

car



GERMANY DM18.90 USA \$6.50
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BMW 850i V12 -v- JAGUAR XJR-S V12 -v- PORSCHE 928GTS V8

FIVE POLITICALLY INCORRECT COUPES

(they guzzle gas and go like stink)

And the 50mpg fun cars that will get you there just the same

NAUO

Duly noting that they do 15mpg, occupy more road than some seven-

BUT

to find a place in the world for three, er, lifestyle accessories, the BMW

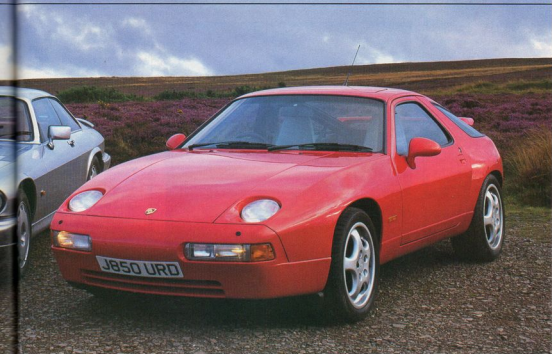


WORTHY

seaters and are no faster than certain saloons, Russell Bulgin tries

NICE

W 850i, Jaguar XJR-S and new Porsche 928GTS PHOTOGRAPHS BY IAN DAWSON



Yes, each of these cars is brilliant. As brilliant in all the hard-to-get good stuff - toe-itch

alacrity, down-the-road grip, the ability to lease trouble before slyly electroneering their way out of it - as you might reasonably expect when appending a signature to a cheque for not less than the thick end of £48,000. They are as brilliant as they have to be, glittering atop the price lists of these respected marques, each a complex totem to corporate ego and the ingrained belief that more is better and might will always out.

And this is no longer enough. That each of these cars also packs a roster of shortcomings which would spell commercial genocide in a less rarefied market sector is worrying, certainly. But once you've gloried with the grip and got hands-on with the handling one question bubbles to the fore: are these cars stimulating harbingers of freedom - intellectual, social and small-p political - in a recessionary era, or just a trio of fat old dinosaurs which should go the way of the stegosaurus, the triceratops and, sadly, Raquel Welch in *One Million Years BC*?

These three cars - the £66,465 BMW 850i with Active Rear Axle Kinematics (hey!), the £48,029 Jaguar XJR-S and the £64,996 Porsche 928GTS also reflect very accurately the current commercial fortunes and product philosophy of their manufacturers. Try this:

Slick as it is, the BMW can't make up its mind whether it wants to be green irrespective of body colour - environmentally responsible in terms of construction and eminently recyclable - or a snorting two-seater for a clientele which wants to mash autobahns into submission, day in, day out.

Financially strapped Jaguar does what any budget-conscious individual would do when tarting up a 17-year-old car; throws a bodykit at it and tunes the engine. The reality of Ford and Jaguar's collective short-termism is Essex Man aesthetics pasted on Great British indomitability.

Having spent the '80s proving you can't sell BSc products with an O-Level marketing strategy, Porsche faces the essential truth about the 928 - not enough people want one - and

revivifies it the only way the company knows: by throwing more engineering at it. More power, more grip, more... just more.

And before casting a critical eye over each car, you should file away the following facts. These cars deliver profoundly terrible fuel consumption figures: in the mid-teens after a day of mildly invigorating driving. The Jaguar, for example, has an effective range of around 250 miles, which limits its appeal as a transcontinental mile-eater. You can stuff the glovebox with freebie-tokens in no time at all, though.

Such is the combination of dynamic competence and sheer mass of these cars that the effort demanded to touch the limit on the public road should be sufficient to have the driver registered clinically berserk.

You can't begin to explore the twilight zone of apex-sliding fun in these cars without putting your licence

and other road users at considerable - some would say unconscionable - risk. If you can quantify such an intangible, you might surmise that you can use 30 percent of the available performance without attracting attention from any policeman with a Panda car and polite radio manner.

