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Grand Touring

Aston Martin Virage, BMW 850i, Jaguar XJR-S 6.0, Mercedes 500SL and Porsche 928S4: over £350,000 worth of the finest grand tourers in the world. But which is best? A two-day, 100-mile round trip to the dramatic open roads of Scotland gave the answer. By John Barker



Grand Touring

Fill a service station with five of the world's greatest grand tourers — collectively 48 cylinders, a field full of fine hide and an open market value approaching half a million pounds — and onlookers aren't slow to come forward. The Mercedes 190E driver in the *Question of Sport* sweater seized the opportunity to poke his head into the aromatic interiors of all five. So too did the service station staff, in between ringing up an hour's worth of petrol sales in five minutes. And the car which held their attention longest? The dark green Aston Martin Virage.

Can non enthusiasts tell when a car costs at least twice as much as those surrounding it? Our quick exit poll would suggest that they can, although the sheer presence and AM V8 number plate of the hand-crafted, aluminium-bodied Virage must have helped.

But we hadn't driven the best part of 150 miles to Ferrybridge services at the A1/M62 junction to assess the crowd pulling potential of Newport Pagnell's finest. We wanted to know whether the

bespoke Brit would still seem as indomitable at the end of two days and 1000 miles in the company of four other great grand tourers. By that evening, when we reached our comfortable loch-side hotel a few miles inland of Oban on the west coast of Scotland, we'd have a good idea.

It wasn't only the Aston's reputation that was on the line. Among its travelling companions was the brand new BMW 850i, granted a lukewarm welcome by the world's press. We have rated it higher than most but this was the first chance to directly compare the sleek new Bavarian with its rivals: the JaguarSport XJR-S 6.0, Mercedes 500SL and Porsche 928S4. In total, 48 cylinders shared between a trio of all alloy 32-valve V8s — Aston, Mercedes, Porsche — and a pair of all alloy 24-valve V12s — BMW, Jaguar — not one of which produces less than 300bhp.

Exclusive as they are, the others are effectively mass-produced cars when judged alongside the Virage, which rolls out of Aston Martin Lagonda's modest Bucks-based factory at the rate of five a week. Demand is so strong that if you're not on the waiting list or simply can't wait, you'll have to pay considerably more than the £129,950 list price to have one.

Currently, the same is true of the 850i (£59,500) and 500SL (£63,460), though any premium paid on a delivery mileage example now (in the region of 20 per cent) will probably evaporate when supply begins to catch up with demand. The 928 and XJ-S have been around too long to warrant premium prices; the Porsche can trace its lineage back to 1977, the Jaguar to 1975. The Porsche carries its years better and has never been more impressive than in its current 5-litre, 32-valve S4 form (£64,496). With JaguarSport's 6-litre engine and sporting chassis, the same is true of the XJR-S, which is easily the least expensive car here at £45,500.



● **Thirsty work; the famous five drink another filling station dry and we're well on our way to owning a glassworks**



Old fashioned the XJR-S certainly is but it uses good old cubic inches to secure the top slot in the torque stakes with 218bhp and a devastating 362lb ft from its 5300cc V12. Next in line is the 5349cc Aston V8, with its four valve per cylinder heads engineered by US company Callaway. It produces 330bhp and 360lb ft.

The three Germans, each a few cubic centimetres shy of 5 litres, are similarly muscular. The Mercedes and Porsche develop 326bhp/332lb ft and 320bhp/348lb ft respectively, leaving the BMW's 4980cc V12 to bring up the rear with 'only' 300bhp and 340lb ft.

All five have the classic GT layout of front engine/rear-wheel drive, and all bar the Aston have automatic transmission. As you'd expect, the newest cars in the group, the BMW and Mercedes (the Virage is new only by Aston Martin standards), are the most technically advanced. Both have four-speed autos with switchable response patterns, and when the engine's efforts reach their rear wheels, sophisticated traction control systems are on hand to throttle back the engine or even brake a spinning wheel.

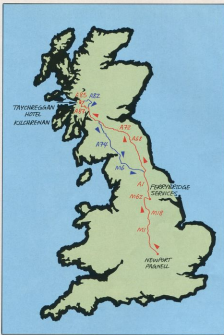
The Porsche also has four ratios, in a rear-mounted transaxle and without selectable change patterns, and 'PSCD', an electronically activated, variable locking differential. As ever, the Jaguar has the GMX30 'Torqueflite' three-speeder and a conventional mechanical limited slip diff, as does the Aston with its 2F five-speed manual 'box. The less sophisticated specification of the Aston goes further: it is the only car here without anti-lock brakes.

Day 1, 8:15am, Newport Pagnell, Buckinghamshire

The gleaming, broad shouldered Virage burbled at a fast idle outside Aston Martin's factory, twin plumes of catalysed vapour chugging from its tailpipes. Along with thousands of other showgoers, I'd seen the very car, prototype number four, on the stand at the 1986 NEC and seem something of its life since in the pages of various magazines. To be truthful, I hadn't been that impressed. But here, close up and with the prospect of putting some fast miles beneath its fat Avons, the Virage began to weave its magic.

Despite a hard 54,000 miles as a demonstrator, the sumptuous cream and olive green leather interior looked immaculate and still had its heady, expensive smell. Getting comfortable proved no problem with the electrically adjusted seat while the lofty, almost Range Rover-like driving position immediately conferred a sense of superiority. Less good was the noisy, metallic gearchange that would improve only a little when warm, and the responsive but rather lifeless steering.

The list of few opportunities to open up



the burbling V8 during the first stint came on the slip road to the M1. It felt and sounded strong but almost immediately the fun was curtailed as the Aston was hemmed in by early motorway traffic. Past Northampton, Rugby and Leicester only the occasional gap gave the chance to dig into the engine's reserves. Fuel injection has improved its manners but the V8 still snuffles and bellows like the carburettored unit.

The M1 is hardly the place for grand touring yet there is still some entertainment to be had, as other drivers catch sight of the Aston in their rear view mirrors. One moment you're at the rear of an outer lane chain, the next you're at the front as those ahead duck to the middle, as if a police car has appeared.

Even though the Virage has the safety margins to travel much quicker than the real motorway performance cars — innocuous 1.6 Sierras and Cavaliers — it would be foolhardy to flout the speed limits in such an attention-getter. So, settle back and take stock of the cabin.

Beyond the leather-trimmed two-spoke steering wheel is a deep instrument

binocular as big as a small TV screen and stocked with seven dials, at least one of which is obscured by the rake adjustable wheel. Sandwiched between the centre console and dash top is a broad band of figured walnut veneer with two air vents and the trip computer let into it. The latter with its multiple tiny buttons and often illegible display sits there uncomfortably, like a pocket calculator in an old master, but the overall impression is one of unrestrained, stylish luxury.

Signs for Sheffield slip by and just before Leeds, where the M1 comes to an end, we turn right onto the M62. Two hours and 150 miles from Newport Pagnell, the Aston rumbles into Ferrybridge services where the other four cars and drivers are waiting. It's proved itself a comfortable and characterful companion but hasn't had to work for its keep, yet.

