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FIRST DRIVE



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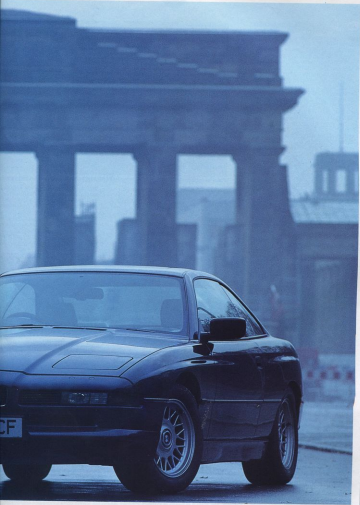
New Bentley coupé



Berlin Haul

Phil Llewellyn drives a BMW 850i, a potent symbol of what West Germany achieved, to Berlin and beyond in a testing 2200-mile slog

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TIM ANDREW





DAWN COULD HAVE BEEN FASHIONED from wet cement by a manic depressive artist. Sullen grey light oozes into the cold, damp November sky, enabling me to identify the Russian soldiers and T-34 tanks. They guard the lofty memorial to millions of comrades who died between 1941 and 1945, when Adolf Hitler shot himself in the nearby Fuhrerbunker. This is Berlin, the capital whose *gotterdamung* at the hands of Marshal Georgi Zhukov's avenging armies was chronicled by Cornelius Ryan in *The Last Battle*. Soviet forces massed for the final assault on the inner city included almost 500,000 troops, 1500 tanks and wheel-to-wheel artillery.

The city is no longer divided by the infamous wall, built in 1961, which epitomised the stark difference between western democracy and die-hard socialism. But this misty apology for a dawn preserves the atmosphere beloved and exploited by a generation of writers and film directors. In spirit, if not in fact, this is still, for me, the enclaved Berlin of Len Deighton and John le Carré, of the KGB and CIA, of deception and blackmail.

Traffic is nose to tail in the brightly lit western half of the city, beyond the 630-acre Tiergarten Park. But the area near the Brandenburg Gate and the Reichstag building, which Marshal Zhukov regarded as the very heart of Hitler's depraved Nazi empire, is virtually deserted. Where the best-known section of the wall ran remains in something of a limbo, while the city adjusts to its new-



Fancy gadgets on this £60,581 BMW include electronically adjustable steering wheel with memory

found unity. So we park where we want to park, despite these locations being comparable to Marble Arch and Whitehall in the middle of rush-hour London.

The car is significant. Photographer Tim Andrew and I have travelled to Berlin in a BMW 850i. Sleek, expensive and powerful, the new coupé is a symbol of what West Germany achieved, after emerging from the blackened rubble of war, and of what

the future holds for those who lived on the other side of the Iron Curtain.

The 850i is greeted with gasps and gapes by wide-eyed folk whose previous status symbols have been Trabants and Wartburgs. Their reaction is nothing if not predictable. But the 850i also commands attention while cruising along the Kurfurstendamm, western Berlin's answer to Oxford Street and Broadway.



BMW's 5.0-litre V12 engine gives 300bhp at 5200rpm, and 325lb ft of torque at 4100rpm. Flooring the throttle always gives turbine-like acceleration



BMW's leather-trimmed cabin, against 1952 mural depicting hearty communists having fun

Given the choice, I would not have started my five-day, 2,200-mile relationship with BMW's flagship on a wet evening in central London's traffic as at its best demented. That's no time for a sunny bumpkin to start getting acquainted with a big, fancy car while keeping one eye on the A-Z.

Big is one of several key words, though little more than a two-seater, the

650i covers slightly more of the plane's surface than a Ford Sierra estate. It weighs as much as two top-of-the-line Fiestas. Judged by these standards, the old 635 CS was a pared-down paragon of efficient space utilisation.

Fortunately, the 650i has what it takes to make a newcomer feel at ease. For a start, it looks solid enough to provide adequate protection when battling in a

benefic world of black cabs, buses and cars driven by crazed commuters. True to BMW's philosophy, which appeals to your liberal reporter's more conservative instincts, the coupé eschews flights of styling fancy in favour of smooth, clean lines sculpted to give a 0.29 drag coefficient. Some pundits have marked the 650i down for looking bland, which is often a synonym for discreet and understated. The coupé pleases the eye of the beholder. It looks potent, but in the manner of a superbly fit heavyweight boxer rather than that of a world champion sprinter. Muscular is a word that springs to mind. Like does not.