Each machine displays a rare level of packaging incompetence. Plan area plus a nodding acknowledgement to seating capacity is a good rule of thumb to the sheer zappability - summer morning, winding road, grin gleaming Colgate factor five - of a performance road car. A Mazda MX-5 seats two in comfort and occupies a veneer of asphalt 13ft 1in by 5ft 6in; each of the cars tested does precisely the same job but takes a lot more metal to make its point.

These cars are each within an inch of 6ft across the flanks, with the Jaguar and BMW stretching the

tape at 15ft 8in long with the Porsche 10in shorter. A Mercedes-Benz W124 saloon is 15ft 8in long and can carry four in comfort, plus a week's shopping, the dog and granny's travel requisites; if you wish to deal in absolutes, note that a Renault Espace is two inches shorter and two inches narrower than the Porsche and can lug five easily, seven if chummy.

But, you will say, that's not the point. These cars are not meant to be sensible, to be relentlessly practical. Maybe not; maybe they should be. Why do manufacturers make strenuous efforts radically to improve their everyday cars in terms of fuel efficiency, performance, accommodation and ecological responsibility only to cap the range with a supremely paunchy, uselessly fast old bloater?

Because, of course, there is a market for the car as jewellery, the car as status, the car as self-aggrandisement. If a gold Rolex Daytona chronograph costs £9800 and tells the time with the accuracy of a 12 quid Casio, then a £65,000 Porsche which cruises the middle lane at 70mph makes perfect sense. To some people.

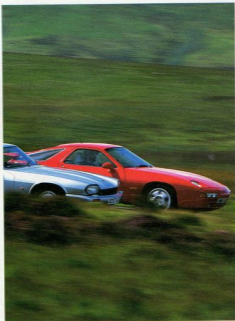
So what of the reality of driving these cars? First, the BMW. A great shape - sinewy, taut - is let down by a lack of confidence at the front end. Perhaps the design team's pencil was worn down; more likely we've all seen a Toyota Supra in the rear-view mirror once too often.

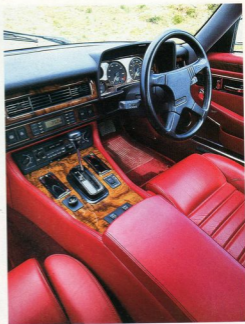
Inside, the cockpit is densely black and argo-BMW to perfection, constructed of a faintly uneasy combination of black synthetics and semi-matt black leather; surfaces of leather-grained plastic abut leather-grained leather. The ambience is Braun travel alarm; blackly black, functional, moderne, eliciting admiration rather than affection.

But the 850i works. As a place to pass the miles in, as a tax-free adjunct to an office, a Club Europe ticket and a platinum American Express card, the 850i interior is an elegant, soothing and high-tech minimalist home from home.

To drive, the BMW 850i is good. Good but not exciting, stimulating or particularly communicative. Springing is lovely, compliant and

'Are these cars the harbingers of freedom - intellectual and small-p political - or just fat old dinosaurs?'





Jaguar V12 is stroked to 6.0 litres; gives smooth 350bhp and thunderous performance. XJR-S chassis and steering are substantially tauter than standard XJS. Cockpit is hedonistic though hardly efficient

motorway-friendly, but with a tendency to turn floaty come the twists.

There's a wedge of disinformation about the steering at straightahead and an elasticity, a faintly artificial self-centring which begins to grate after a while. You don't want to know everything the front wheels are doing - the inevitable Catseye abuse is an irrelevance, for example - but it would be reassuring to scroll more data than the BMW processes.

That V12 engine packs 300bhp, the smoothness of an electric motor and no sense of involvement whatsoever. Even the noise of the motor is fey, like the thrum of distant air-conditioning. The gearbox is clever, with three programmes: E, presumably economy, proving the Germans have a sense of irony; S, sport ditto; and M for manual which no-one would use seriously. S allows you to pull more revs, eke out brio, gusto and a smidge of ker-pow, but the shift quality is always a shade slammy.



This car also has cockpit-adjustable suspension, activated by touching a rocker marked K and S. This proves that BMW has had two opportunities to get its suspension calibration wrong: K is fine on smooth roads but discombobulated on anything pocked and winding, while S is jiggly-hard and recommended solely for those who are drivers amply provided with natural padding.