11.15am, A1 Northbound, Yorkshire

From the opulent, leather-lined cocoon that is the Virage cockpit and into the BMW 850i. Boy, does it feel and smell



● Thirty work; the fortissae five relax at Ferrybridge services, *Photofact*

Grand Touring



● *Pushing on in the Porsche — still a great entertainer 13 years after launch*

cheap. The Aston might not have been an ergonomic masterpiece but there was more character and class in one of its door cappings than there is in the whole of the BMW's interior, which seems flat, almost two dimensional. And after the snarling V8, the BMW's V12 is almost inaudible.

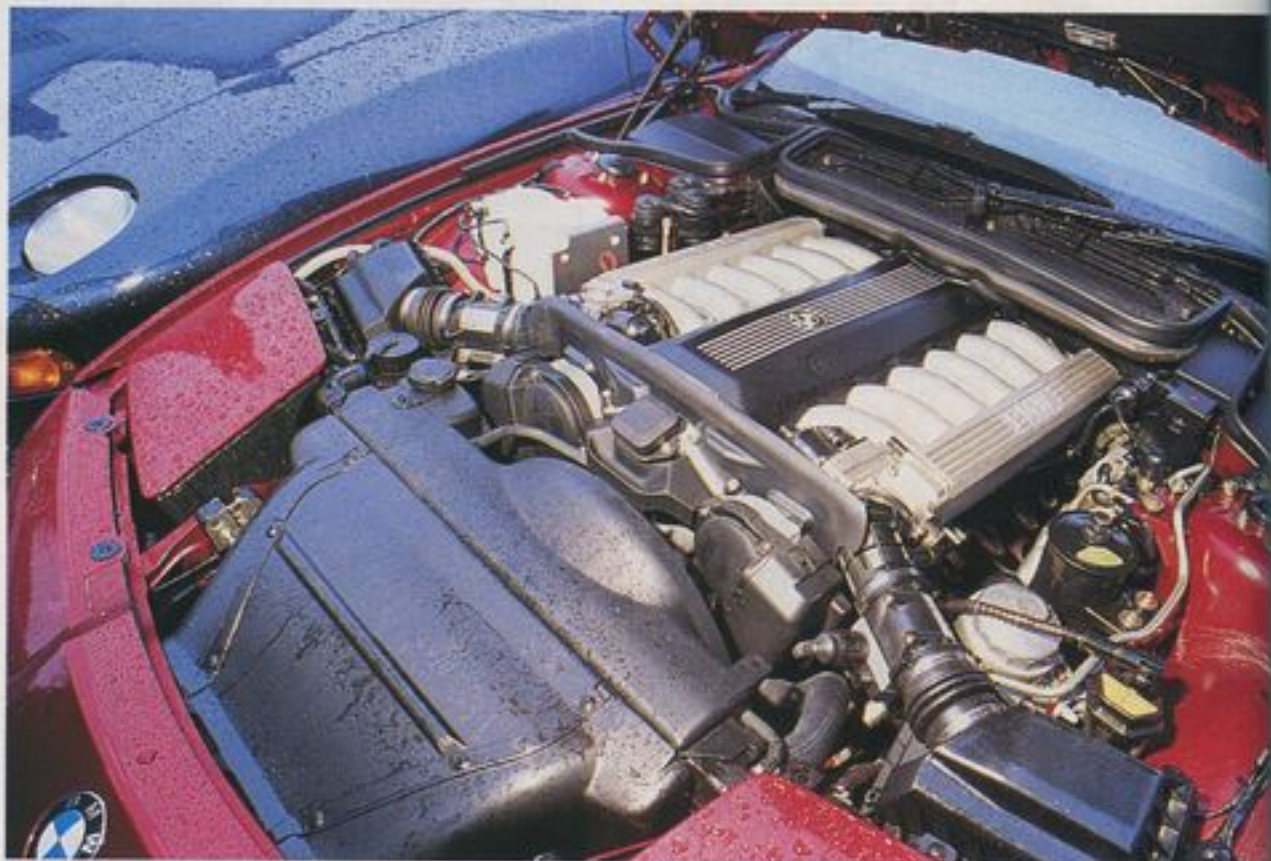
But there is a quiet confidence about the 850i. While the Aston bombards the senses with its sound, aroma and overt luxury, the BMW charms with subtlety. Every now and then it pulls something special out of the bag as if to show how much time and effort has gone into creating it.

Heft the door shut and a second later the frameless glass automatically snicks home for a perfect seal while the steering wheel, raised slightly to aid entry, whirrs down into position. There's more; as the speed of the car increases so does the pressure on the wipers to keep the blades in contact with the screen, and when reverse gear is selected the nearside mirror dips to show the kerb.

All clever stuff, but it would be wasted if the 850i didn't get the fundamentals right. As you might expect of a company which produces some of the finest handling chassis around — M3, 5-series and Z1 — the 850i has superb dynamics. Many have said that the BMW V12, as used in the 750i saloons, is not as refined as the much older, and heavier, Jaguar unit. There will be time to reflect on that later.

Hacking north on the A1, the BMW felt at least as responsive (if a little gruff at around 4000rpm), rode just as smoothly and cut the air as cleanly as the Aston. Yet while traffic fell over itself to get out of the way of the Virage, the 850i might as well have been a Sierra.

