

Wheelbase 99.0 in
Length x width x height 176.0 x 71.3 x 51.2 in
Curb weight 4163 lb
Fuel capacity 21.1 gal