Even in K(omfort), which is 30 percent softer than standard - and feels it - the 850i will switch to S(port) in



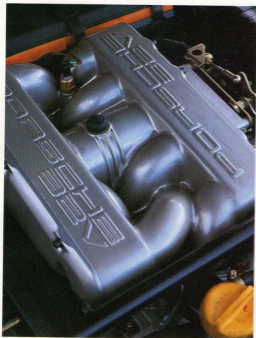
40 milliseconds if you are being particularly aggressive in a bend and all to no great effect as the ride still isn't wholly satisfactory. You can also get the 850i to flick from Float to Stiff at precisely the time it is changing down with a hint of a thump; the effect is to make the 850i seem slightly hesitant, unwieldy, unsettled by the reality of pitch-and-toss B-road topography.

Active Rear Axle Kinematics (that's AHK in abbreviated German) - yours for £4710 in a package which includes the adjustable suspension, ASC+T traction control, Servotronic steering and the electrically adjustable steering column - is BMW's four-wheel steering. Steering wheel angle and road speed are measured and an

electro-hydraulic steering actuator twiddles the rear wheels to suit.

The result, says BMW, is a reduction in understeer (agreed), more precise handling (agreed), improved levels of safety (agreed) and a feeling that, as the non-AHK 850i was hardly likely to throw you into the hedge thanks to a mistimed wriggle of the right foot, it's possibly not worth the extra cash. (BMW would presumably disagree on that one). Switch off the excellent ASC anti-skid control and you can excite a curious flash of oversteer before the AHK comes over all territorial and nudges the rear end back into line.

In present company, the 850i is the slowest, the least engaging in recreational driving and, of course, the most civilised, the easiest to live with, the most elegant, the best built and the car you would pick to drive to Geneva, whatever the weather, whatever the reason. You would always respect such country-crossing abilities, but never fall passionately in love with



Porsche engine is the rortiest here, a multi-valve V8 against the two-valve V12s. It delivers rocket thrust, and the harsh chassis matches it. Cabin is well designed in front, cramped in back, hideous in colour

It as a loyal and faithful servant. Somehow, the BMW 850i is a shade too nice, too pinkly soft, too twee: it tries a mite hard to be friendly and accommodating, offers heart but not soul.

Never forget that the Jaguar XJS began to look remotely acceptable only when it was decapitated into a soft-top. So the bodykit on the JaguarSport-developed XJR-S performs an optical illusion hitherto unknown in contemporary motoring: it distracts your eye from just how terrible the basic car looks, with its stunted cabin, runaway nose and bizarre buttressed rear. Then there's the dreadful new rear end, where neutral density rear lights - late '80s trendy - have a major artistic quarrel with their chrome surround - late '60s forgettable - and all to no real improvement.

That the XJR-S still manages to pack a superb and radically nose-down presence is a credit to the JaguarSport crew but the whole project remains testament to British antique restoration skills. The 5.3-litre V12 is stroked to 6.0



litres and 333bhp, 18 percent up on the standard-car. Uprated springs and Bilstein dampers are a traditional aftermarket stock-in-trade, and the XJR-S also gets a set of slick new wheels wrapped in Goodyear Eagle ZRs.

The Jaguar has the worst cabin of the three, but it is the one you want to spend the most time in. It is, unforgivably, cramped ahead and impossibly tiny aft. Why insert such vestigial rear seats? Only leather-lining the spare wheel well could be more pointless. The shallow screen crams the world into an accelerated Cinemascope and the layout of the dashboard is less considered than the two German cars'.

This Jaguar brandishes



Montegoid column stalks but, then again, it is the cheapest of the three cars by the margin of a Mercedes-Benz 190E 1.8 piled with a few choice extras. Nasty by the standards of Mum and Dad saloons, these wands have no place in the cabin of a Jaguar, matching a slimy facility with the fact that they are cack-hardedly fiddly. Which is a shame. Because for all its faults, the walnut, chrome and creamy Autolux hide never fails to seduce. Just sitting inside the Jaguar makes you feel good; it flatters you like a favourite shirt.