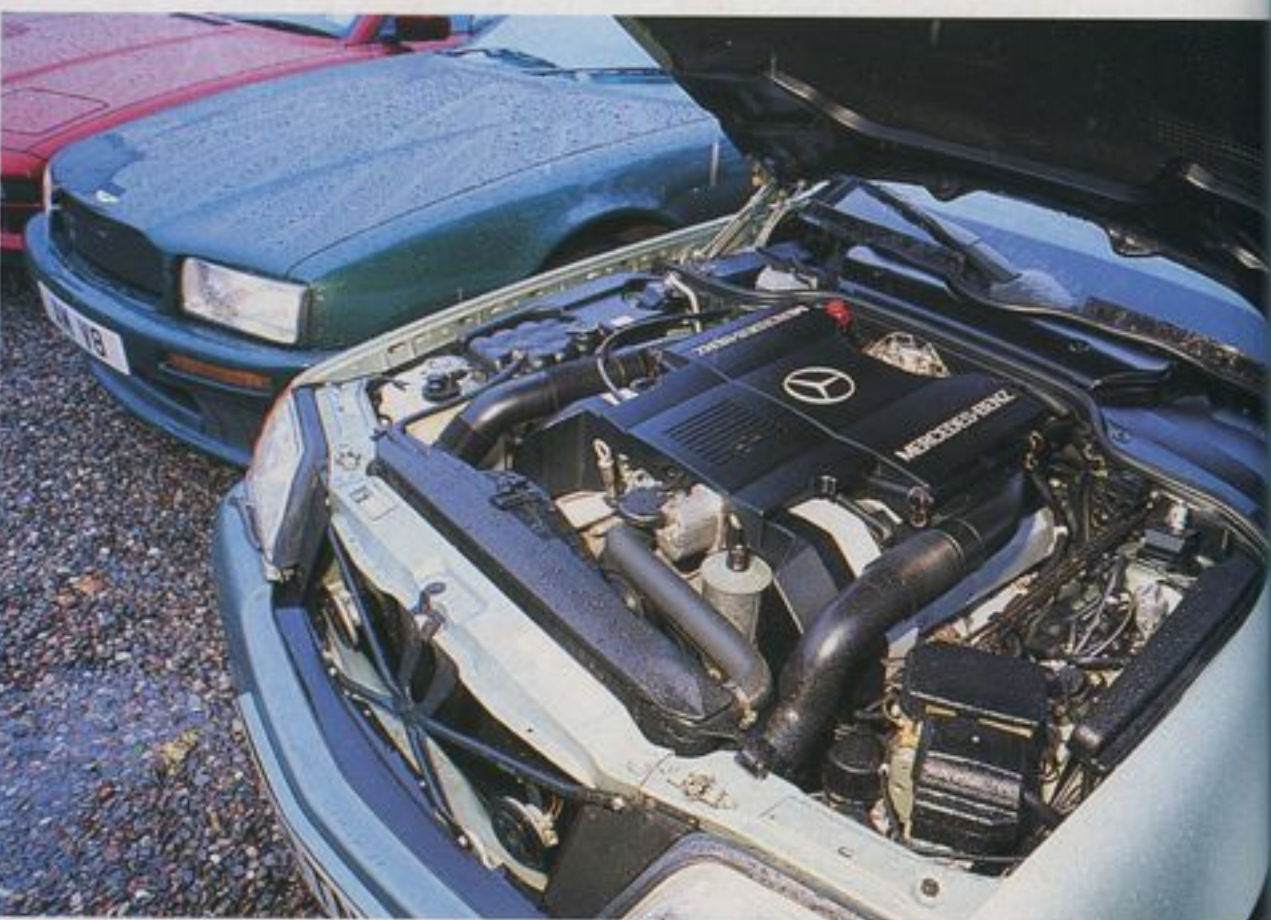
A moment's respite at Scotch Corner Hotel allowed a quick appraisal of the 850i's looks. Unlike the Jaguar and Porsche, the BMW has no need for a rear spoiler; indeed, there is an elegant simplicity to its lines enhanced by pillar-less side glazing. Its 1970s BMW M1-look nose is low and slim, thanks to pop-up



● *BMW's 5-litre V12 is least powerful of cars assembled — a 'mere' 300bhp and 340lb ft torque*

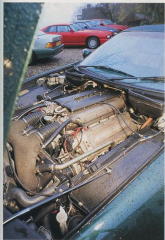


● *Heart of latest Porsche 928 is magnificent 32-valve 5-litre V8, good for 320bhp*

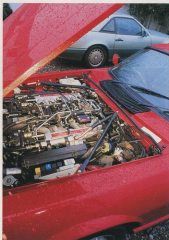


● *Mercedes 500SL, like Porsche, boasts all alloy quad-cam 5-litre V8 — and it sounds wonderful*

26 litres ... 48 cylinders ... 1600bhp ...



● Aston follows same pattern as German V8s but with 5.4 litres



● Somewhere under there is XJ6's silky, torquey 6-litre V12

lights in its long bonnet, yet the whole shape seems to lack the conviction of the Hellfire/Greerley Virage and the 908.

As with the exterior of the 850, the interior is undramatic: regular BMW with a dash to inject a little interest the speedo and tach overlap while the outer fascia vents, mounted on the door casings, and the centre console have a lozenged look. It's a pleasant enough environment, with well-shaped, leather covered seats and a light, airy ambience but the hard plastic used on some surfaces denies it an expensive feel.

The straight, roller-coaster B6275, that will used short cut to the A66 and the first 'real' road on the test route, focussed attention on the less personal aspects of the 850. There, the superb responses of its transmission, the precision and feedback of its recirculating ball steering and the composure of its chassis were deeply impressive. While the Virage behind looked hard work (later confirmed by Howard Lees), the 850 sped comfortably on, even attracting a compliment at some road works from a discerning labourer who shouted 'Flash Bastards!'

Come the next hair, at the Errington Arms at the crossroads with the B6138, the BMW had lifted its points tally considerably and would further impress on lighter, wet roads. Lees said that the Aston sounded great but that its brakes, gearchange and steering left something to be desired. Brian Laban enthused about

the Jaguar, saying 'That is a bloody good car', while Kevin Blick said the Porsche was very firm and Dave Calderwood reckoned the Merc a bit woolly.

1.30pm, Errington Arms, near Corbridge, Northumberland

No great culture shock this time, stepping from the almost clinical 850 into the smaller but no more homely 500SL, which adds weight to the thought that any interior after the Aston's would have seemed short on luxury. The Mercedes' materials are better chosen, though, softer to the touch, and there is wood for the centre console and doors.

Aspiring Mercedes owners who finally reach the top rung will find the cockpit of the SL simply a variation on what they are used to. The fascia is very upright and the centre console low, so that the SL does not feel as involving as the others and, as ever, the steering wheel is large. Not large enough to give a full view of the instruments, though, since the definitive M-B three-cluster layout has been supplanted by a wider, five dial spread.

What robs space in the rear of the Merc and makes it perhaps the least plausible 2+2 in a group of coupes that offer space for only 2+ two crumpled adults, is the mechanism of its one-touch electric soft top. In terms of versatility, though, the 500SL has no peers here. With its hard top in place — with heated screen and fully

trimmed interior — it offers near-fixed head levels of comfort. And if its owner can find a strong friend and somewhere to store the top, the SL becomes a soft top in a couple of minutes.

Perhaps surprisingly, the 500SL's engine is more characterful than either the 908S4's V8 or the BMW's V12. As the tach needle swings through 4000 to 5000rpm on full throttle, the quad cam V8 barks enthusiastically but you have to crush the throttle pedal to hold onto the gears to the red-line, even in the sporting shift mode. This becomes annoying after a time, doubly so because the SL's change quality is the best there is: fast and unerringly smooth. If only its throttle pedal provided the same responsiveness as the BMW and Porsche's.

Despite switches that allow it to be



● 850 is packed with electronic trickery, but its ability won friends

Grand Touring

lowered and stiffened, the Mercedes is not a precise driving tool. Its steering is vague around the straight ahead and a touch mushy on lock and the brakes on this example were effective but spongy. But what of that sophisticated traction control system, a £1956 option? In addition to cutting power when rear wheel slip is detected, it also has individual wheel braking. The simpler ASC system fitted to the automatic 850i is better in two respects. Firstly, its action is delayed a fraction longer and secondly it can be switched out. Get the rear tyres slipping on the 500SL and the system is fast but not abrupt in its reactions, neatly drawing the tail back into line.

Occasionally, though, the driver hankers after a longer leash. The rain came as we headed up over the Cheviot Hills and down the switchback section of A68 beyond Carter Bar. Here the system was continually cutting in when a little more slip would have worked wonders, correcting for understeer and tightening the cornering line. In front, Lees in the 850i was enjoying the descent much more and Laban behind in the 928 watched the large rear roll angles of the Mercedes with amusement.

