

MERCEDES-BENZ

190 CLASS, 1984-1988

"An excellent car. But it has required vastly more maintenance than the Mercedes-Benz reputation led me to expect."—1985 190E Owner

BY PETER BOHR

ILLUSTRATION BY DENNIS BROWN

ONCE UPON A time, the three-pointed star was not necessarily an icon for conspicuous consumption and high-priced luxury. Back in the Fifties and Sixties, before Mercedes-Benz became a household name in this country, enthusiasts knew the marque represented good value for the money as well as high-quality assembly and advanced engineering.

When Mercedes' management decided to introduce the current 190 class for model year 1984, they made a stab at recapturing that old spirit. With a base price of just over \$20,000, the 1984 "Baby Benz," as it affectionately became known, was no economy car. But compared with the \$40,000 and \$50,000 price tags of its larger brethren, the 190 was indeed quite a value.

The car seemed imbued with all the traditional Mercedes attributes. In 1984, we said, "Don't let the 190's size fool you, for this is every inch a Mercedes in quality, appointments and driving feel."

And just last year, we reiterated the point: "Cut-rate pricing doesn't mean skimping on quality; much of what makes the S-class sedans so desirable is present in the 190E 2.3... the anvil-solid body structure that all Mercedes are famous for is apparent in the 190E every time a pothole is met or a door is closed..."

"120,000 miles and the car is still like new."—1984 190D Owner

But as important as these impressions of new cars may be, only after the miles accumulate and time takes its toll

is the true mettle of a car exposed. With this *Road & Track* Owner Survey, we hoped to determine if the Baby Benz is still worthy of wearing the three-pointed star even after the new wears off.

We asked owners of 1984 through 1988 190 Mercedes to fill out our questionnaire. The cars surveyed represent all the variations of the 190 series during those years—and there were several.

"Like owning and driving a 4-door Porsche."

—1986 190E 2.3-16 Owner

In the first two years, the car came in only two versions, a 190D with a 2.2-liter 4-cylinder diesel engine, and the 190E with a 2.3-liter 4-cylinder gasoline engine. For 1986, Mercedes substituted a 2.5-liter 5-cylinder diesel for the previous 2.2 four-banger. Moreover, the most exciting 190 version made its debut that year, the 190E 2.3-16 with its 16-valve, double-overhead-cam Cosworth cylinder head. The regular 190E 2.3 remained unchanged.

In 1987, there were no less than five 190 versions: the 190E 2.3, the 190E 2.3-16, the 190D 2.5, plus two new models—a turbocharged 190D 2.5 and the 190E 2.6 with a 6-cylinder gasoline powerplant taken from the 300 class. In 1988, Mercedes dropped the 190E 2.3-16 and the 190D 2.5 turbo.

With only a few minor fiddles over the period, the 4-door 190 body has remained virtually unchanged—and does so to this day.

Our survey results are not published according to specific models of the 190 class. However, cars with the diesel, the 6-cylinder and the 16-valve engines ac-

count for only a quarter of the cars in the survey. Nearly three-quarters carried the standard 2.3-liter 4-cylinder powerplant.

Our survey comprises 74 1984 models, 94 1985 models, 81 1986 models, 71 1987 models and 19 1988 models—for a total of 339 cars. As in previous Owner Surveys, we've tabulated questionnaires only from people who bought their cars new and have put at least 10,000 miles on the odometer. The typical car in the survey had been driven 40,091 miles—spring chickens, they weren't.

There's nothing unexpected about the demographics or driving habits of our survey respondents. Fifty-three percent hailed from the eastern U.S., and 32 percent called the western states home. Another 11 percent came from the Midwest, and 4 percent from the South.

Ninety-one percent identified themselves as males. And a huge 83 percent of all the respondents called themselves business owners, entrepreneurs, professionals or managers.

"Like blowing down the Interstate in your favorite easy chair."—1985 190D Owner

Although nearly half of the respondents owned three cars or more, the 190s appear to be daily drivers; 90 percent said they use their Mercedes as everyday transport. And they're quite a hard-driving lot too—45 percent admitted to driving their Mercedes either "hard" or "very hard."