This V12 has grunt and flair to spare. A slug of torque from mid-to-top, an easygoing gait which turns thunderous when you begin to quantify the silkiness of

the carpet with your throttle shoe. What lets the Jaguar down, ironically, is the three-speed GM400 automatic transmission. Conventional wisdom might have it that any car pushing out 365lb ft of eager-to-please torque could get away with only one gear. Conventional wisdom would be wrong.

The XJR-S likes living in top gear. Activating kickdown or even dropping a cog produces a rumbustiousness and major forward surge: this is a sledgehammer attack compared with hitting the reprogramme button in the BMW to achieve much the same end. When in top, the XJR-S possesses an endearingly positive surge to deal with motorway flatsam: again, winding roads get it all out of kilter.

To make the XJR-S handle, JaguarSport has, effectively, de-Jaguard the dynamics of the car. Gone is the pillow-ride and Anadin steering. Instead, you get a firm, well damped motion control that gets fazed only on washboard surfaces, plus slightly nervy and





High-tech BMW is smooth, subtle if massive. Engine feels least brutish of this trio. Electronics are everywhere; driver can feel detached. Even instruments are understated, even lamp washers are electronic

reasonably accurate steering. The XJR-S understeers more than either of its rivals, but once you're used to that, and the way the steering makes you nibble the wheel to the apex, it masters most moves with a real grace.

And a lot of noises off. Above 50mph that thick A-pillar and a door mirror that looks like a chromed Harold Robbins paperback slice up unacceptable levels of wind noise. The leather interior creaks expensively; if the velour and plastic panelling of an econobox was this vocal, you would take it to the dealer for warranty rectification pronto.

James Bond should drive the XJR-S. Tweaked and massaged it may be, but it retains an essentially British charm. As it is, the person who buys this car would be able to lecture you on the benefits of hand-stitched shoes and intends, one day, to own a Bentley Turbo R.

In hot red, the Porsche 928GTS looks like Marilyn Monroe's lipstick trying to wriggle its way out of the tube. The light plays gooey



tricks along its hip-and-thigh flanks: 14 years on, the 928 can still summon gasps from the kerbside. This shape was organic long before designers coined the term.

Maybe that's got something to do with the fact that Porsche has relentlessly funkped up the shape of the car. Viewed from a car following the GTS, those unfathomably huge 255/40ZR17 Bridgestones coated on sinfully spoked alloy wheels simply drop straight out of the wheel-arches, plopp onto the tarmac. If the BMW is sinew and the Jaguar middle-aged spread with a new haircut, then the 928GTS is muscle pumped with clenbuterol.

But inside, the 928GTS displays some hysterically questionable taste. A red exterior was matched to a



pimplastic pale grey leather trim with toning carpets hewn from the stuff furry dice are made from. That the 928GTS has some neat accommodation touches - the way the instrument binnacle adjusts with the steering column up-down remains a delight - the best seats and all-around visibility was completely ignored because the synthetic polar-bear fur on the floor irrevocably grabbed your attention.

The 928GTS is the noisiest. It pokes out a hardcore V8 throb multi-tracked with a four-valve head-thrash. You love the sound, an American muscle car that has graduated from a top European finishing school. However, you can't escape it. And, on top of that, the 928GTS splodges a

ringing tenor ding which seems to percolate up the gear linkage - the five-speed transaxle, don't forget, sits between the rear wheels. There is also considerable tyre swish, road rumble and a feeling that this car is rarer, less couth than the other two.

Your ears do not deceive. The 928GTS is blatantly yobbist. It is also the fastest, the most fun to drive, the most rewarding to drive and the car which results from a manufacturer with the clearest vision of things fatso. Porsche's brief to its engineers must have been something like: make this car involving; make punters fall in love with it; make it bloody fast.

A four-cam V8 taken out to 5.4 litres, 340bhp and hauling 369lb ft of torque seems good enough. When you add in an effective working range of 4000rpm - from 2800rpm to 6800rpm - and a five-speed manual shift which manages to be sloppy, notchy and just about exemplary you have a recipe for real driving fun.