But all three of us were having a much easier time of it than Blick who was leading the convoy in the Virage. His main complaint concerned the brakes which were unresponsive and occasionally unpredictable: 'You just don't know if the fronts are going to lock coming up to a corner.' Calderwood, tail-end Charlie on this stretch in the XJR-S, had enjoyed his



● *Jag's olde worlde interior disguises strength in depth; a real driver's car*



● *Any Mercedes driver would feel at home in the finely finished 500SL*

stint but hadn't found the trick to making the three-speed Jaguar more responsive.

2.45pm, south of Galashiels, Borders

There's no doubt about it: the Jaguar XJR-S looks antiquated. Lowered by JaguarSport suspension, it takes on a more purposeful stance and the smoother front and rear bumper/spoiler mouldings and optional black chrome tidy up the shape but this can't disguise its age. Inside, the stalk controls are spindly and get left behind when the wheel is telescoped out to adjust the reach. The minor gauges look like the reels of a one-armed bandit and the front screen is very upright with short wipers that flip across staccato fashion.

That said, the XJR-S is very comfortable with its soft, bucket-like seats, elbow height centre console and door handles, and snug, low slung driving position. JaguarSport's work on the interior adds contrasting red piping to light grey leather seats, a round gear knob and a chunky, small diameter Momo steering wheel.

Because it is so comfortable there is a



● *928's harsh ride settles down at speed, the precision of its responses a delight*

suspicion that the big Jaguar will be a handful on the twisting, soaking wet roads to the next halt, especially with that enormous 362lb ft of torque fed through nothing more sophisticated than a regular LSD. There is no shortage of rubber, though, and it is of the highest order: Dunlop D40 M2. All five cars have 16 inch ZR rated tyres on alloy wheels and the XJR-S, like the 928, has different sized tyres at either end: 225/50s up front and 245/55s astern.

The Porsche's forged rims, 7ins wide up front and 8ins behind, are shod with 225/50 and 245/45 Pirelli P700s. Aston Martin fits the widest and tallest tyres, 255/60 Avon Turbospeeds all-round, while the BMW has 235/50 Uniroyal Rallyes and the Mercedes is equipped with regular 225/55 Dunlop D40s.

Turn the Jaguar's key and the metallic whining of the starter motor is followed by the pitter patter of 12 silky cylinders awakening. Tug the stiff gear selector down through its notchy gate into D, release the fly-off handbrake by the door sill, and waft off in virtual silence. This side of the Mercedes, there is no car here more adept at smoothing over the scars and pimples of town roads. But while the Mercedes runs out of travel on fast, undulating roads, the Jaguar's display simply gets into its second act.

Worries about the agility of the XJR-S on the sinuous, leaf-covered roads beyond Galashiels were soon brushed away by its remarkable grip and turn-in, superbly weighted, quick steering and sensational brakes. And with such a deep reserve of torque on tap, the XJR-S's three speed box is not the handicap it would appear.

The muscular V12 is easily the most responsive engine in this group but for the keenest reactions it is worthwhile snicking the gear lever back and forth between drive and second — strong detents prevent mis-shifts into reverse or first. Although the Jaguar's shifts are not generally as smooth as the other autos', pressing the throttle as the lever is shifted into second brings swift and sweet downchanges. Lees was moved to describe it as a 'two-speed Tiptronic'.

Hauling hard, the V12 sounds like an expensive motor cruiser with its deep, bassy rumble, yet if you want to slip quietly along, the engine becomes silent on a light throttle. The BMW's V12 is similarly hushed but doesn't have the XJR-S's fabulous full bore howl and it isn't as smooth. The BMW is more economical, though, with an interim consumption of 16.9mpg to the Jaguar's 14.7 (on premium leaded; the Jaguar is the only car without catalytic converters). Top prize went to the Mercedes, though, which returned 20.1, with the Porsche second on 18.1 and the Aston doing its best to empty editor Calderwood's bank account and fill his pockets with Texaco stars with 14.2mpg.

4.00pm, Carluke, south east of Glasgow, Strathclyde

For a car that has already celebrated its 13th birthday, the Porsche 928S4 looks distinctly modern. Compared with the XJ-S which pre-dates it by a couple of years, it is positively futuristic with its smooth, low snout and bulbous fastback tail. Inside, too, the generous sweeps of the stylist's pen have stood the passage of time much better. The T-bar selector is a throwback, though, and the test car's optional dark blue leather would have been infinitely



● Half a million pounds' worth of the world's finest grand tourers. But there could be only one winner. . .

more attractive were it not contrasted by white carpets (1) and inner seat panels. Adjust the fat-rimmed wheel for rake and the instrument pod hovers in tandem — still a good idea — but the supportive seats are less easy to adjust with hidden and confusing electric switches.

What strikes you in the first few miles is how heavy all the major controls are. The throttle requires a hefty shove to get the car moving, the brakes need a firm prod to stop it again and the steering demands two muscular arms to manoeuvre around things in between. After the measured delicacy of the XJR-S and 850i, the 908 feels solid and unyielding.

It's a wide car, too, and doesn't offer the all-round visibility of the BMW for instance, so its ability to dart instantly into gaps is a great asset as we thread our way along the A8 and onto the M8 through Glasgow, announced by a road sign as European City of Culture. It doesn't seem very cultured from the elevated motorway, but once we turn off onto the A82 with its colourful shop fronts and bustling pavements it looks lively and interesting.

While the other GTs are floating over the ragged tarmac on the run out to Clydebank and Dumbarton, the 908 is thumping along like a race car. And there's an odd roaring on the overrun, an exhaust resonance perhaps, that is loud enough to be heard above tyres and stereo.

As the pace picks up, the Porsche becomes more comfortable. Tyre roar still intrudes but the ride settles down and the firm controls take on precision and progression. Oversteer is easily provoked and gathered up on drizzly roundabouts but through the A82's last sweeps up to Tarbot, the 908 is in its element, its stability is unwavering, its throttle response crisp and its headlamps are capable of lighting up the road beyond the 500SL in front. How disappointing that Mercedes, Aston Martin and Jaguar supply their finest cars with poor lights.

As befits its uncompromising nature, the Porsche offers no sport and economy shift patterns for its transmission, nor does it have five them. Like the 850i (which does have them), the 908 always seems to know which gear the driver wants and slips between ratios with almost the same slickness. Bury the throttle in the carpet and the acceleration is stunning.

It should come as no surprise that the Porsche is the fastest of the five because it

has the best power to weight ratio at 181bhp/ton. From rest it punches off the line to hit 60mph in just 6.0secs, half a second ahead of the 500SL. itself a tenth ahead of the manual Virago. The BMW and Jaguar are still in touch on 7.0 and 7.1secs and at the quarter mile post the cars are more evenly matched. The

Porsche is again quickest (14.6secs) followed by the Aston (14.8), Mercedes (15.0), BMW (15.3) and Jaguar (15.4).

The reason the Jaguar is not as quick as its second best power to weight ratio of 172bhp/ton would suggest is because of its soft transmission take up. The step off of the three German cars, and the Porsche

Second thoughts

Undisposed as I am towards cynicism, I would venture that both the 500SL and 850i have neatly illustrated two modern trends in the almost-supercar reaches of the motor industry, one, that you don't necessarily have to believe everything you read around the rush-to-be-first of launch time, and two, that the narrow-boy mentality is seldom more prevalent than it is around the rarefied world of small-run, high value motor cars.