Inside, leather-trimmed seats and doors complement the neat, functional cockpit layout that has become a BMW hallmark. Fancy gadgets include an electrically adjustable steering wheel, complete with a memory, and separate air-conditioning controls for driver and passenger. The front windows are automatically lowered a fraction of an inch when a door opens, then raised when it closes, to ensure an exceptionally efficient glass-to-rubber seal. A nearside door mirror that adjusts itself for a view of the kerb, when reverse is selected, is another practical feature.

The most obvious drawback noted before even switching on the engine was the cabin's woeful lack of convenient storage space. The handbook package alone accounts for almost half the space in the split-level glovebox. What might charitably be described as door pockets



BMW 650i's sharp handling belies its size and weight. 60mph is reached in just over seven seconds. Top is an electronically governed 155mph



are too skimpy to take anything more massive than a brace of Mars bars. An interior lacking anywhere for such simple essentials as a road atlas almost inevitably becomes cluttered during the course of a long drive. Ankle-deep debris may not look too bad on the floor of the battered old van used by Paddy O'Hooligan and his workmates. It does nothing to enhance a car listed at £59,500.

The car used for our Destination Berlin operation represented a £60,581 price tag, thanks to such options as an electrically powered blind for the rear window, heated front seats – which should be standard equipment in such an exclusive car – and, more significantly, the M-Technic sports suspension. Standard with the six-speed manual gearbox, this adds an extra £350 to the bill when specified in conjunction with automatic transmission. On the evidence of this exercise, I would want to try an 850i fitted with electronic damper control, an £1160 option, before signing on the dotted line.

Although just about big enough to cater for two people on a two-week holiday, granted careful packing, the boot failed to swallow all of my colleague's photographic equipment. A tripod big enough to be mistaken for one of Marshal Zhukov's 21,000 rocket launchers was consigned to the back seats.

We spent a four-hour night in a Dover hotel, caught a pre-dawn P&O ferry to Calais, then tackled the 600-mile slog to Berlin on a route that skirted Lille, Cologne, Hannover and Magdeburg. Driving on German autobahns, where high speeds are permitted, should have been an immense delight in a car whose prime assets include a 5.0-litre V12 engine from which 300bhp pours forth at 5200rpm. The torque curve reaches its prodigious, 325lb ft peak 1100 revs lower down the scale.

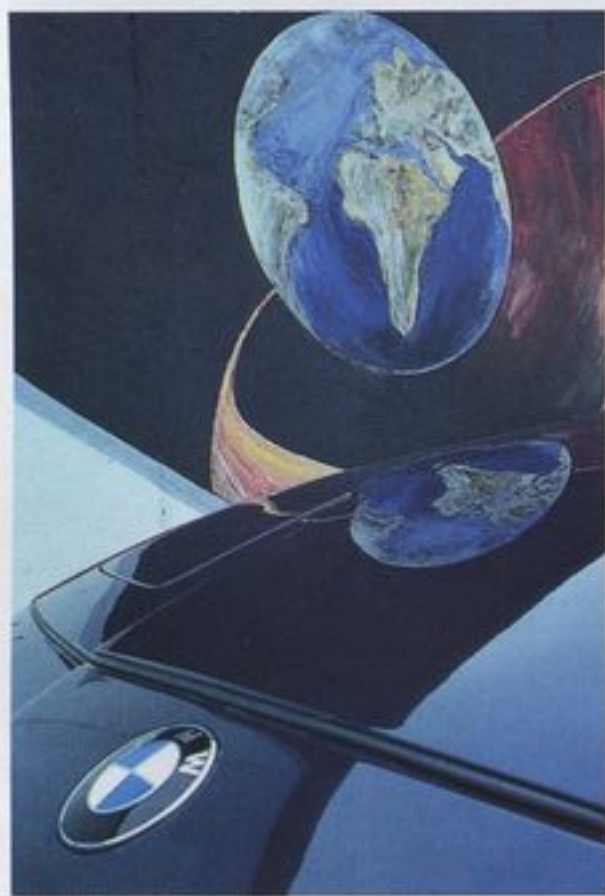
The fact that almost 80 percent of those pounding feet are on parade at only 1000rpm is of more than academic interest when you floor the throttle to produce a solid stream of turbine-like

acceleration. Alas, the ability to accelerate from 0-60mph in just over seven seconds, and to reach an electronically limited 155mph maximum speed, proved no match for a grim combination of heavy traffic, rain and roadworks. Despite wasting no time at all – lunch was nothing more elaborate than an on-the-move snack – the Bavarian *wunderwagen* averaged a modest 52mph. The more stoical side of my character said that making slow progress in leather-upholstered luxury was just a tad preferable to travelling even slower in a 20-year-old Trabant made from recycled toilet paper.