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perfectly weighted and has a wholly mechanical-feeling smoothness as if rifle oil is periodically dripped into its works. Ride? Firm, but consistent - unlike the BMW - and remarkably supple given the tyres look as if they spent a previous life as rubber bands.

An electronically controlled transverse rear diff lock-up - traction control with added pretension - works with genius subtlety, allowing sufficient tail-happiness before cracking the whip. Brakes? ABSed, like in each of these cars, but with a better pedal feel than the slightly softer Jaguar action and more initial bite than the BMW.

Stick the Porsche in third, let the torque carry the day and the 928GTS does what neither of its rivals can manage: it shrinks around you, seems to fade to Mazda MX-5 dimensions. But it makes more demands on your forbearance than the other two.

A deep-rooted lack of manners makes it a less amenable long-distance companion than the 850i or XJR-S: it may offer the



highest reward to the enthusiastic driver, but it will never soothe after a hard day at corporate HQ. This Porsche is pugnacious, up-and-at-'em at all times.

For serious wing-dingery on roads that turn your knuckles a shade paler, you

would take a Lancia Delta HF Integrale or Ford Escort Cosworth RS in preference to any of these cars; those hot homologators flow on roads where the fatties flail. Crossing Europe in an afternoon? None of these cars comes close to offering

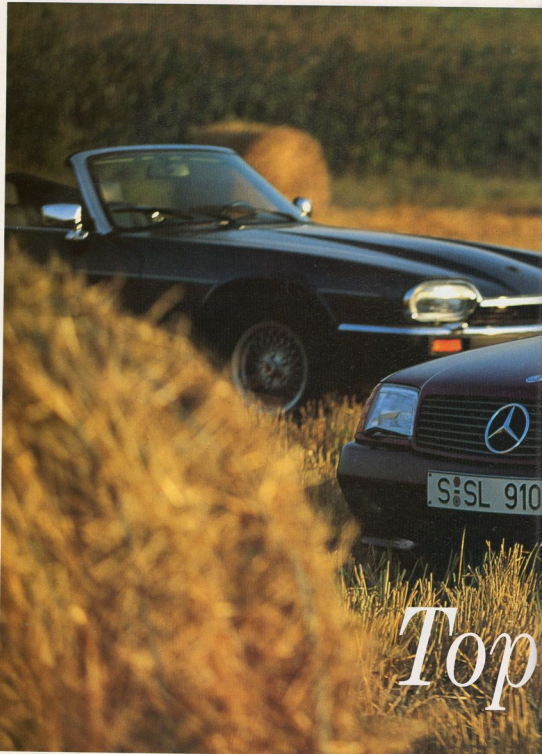
**'Porsche's brief to its engineers:
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the Lexus mix of speed and silence. And, if you wanted a little slice of all these virtues, buy a BMW M5 instead: a blend of handling and pace which outranks two of the three cars here and proffers discretion, a rear seat and a decent boot to boot.

But these cars are not transport in the accepted sense. The way each performs is less important than what they say about the owner: they are lifestyle accessories for people who always know the chic-est holiday location, get the best table in the restaurant and are on first-name terms with their personal financial advisers. If thrashing them across Exmoor highlighted their shortcomings, a late-night run from Frankfurt to Milan for a breakfast meeting is their true habitat.

These are the cars which say that you've made it, you're going to flaunt it and to hell with the petrol consumption. These are cars which, now more than ever, defy rational analysis. They are, of course, brilliant. And stupid. And often at the same time.





Top



of the Drops

The world's total of V12 droptops has just doubled - to two. Georg Kacher compares the new Mercedes 600SL with Jaguar's XJS PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD NEWTON

AT FIRST GLANCE, THE new Mercedes 600SL is the answer to a question nobody asked. After all, the V12-engined SL is significantly heavier and thirstier – and 20 grand more expensive – than the existing 500SL, which is virtually as quick. For the price of one 600SL, you

could almost buy a matched pair of the lookalike 300SL, or two Jaguar XJS V12 convertibles. We can assume the 600SL is a better car than the ageing XJS, but how big is the margin? Is its V12 engine, though much more powerful, as refined as the British V12? Come to that, is it superior in every respect to the 500SL's V8?