These are both cars that were a long time in the coming, and consequently both cars that were keenly anticipated by scribblers and investors alike. They're both good cars, and you'd be surprised if they were otherwise, but by the time they got here, they weren't just two more car launches, they were major events. And major events demand major pronouncements from the media.

I'm not sure what an up-to-date version says, but my dog-eared dictionary defines Type as a 'choat or trick, and hyperbole' (which I think current usage notably means) as an exaggerated statement not meant to be taken literally. You might say that's only a matter of degrees of the same thing, but you get the gist.

Now when the Mercedes appeared, the eulogies followed as night follows day. It was variously described as 'the world's best', 'the best convertible that has ever been made', 'a landmark car', 'seminal', 'a practical supercar'. You name it, the SL was it (and some of those sentiments were our own). On the other hand, even our earliest test included reservations about the necessity for so much technical wizardry, and I'm afraid I subsequently had the temerity to

question whether it was, as Mercedes averred, a true sports car.

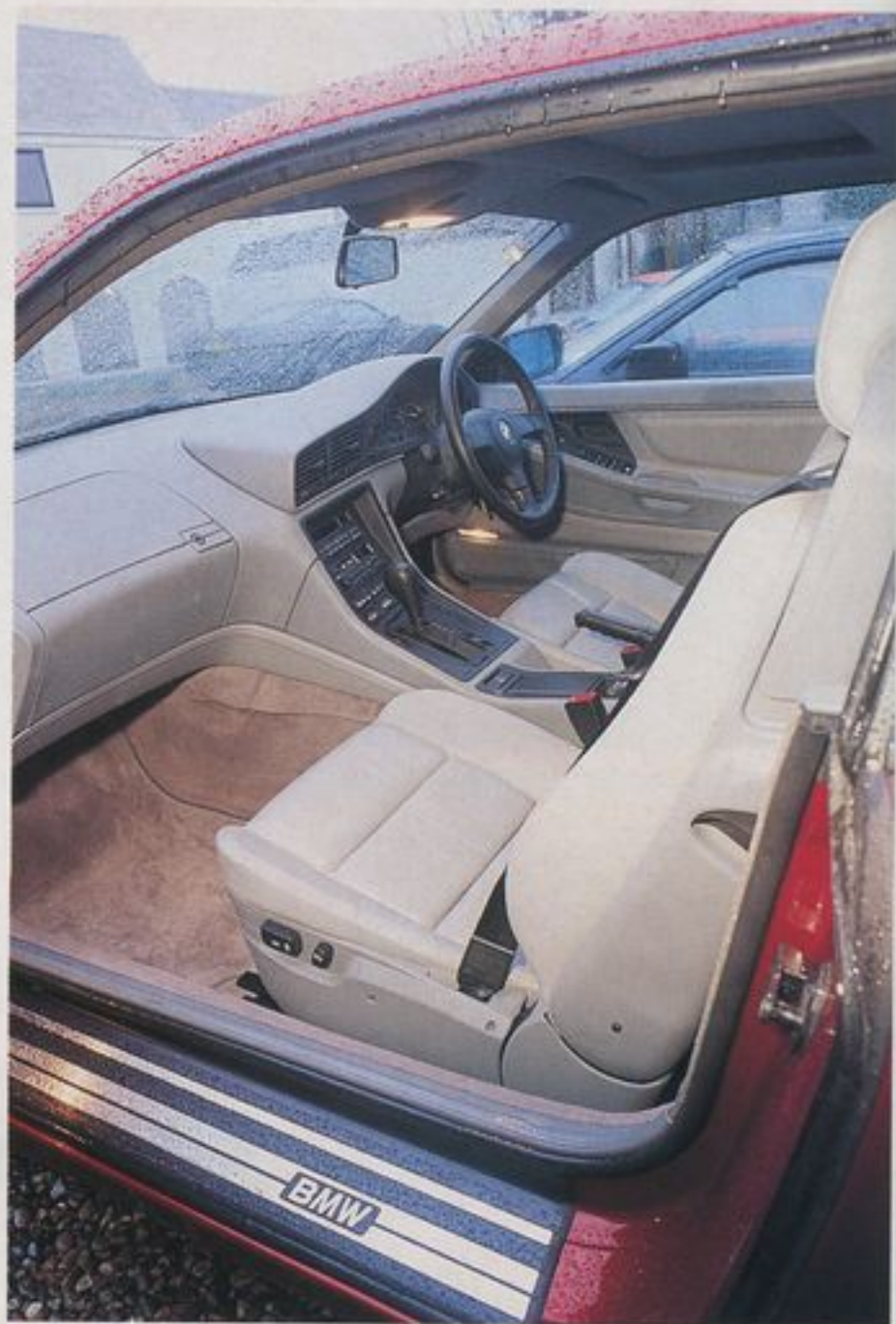
The BMW garnered a strangely more circumspect reception: 'good but not that good', 'tawed in some important areas'. Most noticeably, some of the very qualities of technical overkill and ultimate refinement that had so appealed in the Mercedes were deemed to compromise the BMW's credentials as a real sports car. Did that 'Ourselves'? Oh, we absolutely loved it — for what it is, 'one of the finest long-distance tools yet built'. And now? Well, it's no longer quite such a henry to lone down the Merc's supposed sporting cachet and admit to a slight air of smugness, which suggests that a few doubters might ultimately re-examine their expectations of the Bee-Em and try a bit less hard to convince faint praise.

Conviction, you see, can be a wonderful thing, and that's where the narrow boys were, a bit more decisive than the hawks. When the SL was launched in Geneva in March 1989, Mercedes was already talking of two-year waiting lists, minimum; when the 850i arrived, it was already sold out for at least three years. From the start, a basic £58,340-worth of SL could command a private, queue-jumping premium of £20,000 and more; nowadays we're taking anything from 'reasonable offers' to 'price on application'. For the foreseeable future, the 850i is likely to be in the 'name your price' league. Obviously it takes a clever sage to know his motoring onions, but it doesn't take a great prophet to spot a great profit.

Brian Laban



● *Sumptuous leather and slabs of walnut veneer in the Aston*



● *BMW is comfortable, well-planned but lacks real class*

in particular, is much brisker but once the Jaguar is rolling, it claws back. In kick down through 50-70mph the Porsche leads with a startling 2.8secs followed by the Jaguar and Aston (which runs past 70mph in second gear) both on 3.2, the Mercedes on 3.3 and the BMW with 4.0. Flat out, there is nothing to choose between them. All attain 155mph, give or take a mile per hour.

At Tarbet we head west along the A83 to Inverary, stopping briefly for a few snap shots outside The Great Inn before slipping through the archway beside it and up the A819. Lees is enjoying himself so much in the XJR-S that he's missed a turn and carried on up the A82. Calderwood is being terrorised by the Aston's will-it-won't-it brakes and handling, Laban is revelling in the security and honed

responses of the 850i and Blick is finding that it is the 500SL's dim headlights, not its chassis, pegging back his speed. Almost 12 hours and 500 miles after we started out, the five GTs are cooling off in the courtyard of the hotel.