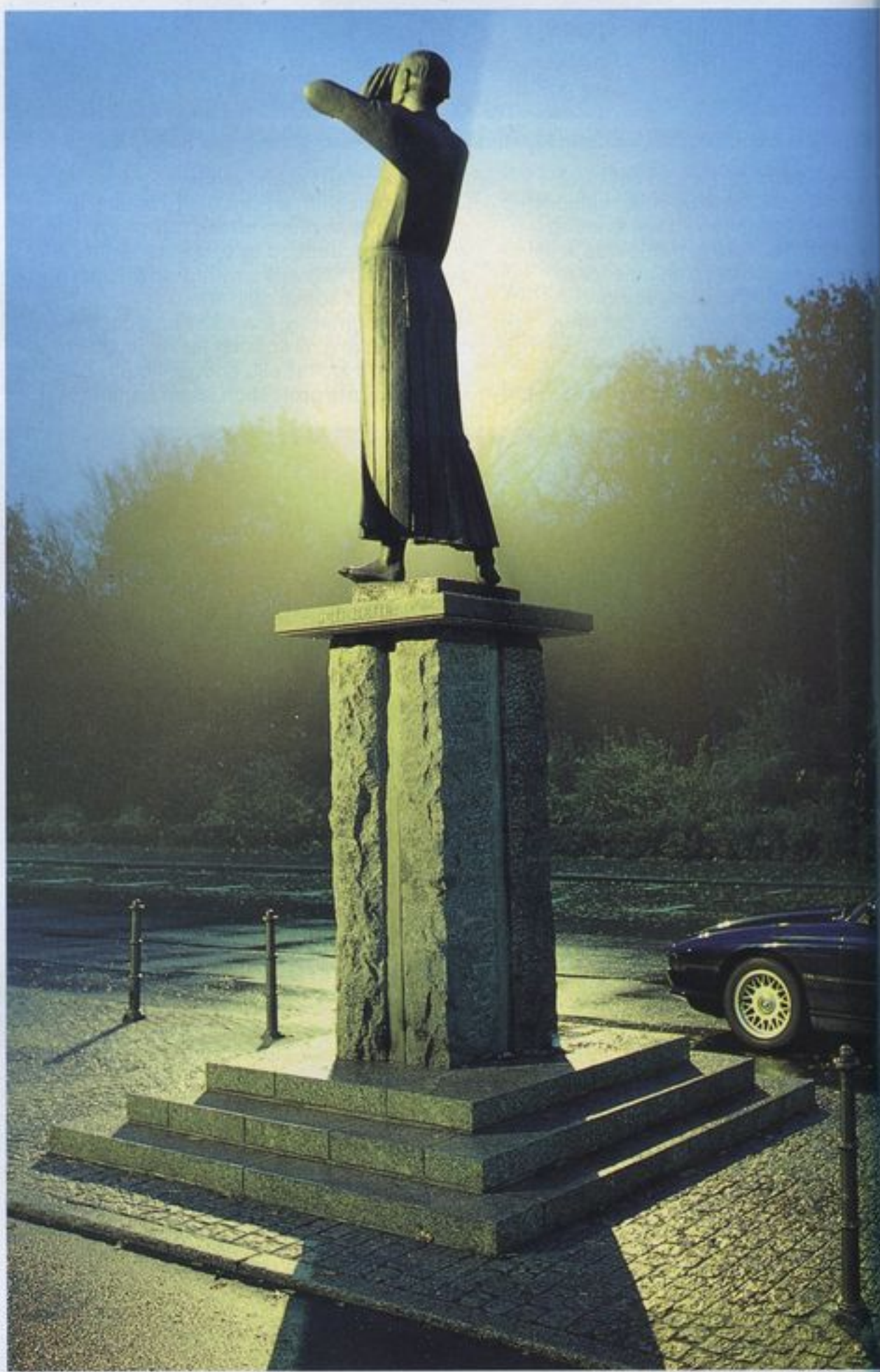
Exhaust smoke trailed by Trabbies reminded me that the 850i's air-conditioning system incorporates an electrostatically charged synthetic felt