The visual differences between the 600SL and the other Benz SLs are minimal. Externally, they are confined to the 600SL badge on the boot lid and a pair of rather tacky V12 emblems next to the air outlets behind the front wheels. Inside, the 600SL (on sale in Britain from November, at £90,000-plus) offers a truly complete specification plus colour-coded cabin trim. Should you fancy blue leather seats, Mercedes will throw in a blue dashboard, blue air vents, blue carpets and a blue steering wheel. Also included are airbags, leather trim, automatic air-conditioning, powered seats, an electrically adjustable steering column, cruise control, traction control (ASR) and electronic damping control (ADS).

The SL cockpit is well laid out, but not perfect. For a start, the car could do with a bit more legroom. Even when the optional rear seats are unoccupied (only small children fit, anyway), tall people won't always find a comfortable seating position because once you've pushed the chairs back most of the way, there's no room for the backrests to recline. Typical Mercedes idiosyncrasies such as the foot-operated parking brake, the single over-loaded column stalk and the unfathomable Becker radio return to haunt the 600SL, but at least the diameter of the steering



wheel has been reduced to a manageable size. Even with the passenger airbag occupying the site of the former glovebox, there is sufficient storage space in the centre console, the door pockets and in the small compartment above the air vents, which also houses the trip computer readouts.

The cabin of the XJS looks as opulent as that of the Mercedes, but is cramped and not all that well thought out. The power-operated seats don't adjust in height, and they won't travel far enough back, either. Where you'd expect the rear seats to be, the XJS has a lockable oddments compartment cum luggage tray which is so thoroughly heated from below that it will cook its contents long before you've reached your destination. The dashboard comes with all the right dials and gauges, but some of the



SL interior (top) comes with electric everything. It's comfortable top-down, even in winter: heater is volcanic. Trad Jaguar cabin cramped, or cosy, depending on your point of view. Control positioning not as good as in Benz





switchgear is scattered out of reach and out of sight. On the centre console, the rather unimportant on-board computer has the best seat in the house while the radio and temperature controls jostle for space and accessibility. The fragile T-handle transmission lever looks classy and traditional, but the gate it moves through is stubborn and recalcitrant. The woodwork of our test car was a disappointment, too. The high-gloss wood in the SL looks more co-ordinated, if more artificial.

Like all SLs, the 600 comes with that magic roof, which opens and closes at the touch of a single button. There are no levers to be fastened or unfastened, no lids to be opened or closed, no folding top cover to be clipped on or removed. The whole assembly consists of 15 hydraulic cylinders, 11 solenoids, 17 switches and 45 pipes, but despite its complexity the system is maintenance-free and fairly quick.

To reduce wind noise and improve resistance to car washes, Mercedes has modified the roof. The flexible rear window is now claimed to be less scratch-prone, but it still isn't as good a solution as the Jaguar's proper heated glass backlight. The XJS has a semi-automatic power top supported by two latches over the windscreen and a manually fixed canvas tonneau cover. It's not as flash as the Mercedes', but it does the job.

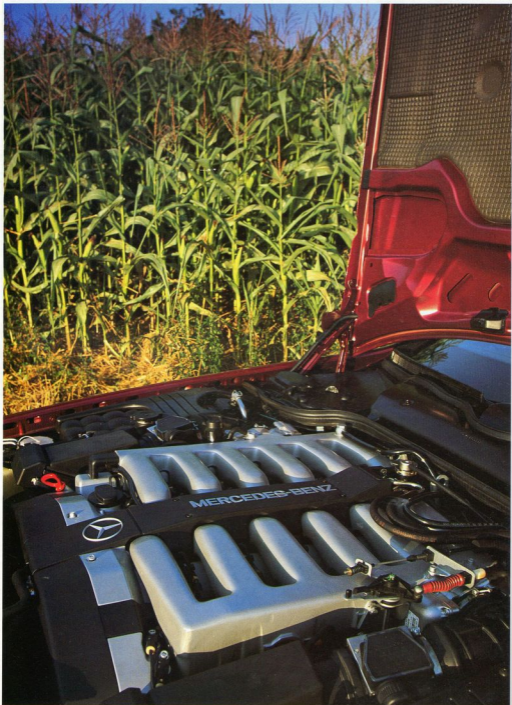
Although the 600SL is powered by the familiar 6.0-litre V12, this is