7.40pm, Taychreggan Hotel, Kilchrenan, Argyll

Ensclosed in the warm bar of the Taychreggan Hotel beside Loch Awe, it is time for some serious discussion. Votes are cast and an interim running order established. The Virage, described by Laban as 'a vintage car' compared to its rivals, is edged into fifth place by the largely unloved 500SL. In third place is the firm and responsive 928, a point adrift of the XJR-S. The characterful and eminently able Jaguar is itself a single point behind the 850i which has impressed in all the right areas; its chassis is superbly balanced and smooth riding, its steering has good feel and weighting and its gearbox is smooth and crisp. The only demerit seems to be the lack of long wave on its radio...

So strong is the feeling that the finishing order is very nearly decided that we elect to allow each driver one more stint in the first two cars they drove and then converge on the first services on the M6 to decide the finishing order. The last 300 miles will be a steady cruise home.

Day 2, 7.40am, Taychreggan Hotel

A windless morning, meteorologically speaking, an early mist over the loch and only the sound of heavy rain bouncing off

bonnets and trickling down drainpipes to break the silence. Until the Virage is fired up, that is. The Jaguar and BMW V12s are purring, the Mercedes and Porsche V8s grumbling quietly to themselves. Then the Aston's V8 catches quickly and cleanly, assumes a jogging idle and burbles loud enough to wake other guests. For most of us, the single malt sustained the debate too long and breakfast came too soon. By mid-morning we are ready for the off.

The invigorating enthusiasm of the Virage's motor soon sharpens the senses and the weaving B845 presents a challenge to relish. Its big Avons, ably assisted by the limited slip diff, keep the tail stuck to the streaming road as the engine roars eagerly and the gearlever clacks rather awkwardly through its gate.

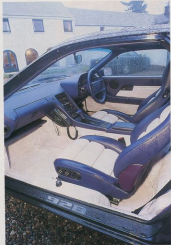
Blick drove AM V8 when it was 10,000 miles younger than its current 54,000 miles and firmly believes that its chassis' reactions have dulled somewhat since then. Certainly, there is a detached feel about the over-light steering's responses, and the worn edges of the front tyres rob it of turn-in bite. The action of the dampers is occasionally ponderous, too.

It's a challenge to hustle the bulky-feeling Aston quickly, with its skittish feel through standing water and lack of steering feedback. Once I'd established a rhythm, I decided to push a bit harder, just to see if there was anything left in the chassis' reserves. On the faster stretches of the A85, the wipers chickened out first, lifting off the screen. And when the opportunity came and I pushed, the Virage told me politely to back off by juddering the tread blocks of its front tyres across the tarmac. Still, it was an

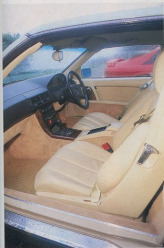
Grand Touring



● *K10-S* looks dated now, but cockpit still snug and well finished



● Ergonomically sound, aesthetically dubious — but it's the 328



● Solid and unpretentious Merc feels beautifully put together



● Travel-stained 350V takes a breather at leveroy



● The morning after... about to hit the road again



● The night before... and the moment of reckoning arrives

Grand Touring

entertaining run down to Tarbet and the Virage's character had grown on me.

12.15pm, Tarbet, Strathclyde

Another fill-up and another bundle of Texaco stars — Calderwood now has enough for a rowing machine, appropriate given the weather. Defying performance versus economy logic, the Porsche records 17.4mpg. Runner up is the BMW (16.5), followed by Aston Martin (14.5), Mercedes (14.3) and Jaguar (12.9). Overall consumptions showed the Porsche still ahead — see data panels.

From the Aston to the BMW once more. Its silence and general user-friendliness are welcome but it does seem a bit short on character compared with the others: the Jaguar with its turbine-like delivery, cosy, olde worlde interior and communicative chassis; the Porsche with its single-minded aim to provide racer reactions, its strong style, and its terrific kickdown response; and the Mercedes with its howling V8, super-smooth shifts and essentially cossetting nature.

But the BMW has a great deal to offer, not least serene cruising, almost telepathic kickdown, fine steering and one of the safest, most supple and rewarding chassis in the business.

And so to Southwaite services on the M6, and the verdict.

The 500SL came in fifth, mainly because its chassis is over-protective, its main controls lack definition and its engine's ability is too hard to exploit. In fourth place came the exclusive, hand-crafted Virage. Easily the most attractive and expensive looking inside and out, the Aston's poor brakes and under-achieving chassis dropped it out of contention.

Two cars tied for second slot with identical scores: the Porsche 928 and BMW 850i. Both are very competent cars of completely different nature. The 928 lost ground through its harsh, noisy ride and the 850i for being very able but lacking that final edge that makes a good car great: involvement and satisfaction.

Both of which the winner has in abundance. Three voted it first, one second and one third. The Jaguar XJR-S is a special car, possessing a smooth-riding yet fabulously responsive chassis with meaty, communicative steering and tireless brakes. And what an engine. Lusty enough to make three gears seem plenty, silent at a cruise, subtly rorty but still silky smooth when worked hard, the 6-litre V12 is perfectly matched to the role of Grand Touring. The XJR-S isn't perfect by any means — it's dated and thirsty — but when it comes to delivering satisfaction on the long haul, it is without peers. ○

ASTON MARTIN VIRAGE



All tests with a crew of two and a full tank of fuel

THROUGH THE GEARS (seconds)			
0-30mph	2.6	0-80mph	10.5
0-40mph	3.6	0-90mph	12.9
0-50mph	5.1	0-100mph	15.7
0-60mph	6.6	0-110mph	19.1
0-70mph	8.3	0-120mph	23.2
STANDING 1/4 MILE		14.8/96 (secs/mph)	
AVERAGED TOP SPEED		156mph	
ACCELERATION IN 3rd/4th/5th (seconds)			
20-40mph	5.0/6.4/8.0	60-80mph	4.7/5.9/7.6
30-50mph	5.0/6.3/7.7	70-90mph	4.9/6.0/7.8
40-60mph	4.9/6.5/7.5	80-100mph	5.4/6.3/8.0
50-70mph	4.7/5.9/7.5	90-110mph	6.2/6.7/8.7
MAX SPEEDS IN GEARS AT 6800rpm			
FIRST	50mph	FOURTH	144mph
SECOND	81mph	FIFTH	155mph at 5760rpm
THIRD	118mph		
OVERALL FUEL CONSUMPTION		17.6mpg/16.1 l/100km	
TOURING FUEL CONSUMPTION*		18.6mpg/15.1 l/100km	
*Estimated			
TRACK CONDITION		Dry	
TEMPERATURE		+7°C	
WIND SPEED		10mph	
ATMOSPHERIC PRESSURE		1012mb	