We asked the owners to check off five features that particularly influ-

enced their decision to buy a Baby Benz. Engineering, workmanship, reliability/durability and quality of materials were the top four.

"This car saved my life when I was hit broadside on the driver's side by a truck going 50 mph."—1985 190D Owner

The fifth feature, crashworthiness/safety, has never rated highly in our previous Owner Surveys. On the other hand, a feature that almost always rates among the top five in our surveys—styling—was low on the Mercedes owners' list.

Though not among the top five, handling and resale value were listed as important factors in buying the Baby Benz.

"Service, warranty and safety plus the handling make the 190 great!"

—1986 190E Owner

Then we asked the survey respondents to select their car's five best attributes "now that you've owned it for a while." Engineering still came first. But the 190's excellent handling jumped to second place. Crashworthiness/safety also rated higher, in third place.

However, workmanship (in fourth place) and reliability (in fifth place) dropped on the list. And quality of materials didn't even make the owners' list of best attributes at all.

"Very small, very slow, very safe."—1985 190E Owner

We also wanted to know about the owners' chief complaints. The lack of interior room (especially in the rear seat) topped the gripe list. Ventilation/heating/air conditioning and performance/acceleration (though the last was presumably not a complaint among the

2.6 or 2.3-16 owners) were second and third, respectively.

"Other makes now offer better value."—1984 190E Owner

Somewhat surprisingly, 29 percent of the owners came to regard their 190's as a poor value for the money.

And the fifth spot on the gripe list, at 27 percent, went to dealer service/parts availability. Now, this last one is a real puzzle. In another question that asked the owners to rate dealer service, 77 percent rated it as either good or excellent. In all our Owner Surveys since 1975, no other automaker's dealers have garnered such a favorable response—not even BMW, whose 3-Series owners gave their dealers a 74-percent approval rating. Many of our respondents noted that Mercedes made great efforts to satisfy customers with generous warranty policies.

"Dealer service is the best I've ever seen."—1987 190E Owner

So why the discontent among other owners? The price of maintenance and repairs may be one reason; 77 percent thought dealer's parts and labor prices were "expensive" or "very expensive." (By comparison, 74 percent of Jaguar XJ6 and BMW 3-Series owners thought parts and labor prices for their cars were costly. But only 47 percent of Honda Civic owners thought the same.)

Perhaps an even more likely reason for the significant number of 190 owners' complaints about their dealers might be the wait for parts. Thirty-five percent had to give up their car for more than a day because necessary parts weren't in the dealer's stock. (Only 12 and 20 percent of the Honda and BMW owners, respectively, said the same.) The Mercedes owners also reported they had to wait more than four days on

■ A Cosworth twincam head gave the limited-production 190E 2.3-16 a rousing 167 bhp.





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average when parts weren't in stock.

Furthermore, these 190s needed quite a bit of repair, even during the first 10,000 miles. Eighty percent of our respondents had to take their cars to their dealers for repair—not just routine maintenance—at least once during that time. (This compares to 88 percent of the Jaguar owners, 74 percent of the BMW owners and 50 percent of the Honda owners.)

In fact, the Baby Benz appears to be slightly more trouble-prone than average, reporting 13 problem areas, according to our survey. The typical car in all our Owner Surveys since 1975 had a total of 11 problem areas reported by 5 percent or more of the survey respondents. Four of those problems on the typical car were serious enough to make it either inoperable or unsafe to drive.

"Best warranty in the business. Too bad we had to prove it so often."

—1985 190E Owner

Of the typical 190's 13 problem areas, however, only one was judged to be a "reliability area"—a problem that might make the car undrivable or unsafe. Instead, most of the troubles cited were irritations and not much more.

We asked owners of two independent Mercedes repair shops to provide us with more detail on our findings. Steve Marx is proprietor of Marx Mercedes Service in Costa Mesa, California, and Michael Frederick and Joe Mills co-own Rizzco Automotive in Riverside, California.