not quite the engine from the SE/L. It delivers 395 instead of 408bhp, and maximum torque is down from 420 to 412lb ft at 3800rpm. This slight loss is due to the absence of the full-throttle enrichment device which has been ditched to reduce consumption and emissions. Even so, the massive V12 still produces power and torque in abundance. According to Mercedes, it propels the 4356lb 600SL (Jaguar: 4221lb; 500SL: 3960lb) from 0-62mph in 6.1sec, thus being only 0.1sec quicker off the mark than the 500SL. Top speed for both Mercedes is 156mph, electronically limited. Figures aside, the real-life

difference between the two Mercs is more obvious. It starts with the exhaust note which is, towards the limit, a muscular roar in the 600 and an angry roar in the 500. Both engines deliver instant low-end torque thanks to adjustable intake camshafts, but the V12 is even more effortless, even more refined and even stronger than the V8. Red-lined at 6000rpm, the 600SL needs fewer revs to come up with the goods, and it provides more than 20 percent extra oomph which easily compensates for the 400lb weight difference. Between 70 and 125mph in particular, the V12-engined model feels faster, pulling away

Mercedes has superb composure in corners, even when surface is bumpy or slippery. But drivers will feel too divorced from the action. Jaguar (opp) is sloppy. In a straight line (left), Benz powers away from Jaguar



Basic Jaguar shape is 17 years old now, but people still love the convertible's style (below), and it rides very comfortably and quietly. Benz is recognised as a great piece of styling, and has strong presence



for a little fun on the way, you'll find the steering a bit numb, and the suspension a bit artificial. You may also question the handling which is oh-so-perfectly neutral, no matter how big a throttle opening you've

dialled in. The prevailing feeling is that it's the car, not the driver, that's in command.

Even when ASR is angrily flashing its amber warning light, the rear end stays steadfastly put. Make no mistake, the ASR computer expertly walks the line between slip and slide, keeping out the drama but letting in the speed. But it's a black box that does it, not you - the one who just shelled out £90,000. Wouldn't a switch to deactivate ASR boost the fun quotient without impairing safety on slippery roads? In fact, on wet roads the overall grip of the Michelin MXM tyres is pretty poor, so you're glad of the electronics on hood-up days.

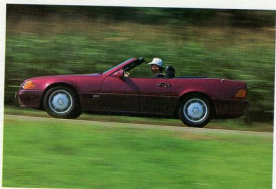
The brakes are powerful but the pedal doesn't feel right. At first it's spongy, then it goes wooden with bigger efforts. The 600SL comes with a new high-performance system which diverts more pressure

to the normally understressed rear brakes. To prevent lock-up, the rear wheels are monitored by an additional anti-lock circuit which relies on its own g-force sensor.

The XJS relies on a low-tech chassis and drivetrain, and it feels like it, too. On loose or slippery surfaces, you get all the wheelspin in the world, which can be even more frustrating than being overruled by the electronic brain of a traction-control computer. The Jag's brakes ultimately feel just as lifeless as those of the Merc (and they will fade much sooner), but at least they provide strong initial bite and more progressive pedal action.

The steering of the XJS is a disgrace. It seems to turn the wheels via a set of bungee cords. There is enormous slack around the straight-ahead position, and after a brief spell of alertness during turn-in, the steering gradually becomes less and less communicative as you apply more lock. Eventually, the front wheels do react to your sawing at the steering wheel, but by the time you actually see a result the car will have travelled through five layers of indifference. To make matters worse, the XJS has the turning circle of a truck. It needs 44.9ft between kerbs, compared with 35.4ft for the 600SL.