SPECIFICATION

ENGINE TYPE	Front-mounted longitudinal V8		
DISPLACEMENT	5340cc		
BORE	100mm	STROKE	85mm
COMPRESSION RATIO	9.5:1		
FUEL AND IGNITION	Weber/Marelli sequential fuel injection and mapped ignition		
CYLINDER BLOCK	Aluminium alloy		
CYLINDER HEAD	Aluminium alloy, twin overhead camshafts per bank, 4 valves per cylinder		
MAX POWER (DIN)	330bhp @ 6000rpm		
MAX TORQUE (DIN)	350lb ft @ 3700rpm		
GEARBOX	Five-speed manual		
GEAR RATIOS			
1st	2.90	4th	1.00
2nd	1.79	5th	0.85
3rd	1.22	Reverse	
FINAL DRIVE RATIO	3.540 to 1		
SPEED PER 1000rpm IN TOP	26.9mph		
FRONT SUSPENSION	Independent by double-wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers and anti-roll bar		
REAR SUSPENSION	De Dion axle located by radius arms and Watts linkage, coil springs and telescopic dampers		
STEERING	Power assisted rack and pinion		
BRAKES	Front ventilated discs, rear solid discs		
WHEELS	8in cast alloy		
TYRES	255/60 ZR 16 Avon Turbospeed		
WHEELBASE	102.75in		
TURNING CIRCLE			
FUEL TANK CAPACITY	19.5 galls/89 litres		
UNLADEN WEIGHT	4224lbs		
TEST WEIGHT	4555lbs		
POWER TO WEIGHT RATIO (TEST WEIGHT)	162.3 bhp/ton		
BASIC PRICE (INC TAXES)	£129,950		
PRICE AS TESTED	£129,950		
OPTIONAL EXTRAS FITTED TO TEST CAR	None		

BMW 850i



All tests with a crew of two and a full tank of fuel

THROUGH THE GEARS (seconds)			
0-30mph	2.8	0-80mph	11.1
0-40mph	4.0	0-90mph	13.8
0-50mph	5.3	0-100mph	17.1
0-60mph	7.0	0-110mph	20.8
0-70mph	8.9	0-120mph	
STANDING 1/4 MILE		15.3/95.1 (secs/mph)	
AVERAGED TOP SPEED		155mph	
ACCELERATION IN KICKDOWN (secs)			
20-40mph	2.5	60-80mph	4.1
30-50mph	3.1	70-90mph	5.9
40-60mph	3.7	80-100mph	7.0
50-70mph	4.0	90-110mph	8.1
MAX SPEEDS IN GEARS AT 6000rpm			
FIRST	56mph	TOP	155mph at 4875rpm
SECOND	94mph		
THIRD	140mph		
OVERALL FUEL CONSUMPTION		18.1mpg/15.6 l/100km	
TOURING FUEL CONSUMPTION*		19.3mpg/14.6 l/100km	
*50% of Govt Urban cycle plus 25% of steady 56mph and 75mph			
TRACK CONDITION		Damp	
TEMPERATURE		+3°C	
WIND SPEED		9mph	
ATMOSPHERIC PRESSURE		1025mb	

SPECIFICATION

ENGINE TYPE	Front-mounted longitudinal V12		
DISPLACEMENT	4968cc		
BORE	84mm	STROKE	75mm
COMPRESSION RATIO	8.8:1		
FUEL AND IGNITION	Digital Motor Electronics fuel injection and ignition		
CYLINDER BLOCK	Aluminium alloy		
CYLINDER HEAD	Aluminium alloy, single camshaft per bank, 2 valves per cylinder		
MAX POWER (DIN)	300bhp @ 5200rpm		
MAX TORQUE (DIN)	340lb ft @ 4100rpm		
GEARBOX	Four-speed automatic		
GEAR RATIOS			
1st	2.48	Top	0.73
2nd	1.48		
3rd	1.00	Reverse	2.09
FINAL DRIVE RATIO	3.150 to 1		
SPEED PER 1000rpm IN TOP	31.8mph		
FRONT SUSPENSION	Independent by MacPherson struts, coil springs, lower wishbones and anti-roll bar		
REAR SUSPENSION	Five-link with coil springs, telescopic dampers and anti-roll bar		
STEERING	Power assisted recirculating ball		
BRAKES	Ventilated discs front, solid discs, rear. Anti-lock		
WHEELS	7.5ins cast alloy		
TYRES	235/50 ZR 16 Uniroyal Rallye		
WHEELBASE	105.7in		
TURNING CIRCLE	37.7ft		
FUEL TANK CAPACITY	19.8 galls/90 litres		
UNLADEN WEIGHT	4196lbs		
TEST WEIGHT	4526lbs		
POWER TO WEIGHT RATIO (TEST WEIGHT)	148.5bhp/ton		
BASIC PRICE (INC TAXES)	£59,500		
PRICE AS TESTED	£59,500		
OPTIONAL EXTRAS FITTED TO TEST CAR	None		

JAGUAR XJR-S 6.0



All tests with a crew of two and a full tank of fuel

THROUGH THE GEARS (seconds)

0-30mph	3.1	0-60mph	11.0
0-40mph	4.4	0-90mph	15.4
0-50mph	5.7	0-120mph	16.1
0-60mph	7.1	0-110mph	19.8
0-70mph	8.9	0-120mph	24.1

STANDING 1/4 MILE 15.468 (seconds)

AVERAGED TOP SPEED 154mph

ACCELERATION IN KICKDOWN (secs)

20-30mph	2.3	60-80mph	3.9
30-40mph	2.6	70-90mph	4.5
40-50mph	2.7	80-100mph	5.1
50-70mph	3.2	90-110mph	6.4

MAX SPEEDS IN GEARS AT 6000rpm

FIRST 104mph TOP 154mph @ 5770rpm

SECOND 71mph

OVERALL FUEL CONSUMPTION

19.8mpg/14.1/100km

THROUGH FUEL CONSUMPTION* 16.2mpg/11.4/100km

*70% of Gen Urban cycle plus 20% of steady 50mph and 70mph

TRACK CONDITION Damp

TEMPERATURE +7°C

WIND SPEED 10mph

ATMOSPHERIC PRESSURE 1023mb

SPECIFICATION

ENGINE TYPE Front-mounted longitudinal V12

DISPLACEMENT 5993cc

BORE 94.5mm STROKE 87.0mm

COMPRESSION RATIO 11:1

FUEL AND INJECTION Zetec sequential fuel injection and digital engine management system

CYLINDER BLOCK Aluminium alloy

CYLINDER HEAD Aluminium alloy, single overhead per bank, 2 valves per cylinder

MAX POWER (DIN) 230hp @ 5700rpm

MAX TORQUE (DIN) 307.5 lb-ft @ 2700rpm

GEARBOX 3-speed automatic

CLUTCH 3-speed automatic

GEAR RATIOS

1st 7.41 Reverse 2.00

2nd 4.48

3rd 3.08

FINAL DRIVE RATIO 2.88 to 1

SPEED PER 1000rpm in TOP 26.1mph

FRONT SUSPENSION

Independent by double wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers and anti-roll bar

REAR SUSPENSION

Independent by lower arms with torsion bar, trailing arms, shock absorbers and anti-roll bar

STEERING Power assisted rack and pinion

BRAKES Ventilated-disc front, solid-disc rear. Anti-lock

WHEELS 8-spoke alloy

TYRES 255/50 ZR 16 front, 245/45 ZR 16 rear. Daimler Chassis

WHEELBASE 102.0in

TURNING CIRCLE 42.6ft

FUEL TANK CAPACITY 20 gallons (75.7 litres)

