

Mercedes W126 300SE buyers guide/ owner interview



TT: You chose a 300SE. Of all the W126s, why that one? Why that engine? Why not the long wheelbased version?

TB: The 300SE model was the least expensive W126 offered for the years 1988-1991. They started at about \$50K or so at the time (that's still quite a bit for late 1980s dollars!). However, interior trimmings were the same as offered on the longer wheelbased and bigger engine cars (maybe except for heated seats, fanfare horns, and a few other small details).

I've always been not too fond of the biggest-engined nor most powerful variants. Rather, I tend to go for powerplants that are efficient and mostly bulletproof in design. The 3.0 liter inline six motor (M103 designation) gets the job done nicely for me since I mostly am a "cruising" type of guy. I don't need a big V8 engine and the thirst associated with it. Of all the W126 iterations, I have always enjoyed the styling of the short wheelbase sedans and coupes the most. Their stylist, Bruno Sacco, conceived of a timeless design for me. You see elements of the W126 design in the Japanese luxury segment cars of the late 1980s (i.e. Lexus LS400). The long wheelbase sedan is nice if you carry passengers in the back seat, but since I mostly drove my 300SE alone, I did not see a need to buy a car with six inch longer back doors.



TT: How did you find this example? Tell us about your buying experience.

TB: I had been looking casually on all the popular internet car sites for months but never found a 300SE that suited my criteria (low mileage, documented ownership, superior condition in and out). While visiting a friend in Los Angeles, I happened to be using his computer and saw a listing on eBay Motors for a 1989 300SE. It was for sale from a used car dealership in Murrieta, CA. After the car did not sell through that listing, I contacted the dealer and a salesman promptly emailed me dozens of pictures.

I liked what I saw, so I called the salesman back and asked him to "hold" the car for me. He told me he would keep the car in the back lot until I could come and take a peek at it. Several days later, I flew down to LA and drove to Murrieta. Surprising to me, the salesman had the car waiting for me in the back lot just like he said he would do. For a twenty year old car when I bought it, you would be hard pressed to tell that the car was driven much at all nor kept outside that long. I drove the car, looked over everything, and handed over the money. Although it needed a minor tuneup, I drove it back to San Jose with no problems.



TT: What issues should a prospective W126 buyer look for?

TB: If you are interested in W126 Mercedes-Benz models, you should be aware of a few things to be on the lookout for when inspecting them. Engine mechanicals for the six and eight cylinder motors are durable, but the M103 six cylinder tends to develop head gasket leaks in a certain top corner of the block. Eventually, the head gasket will have to be replaced. The eight cylinder motors should have their timing chains and tensioners replaced at certain intervals, so make sure it has been done and documented. Suspension and subframe bushings tend to wear out on these cars causing creaks, vibrations, and other kinds of sloppiness when driving the car. So be aware if any of this type of work has been done or needs attention. Another area to be aware of is the AC system. The W126 had an automatic climate control unit with vacuum pods mounted in the dashboard to actuate the myriad of flaps that send cooled or heated air around the cabin. If the AC system is not working on a car you're interested in, either have it checked out (and the whole car, too) before you make a big mistake. Problems could be any number of parts in the dash or under the hood.

Here is a [great site](#) if you are interested in W126s. If you are not mechanically inclined, get a PPI done on any possible purchase.

For other parts of the USA, body corrosion is a possible problem (this was not the case for my car, however).



TT: What's up with the shiny chrome wheels? Did they come as a factory option? Why don't I see these around anymore?

TB: The factory 15 spoke chrome wheels on my car were not a factory option. These chromed alloy wheels were installed by the dealership or owners in the USA. You typically never see European W126s with these chrome alloys - not only did the factory not like this but I have been informed that the car will not pass its TUV (inspection) in Germany with chromed alloys wheels.

Namely, the plating process weakens the alloy wheel and after years of weathering and brake dust, the chrome finish starts to flake off and allow air pressure to escape around the bead. Even with my car in great cosmetic shape, the chrome wheels did have a little flaking here and there.

The reason you hardly see these chrome wheels around anymore is due to corrosion and flaking of the plating. You can still buy these chromed alloy wheels online, but I've also been told that once chrome plated, the alloy wheels can not be rechromed a second time. So, if you really want these then look forward to spending about \$1K or more for a set (and be careful about which company did the plating!).



TT: How is the maintenance? The cost of parts and labor?