The Jaguar's directional stability is casual at best. Through corners, it will initially understeer in an attempt to unnerve the driver. Failing that, it tries to hang on (and normally succeeds, thanks to the 225/55ZR16 Goodyears) so that you can make up your mind about which end is going to give in first. Under power, it's likely to be the rear; in all other situations, it'll be the nose. The XJS has much lower limits than the SL, but it provides more



feedback, is less passive. With a tauter chassis and more precise steering, the Jaguar could actually be fun to drive. But as it is, its incompetence is very frustrating, and it doesn't look as if the current formula is crisp enough to be tweaked in the right direction.

But the Jaguar's chassis pulls back points in ride comfort, which is very supple, and in its still-excellent road noise suppression.

The body of the 600SL comes very, very close to perfection. It is extremely well put together, and always feels solid and tight. This car is reliable, made to last and thoroughly functional. It is also comfortable and relaxed when the top's down. With the optional wind deflector in place and the side windows up, you can do up to 125mph without losing your wig. With the soft-top closed, wind noise is rarely a problem, and in winter you simply clip on the rattle-free lightweight hardtop which turns the convertible into a quiet, secure coupé. The few SL drawbacks include the poor three-quarter rear vision with the top up, the high loading lip, the relatively small boot (9.2cu ft), the aesthetically debatable duo-tone colour schemes and the too-small 18-gallon petrol tank. At 13mpg, that will be sucked dry in just 230 miles.

The Jaguar isn't all that well put together. The quality of the paint and the brightwork is not up to Mercedes standards, and the interior trim is rather casually assembled in places. No, the Jaguar does not have a roll bar that automatically pops up in the case of an accident (as the SL has), and it lacks anti-intrusion beams incorporated in the doors. The test car showed a fair amount of scuttle shake and side-window rattle over bumpy surfaces, but by the time you read these lines, the car will at last have received the extra chassis bracing which is already in place in the 4.0-litre model. This improves the torsional stiffness and hushes the poltergeists of body flex. The XJS scores over the SL in having a bigger boot (13.9cu ft) and a low loading lip. Most important, the Jaguar is just as pleasant to drive on warm days with the roof stowed as the 600SL – and that's without all the high-tech goodies.

As we said early on, the XJS doesn't stand a chance vis-à-vis the SL. Sure it's twice the price, but the 600SL is far more desirable. The Jaguar needs a four-speed automatic, a more powerful multi-valve engine and, most important, better steering and updated suspension. Until these changes have been implemented (some of them are due for late '93, others will probably never happen), the XJS V12 simply isn't in the same league as the Benz.

It is, in fact, also a whole lot less convincing than the nimbler, lighter

and cheaper 4.0-litre version, even if that car is only a six-cylinder.

But if the XJS fails as a full-throttle sports car, it doesn't necessarily matter. No-one buys it for that. The wonderful thing about this Jaguar – all Jaguars, really – is that it's such a joy to travel slowly in. It encourages a gentle mode of driving, and in return it will balm your body and soothe your soul. The Mercedes will do that, too. Like the Jaguar, it can wait your long in near silence and hedonistic comfort. Its towering achievement is that it is also a genuine supercar.

The 600SL is very expensive, but it should hold its value well since Mercedes will build only 20 examples a day, which has instantly stretched the waiting list into 1995. It is a great car, and yet it's not so much an inspiring driving machine as a cold-blooded perfectionist performer, and for refinement its V12 is beaten by the Jag's. It could be forgiven for being so heavy and thirsty if these penalties yielded a substantial gain in acceleration or

top speed over the 500SL, but they merely provide a little mid-range boost and a little more refinement. If the prestige of owning four extra cylinders is worth 20 grand to you, go for the 600SL. But if you're at all interested in value, take the 500SL. It's every bit as good a car, and is less detrimental to your personal, and our global, resources.



Flank badges (above) identify the 600, which will cost £90,000-plus at its British launch in November. Jaguar 5.3-litre V12 (left) is much simpler and less muscular than Merc's but is generally sweeter and more refined