UNLADEN WEIGHT 3900lbs

TOTAL WEIGHT 4390lbs

POWER TO WEIGHT RATIO (TEST WEIGHT) 172hp/ton

BASIC PRICE (INC TAXES) 145,500

PRICE AS TESTED 146,500

OPTIONAL EXTRAS FITTED TO TEST CAR Black chrome 1700

OPTIONAL EXTRAS FITTED TO TEST CAR Black chrome 1700

MERCEDES 500SL



All tests with a crew of two and a full tank of fuel

THROUGH THE GEARS (seconds)

0-30mph	2.9	0-60mph	10.4
0-40mph	3.9	0-90mph	17.6
0-50mph	4.9	0-100mph	19.1
0-60mph	6.1	0-110mph	
0-70mph	8.1	0-120mph	

STANDING 1/4 MILE 15.6788 (seconds)

AVERAGED TOP SPEED 170mph

ACCELERATION IN KICKDOWN (secs)

20-30mph	2.0	60-80mph	3.5
30-40mph	2.0	70-90mph	4.4
40-50mph	2.6	80-100mph	4.7
50-70mph	3.3	90-110mph	

MAX SPEEDS IN GEARS AT 6000rpm

FIRST 48mph TOP 170mph @ 5525

SECOND 74mph

THIRD 117mph

OVERALL FUEL CONSUMPTION 18.4mpg/12.7/100km

THROUGH FUEL CONSUMPTION* 20.8mpg/13.5/100km

*50% of Gen Urban cycle plus 20% of steady 50mph and 70mph

TRACK CONDITION Damp

TEMPERATURE +7°C

WIND SPEED 10mph

ATMOSPHERIC PRESSURE 1029mb

SPECIFICATION

ENGINE TYPE Front-mounted longitudinal V8

DISPLACEMENT 6016cc

BORE 94.5mm STROKE 88.0mm

COMPRESSION RATIO 10.5:1

FUEL AND INJECTION Bosch K15 COI fuel injection

CYLINDER BLOCK Aluminium alloy

CYLINDER HEAD Aluminium alloy, twin overhead camshafts per bank, 4 valves per cylinder

MAX POWER (DIN) 250hp @ 5200rpm

MAX TORQUE (DIN) 332.0 lb-ft @ 4000rpm

GEARBOX 4-speed automatic

CLUTCH 4-speed automatic

GEAR RATIOS

1st 3.67 Top 1.00

2nd 2.25

3rd 1.94 Reverse 2.38

FINAL DRIVE RATIO 2.68 to 1

SPEED PER 1000rpm in TOP 29.1mph

FRONT SUSPENSION

Independent by dual wishbones with separate coil springs, lower wishbones and anti-roll bar

REAR SUSPENSION

Multi-link with coil springs, telescopic dampers and anti-roll bar

STEERING Power assisted recirculating ball

BRAKES Ventilated-disc front, solid-disc rear. Anti-lock

WHEELS 8-spoke alloy

TYRES 225/50 ZR 16 Dunlop 248

WHEELBASE 96.0in

TURNING CIRCLE 35.2ft

FUEL TANK CAPACITY 17.6 gallons (66.5 litres)

UNLADEN WEIGHT 3070lbs

TEST WEIGHT 3400lbs

POWER TO WEIGHT RATIO (TEST WEIGHT) 16.4 hp/ton

BASIC PRICE (INC TAXES) 99,480

PRICE AS TESTED 110,735

OPTIONAL EXTRAS FITTED TO TEST CAR ABS, 2100R, Rear-tilt seats 0119C, Dual speakers CD1, Adaptive driver system 0212C, Wheel lock 0215C

OPTIONAL EXTRAS FITTED TO TEST CAR ABS, 2100R, Rear-tilt seats 0119C, Dual speakers CD1, Adaptive driver system 0212C, Wheel lock 0215C

PORSCHE 928S4



All tests with a crew of two and a full tank of fuel

THROUGH THE GEARS (seconds)

0-30mph	2.6	0-60mph	9.8
0-40mph	3.6	0-90mph	17.9
0-50mph	4.7	0-100mph	18.2
0-60mph	6.0	0-110mph	
0-70mph	7.6	0-120mph	

STANDING 1/4 MILE 14.5101 (seconds)

AVERAGED TOP SPEED 150mph

ACCELERATION IN KICKDOWN (secs)

20-30mph	2.6	60-80mph	3.6
30-40mph	2.4	70-90mph	4.4
40-50mph	2.5	80-100mph	5.2
50-70mph	2.8	90-110mph	

MAX SPEEDS IN GEARS AT 6000rpm

FIRST 47mph TOP 150mph @ 5600rpm

SECOND 70mph

THIRD 109mph

OVERALL FUEL CONSUMPTION 19.3mpg/14.7/100km

THROUGH FUEL CONSUMPTION* 20.8mpg/13.8/100km

*50% of Gen Urban cycle plus 25% of steady 50mph and 70mph

TRACK CONDITION Dry

TEMPERATURE +7°C

WIND SPEED 10mph

ATMOSPHERIC PRESSURE 1029mb

SPECIFICATION

ENGINE TYPE Front-mounted longitudinal V8

DISPLACEMENT 4923cc

BORE 100.0mm STROKE 79.0mm

COMPRESSION RATIO 10:1

FUEL AND INJECTION Bosch L4 Jetronic fuel injection and massaged valves

CYLINDER BLOCK Aluminium alloy

CYLINDER HEAD Aluminium alloy, twin overhead camshafts per bank, 4 valves per cylinder

MAX POWER (DIN) 230hp @ 6000rpm

MAX TORQUE (DIN) 217.0 lb-ft @ 3200rpm

GEARBOX 5-speed manual

CLUTCH 5-speed manual

GEAR RATIOS

1st 3.58 TOP 1.00

2nd 2.11

3rd 1.84 Reverse 5.14

FINAL DRIVE RATIO 2.52 to 1

SPEED PER 1000rpm in TOP 29.4

FRONT SUSPENSION

Independent by double wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers and anti-roll bar

REAR SUSPENSION

Independent by semi-trailing arms, upper hub links, coil springs, telescopic dampers and anti-roll bar

STEERING Power assisted rack and pinion

BRAKES Front-ventilated-disc, rear solid-disc. Anti-lock

WHEELS 8-spoke alloy front, 8-spoke rear

TYRES 255/40 ZR 16 front, 245/45 ZR 16 rear. Pirelli P70R

WHEELBASE 96.4in

TURNING CIRCLE 37.0ft

FUEL TANK CAPACITY 18.9 gallons (70.5 litres)

UNLADEN WEIGHT 3270lbs

TEST WEIGHT 3600lbs

POWER TO WEIGHT RATIO (TEST WEIGHT) 16.1 hp/ton

BASIC PRICE (INC TAXES) 104,460

PRICE AS TESTED 108,160

OPTIONAL EXTRAS FITTED TO TEST CAR Leather interior CD12, Rubber-look leather CD5

OPTIONAL EXTRAS FITTED TO TEST CAR Leather interior CD12, Rubber-look leather CD5