TB: Maintenance can go both ways on these cars: you get a car that constantly needs work because something failed or broke (because the car was neglected) or you get a car that was always maintained by a conscientious owner/garage and needs minimal work/parts/upkeep.

The nice part of looking out for W126 models is that they were mainly purchased by people who could afford to maintain them properly. Lots of W126s have been buggered up by sloppy owners and mechanics through the years, but there is still a significant number of these cars still owned by their original owners who appreciate them for their good engineering and high build quality - and they keep these examples in beautiful condition. These are the cars to buy when the owners "give up" driving due to age or they pass away and leave their estate to be sold off. My 300SE fell into this category...

But, parts cost are not too expensive and there are many parts shops online that sell a vast array of OEM or aftermarket spares for these cars. Autohausaz.com and Peachparts.com are good resources. It helps to talk to some owners to get a good idea of the "preferred" quality part (if you can't get OEM or it's too \$\$\$ for your budget).

I had my W126 maintained and repaired at a small independent shop ([MB Garage](#)) in Redwood City, CA. The labor charge per hour was not cheap, but the techs knew their trade and did not recommend any unnecessary work. I generally knew what kind of attention or service my car needed, so when I brought it in there were no surprises. The nice thing about this place was that I was always given a W123 300D (they have a fleet of W123s as loaner cars) to drive around while my car received service work. It rode nicely, but talk about a noisy car!



TT: You're a big Citroen guy. What about the W126 attracted you?

TB: I've always been a car guy. By now, you know my first love is the Citroen DS. I've always admired the W126 series Mercedes as well as most MB series from the 1950s. It is the engineering that I am drawn toward. I could spend hours looking over all the little details on the car - closing the doors just so I can enjoy the firm noise they make when closing, looking under the hood at the double firewall, or sitting inside on the firm yet "springy" seats.

I like how you can tell the car was designed to MB engineering principles of its time as opposed to accounting principles.



TT: When did Mercedes lose its ways?

TB: The Mercedes-Benz that I remember as what an MB should be changed around the early 1990s. Mercedes spent upwards of \$1 billion to design and engineer the W140 model (the replacement for the W126). I have heard that there was much consternation in the company to sell this model to a price point after spending that much to develop it. Consequently, after the model introduced, Mercedes started to decontent as the years went by.

I still feel that after the W124 and early W140 models that Mercedes lost some of its respect from me.



TT: What did you like the most about your 300SE? The least?

TB: What I enjoyed most about my W126 300SE is that no one (myself included) could mistake it for anything other than a big German luxury sedan. And for my car in particular, it was one of the best specimens of the W126 that I could find. I originally bought it so that it could be my "work" vehicle several days a week, but eventually I used it maybe once a week and kept it under a cover the rest of the time. One thing that I really liked about my 300SE was the color combination: it was Smoke Silver with a Palomino (in Germany it's called "dattel" or date) colored leather interior. These are two colors that I immediately associate with Mercedes and no other car maker.

What I least liked about my 300SE: it kinda lacked soul as well as it had kind of a "cold" driving experience. Driving this well made sedan was neat, but it was not quite the experience for stirring my emotions.



TT: Tell us about your other cars, past and present.

TB: Well, my daily driver is a white 2007 VW Passat 2.0T that I bought new in Arizona and drove back to the Bay Area. It was one of only a few on the West Coast I could find at that time with both a manual transmission and sport package. It's been a fabulous and economical car for me.

I also used to have a 2003 VW Passat and two pearl white metallic Toyotas that I bought secondhand but in great condition: a 1988 Cressida with a maroon leather interior and a 1987 Supra Turbo with a navy leather interior and five speed manual transmission.

Then of course, I've had some Citroens. I've previously owned eight DS's (not all at once but sometimes up to three at one time) and a 1963 Ami6 sedan. I now have a 1969 DS21 Pallas at [Hanzel's Auto Body Works](#) in Oakland, CA getting a restoration at the moment - hopefully it will be finished before next summer arrives.



TT: Why do you love cars?

TB: Ever since my teens I've been into cars - I love taking them apart, looking at all the bits, cleaning them up, and putting it back together again. It's neat to see cars, looking at how they are made and engineered, and understand a little bit about the people and cultures from where these cars were manufactured.











Thank you, Tim, for enlightening us.

Tim and I are working on a series of posts that will comprehensively cover his Citroen DS's ground-up restoration.