filter, which prevents all manner of nasties from entering the car. Our car was additionally enhanced by BMW's automatic air circulation control system. This £149 option operates flaps that close with a muffled but slightly irritating clunk when sensors detect such pollutants as carbon monoxide and nitrogen oxide. The system caters for specific conditions, such as congested urban traffic, by adapting its 'switching threshold' in line with the average pollution load.

Night had fallen long before we reached the site of what Winston Churchill dubbed the Iron Curtain. I recalled entering East Germany in 1976, en route for the Persian Gulf after an almighty binge on the Harwich-to-Hamburg ferry. A skull-splitting hangover did nothing to bolster morale as we crossed a sinister swathe of barren



Painted part of wall reflected in shiny BMW



A poignant sight: statue in western Berlin faces Brandenburg Gate and shouts for freedom



overlooked by towers bristling with searchlights and listening wires. Steel gates thick with barbed wire angled shut behind us before sullen riders and snarling dogs searched the tick and its two-man crew. Welcome to socialist workers' paradise. Any going respect for the wit and wisdom Karl Marx evaporated within seconds that we had entered was little more than noise for 17,000,000 people.

This time, the contrast consisted of being more bleak or spine-chilling than down-at-heel filling station. Women sued for the loo, just as they had sued for everything else in the DDR. Yes, but the guy who brimmed the BMW at all smiles, possibly because pumping litres into one tank was still a new and thrilling experience. Three hundred

horses had consumed 27.2 gallons of unleaded while covering 576 miles since leaving Calais. That works out at 18.8mpg. Although it put the 850i in the 'Friends of CPEC' category, the overall figure of 17.8mpg was slightly better than expected, in view of the trip's fast-moving finale.

It would be wrong to wheel out the cliché about feeling as fresh as a dew-dropped daisy on arrival. No car, in my experience, could have compensated for such a short night's sleep followed by such a long day's drive in relentlessly miserable conditions. However, we mustered sufficient energy to explore streets at the eastern end of the bustling Kurfürstendamm, where quintessentially German eye-catchers included the Original Irish Pub — 'Guinness from Dublin' — the Ho Lin Wah restaurant, and

a cinema featuring *The Krays*. The ruined Kaiser Wilhelm church appeared to be the only building of merit in a glittering sea of glass, steel and neon.

A room in the Berlin Penta, which has its own underground car park, cost the equivalent of almost £90. I asked a clerk on the reception desk if unity had made much of a difference to the city. He nodded and said, almost apologetically: 'Berlin was a nicer place before, as an island. Now it's far too busy for my liking.'

By the end of the following day, we had breakfasted in the Checkpoint Charlie Bistro — the actual checkpoint is now thronged with souvenir stalls — watched dawn break over the Brandenburg Gate and paused by the plywood crosses that commemorate those who died trying to reach freedom by swimming the River Spree. We had also come to the conclusion that the heart of eastern Berlin, where a number of splendid old buildings have survived, appealed to us far more than its western counterpart.

Late in the afternoon, we chanced on a section of the wall that is now described as the world's largest art gallery. Murals painted within the past year extend for a mile or more. They provided cheerful, hopeful memories of Berlin as the BMW headed due south for a night in Dresden. Sparse traffic encouraged brisk cruising, but the old autobahn's uneven concrete slabs drew attention to the firm hi-Tech suspension's jiggly ride. Bumps and thumps were accompanied by the roar of Uniroyal's 235/50ZR16 Rallye 440 tyres.

Although equally unflattering in this respect, Dresden's damp and cobbled streets spotlighted the value of one of the 850i's most commendable safety features. The automatic stability control system uses state-of-the-art electronics to prevent wheelspin. Being able to boot such a big, torquey car good and hard, without any risk of nose and tail changing place on the road, is one of many reasons why the 850i feels so predictable and trustworthy. Brused by our Berlin Penta night, the budget was now scooped by the Waldpark



angular, but discreet-looking 850i has smooth, clean lines that give it a 0.29 drag factor



Russian army caps at Checkpoint Charlie



Hotel's tariff. A little less than £30 was exchanged for a room with two single beds and a washbasin. We searched in vain for a bath or shower, but found only a loo whose porcelain perch threatened to fall over when sat on. This was more like the East Germany of the mind's eye.

Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia meet within an hour's drive of Dresden, but the temptation to tick two more names off the list of dramatically changed

nations was resisted. Instead, we looped south-westward along rural roads that snaked and switchbacked across rolling hills patchworked with huge fields, extensive forests and pleasant little towns.

We shared this attractive landscape with the inevitable Trabants, most of which produce more smoke than power. At its pathetic best, the little car's 594cc two-stroke engine sounds no more mettlesome than a gnat farting in a

thimble. One of the day's most vivid memories is of a hill on which two Trabants were overtaken, majestically, by a Volvo F12 truck hauling what looked like a fully loaded trailer. On roads such as these, the 850i driver can use his four-speed automatic's S-for-Sport setting to make the most of the 5.0-litre engine.

Nothing more than serendipity took the BMW to Zwickau – 'Home of the Trabant' – where Auto Union's fearsome, rear-engined grand prix cars were built in the 1930s. Admiring locals besieged the 850i while Tim Andrew snapped the 'Home of the Trabant' sign against a back-drop of a hill made beautiful by silver birches.

This was the second 'last shot' of the day. By the time the third was in the bag, well after sunset, we had devoted 10 hours to covering 135 miles. However, Tim's steely determination to return home with outstanding photos was matched by his companion's desire to give the 850i a really good gallop. Until then, circumstances had conspired to mask its true potential. Not having worked with the marathon man before, Tim thought my 'Let's make a run for Calais' suggestion was a joke.

Ten hours and 656 miles later we were awaiting the ferry. The 850i had won its spurs by wafting us to the English Channel by way of Eisenach, Frankfurt, Saarbrücken, Metz and Reims. Running on almost deserted autoroutes, we had crossed northern France in little more than three long-striding hours, but would have been even quicker had strong, rain-laden winds not been encountered



At the end of his 2200-mile slog, writer Llewellyn remained largely uninspired by BMW 850i



Countryside south-west of Dresden turned up a number of pleasant little villages that don't appear to have changed much in more than half a century



between Arras and Calais.

The main gripe came from the passenger seat, where Andrew would have been a lot more comfortable had he been able to rake the backrest to a position nearer the horizontal than the vertical, but truly would also have welcomed one adjustment in that direction.

When it rained, the speed-sensitive tyres made a clicking noise loud enough to be marked down as a source of irritation. Another entry was made in the edit column after the automatic, switched to its E-for-Economy setting, proved a little sluggish when the 850i was being jockeyed into a fast-moving stream of road traffic.

The homeward run didn't end when Andrew was dropped off at his home in London. Llewellyn wasted no time selling in the remainder of the drive's 606 miles. Most of the last hour was spent on similar minor roads where bags of grip, imbued with basically neutral and quite poor handling, helped compensate for the M-Technic suspension's firm ride, but not so firm as to be uncomfortable enough to form huge lumps ruled out trying too hard, but the driving impression was of a car that handles well enough to belie its considerable size and weight.

Sharper steering with more feel would significantly improve its agility, but one wonders how many owners will regard the 850i as anything more than a grand tourer tailor-made for motorways. That is the role it performs with considerable aplomb, but without being appreciably

better than quite a few rivals from the likes of Mercedes and Jaguar.

My feelings about the 850i are symbolised by nothing more positive than a question mark. I like its looks, love its power and appreciate its clever electronics, despite being enough of a Luddite to mutter about there being that many more things to go wrong. On top of all that, the BMW's ability to cover big distances with little effort was proved

beyond all doubt on the dash home.

But the 850i, although admirable in so many ways, failed to generate the sort of excitement that would make me write a cheque for £50,000. Given the choice between the BMW and a Mercedes 500SL, I have to say that I wouldn't bother to flip a coin. While the 850i is a car of exceptional merit, the Mercedes is blessed with a dash of magic that makes the eyes sparkle and the heart beat faster.



Between Dresden and Zwickau, rural roads snake across beautiful rolling hills and fields



It proved an excellent motorway cruiser, but has dull steering, and M-Technic suspension gives jiggly ride. It doesn't excite the way a Merc 500SL does