A whopping 31 percent of our 190 owners complained of trouble with the air conditioners—not inadequate performance, but actual failure. Marx said that Mercedes has replaced components, from compressors to evaporators—even entire systems—on many 190s under warranty. In their experience, Frederick and Mills have found that a/c problems center in the systems' climate-control units, specifically the relays.

Mercedes 190s seem to be especially hard on brake pads, with owners having to change them at frequent intervals. Marx blames the problem on Mercedes' use of soft graphite pads. He also thinks the rotors—another oft-mentioned trouble spot—are too thin to last very long. "You go through two sets of pads, and the rotors are junk," he said.

Ten percent of our respondents reported problems with window lifts. Marx said the aluminum in the regulators tends to twist and then jam. The Rizzco owners have seen a number of

electric rear window lifts rendered inoperable because water had seeped into the lift motors.

Ten percent of the owners also listed miscellaneous interior parts as problems. In their supplemental written comments, owners mentioned things such as cracked dashes and padding that had fallen out of the front seats.

Continuing the trend of all our recent Owner Surveys, the electronic brains that control the engine vexed a considerable percentage of 190 owners too. Marx has found two problem areas with the electronic engine controls. The first involves the idle brain shutting down; when this occurs, engine idle leaps from around 600 rpm to near-



Even Baby Benzes have big-diameter steering wheels and precise interior fit.

ly 1000. This could cause the cars to lurch, according to Marx. It also throws emissions controls off. And if the owners don't seek prompt repair, it could exacerbate brake wear as the drivers need to apply more braking pressure to keep the cars (those equipped with automatics) from moving forward when stopped at traffic lights, for instance.

The second problem with electronic engine controls, said Marx, involves failure of the cruise-control brain that makes it impossible to set the cruise control. However, one owner wrote that when his car's cruise control failed, it could not be shut off.

Though 5 percent of the owners reported problems with their cars' fuel-injection systems, our expert mechanics all insisted the systems are not troublesome. But they unanimously recommended that the system filters be changed more frequently than Mercedes recommends—Marx said every 15,000 miles.

Because the 190E engine uses hydraulic lifters, the valves do not need periodic adjustment. But there's a mi-

FIVE ATTRIBUTES OWNERS EXPECTED

Engineering
Workmanship
Reliability/durability
Quality of materials
Crashworthiness/safety

FIVE BEST ATTRIBUTES OWNERS FOUND

Engineering
Handling
Crashworthiness/safety
Workmanship
Reliability/durability

FIVE WORST ATTRIBUTES OWNERS FOUND

Interior room
Ventilation/heating/air conditioning
Performance/acceleration
Good value/price
Dealer service/parts availability

nor downside: The valve cover never gets removed, so the cover gasket becomes brittle and leaks. Marx recommends changing it every 30,000 miles.

But 8 percent of our survey respondents also reported more serious valve-train troubles. The 190's valve seals become hard and valve guides become excessively worn unless the oil is changed every 3000 miles or every three months, said our expert mechanics. This again is a much more frequent interval than recommended by the factory.

"This car has been more trouble than my ex-wife."

—1986 190E Owner

Other headaches mentioned by significant numbers of owners included failed central door locks, leaky water pumps, inoperative instruments and problems with miscellaneous exterior body parts (not related to accidents). Though they weren't listed on our questionnaire, engine mounts failed on a number of our respondents' cars. Finally, 5 percent or more of the owners of 1984 or 1985 cars had trouble with engine cylinder heads, transmissions, electric cooling fans and shocks or struts.

It's important to keep in mind that nearly all the cars in our survey are early examples of the model, and thus do not reflect Mercedes' efforts to "debug" the 190. Said Fred Heiler, a Mercedes spokesman, "The problems with the 190 have been addressed, and it is considered a mainstay of the line. The warranty process is a feedback tool that we

RATING DEALER SERVICE

	Mercedes	Avg ¹
Excellent	48%	28%
Good	29%	33%
Fair	15%	20%
Poor	8%	19%

¹Average for all cars surveyed since 1975.

RATING DEALER PRICES FOR PARTS AND LABOR

Very reasonable	3%
Reasonable	20%
Expensive	45%
Very expensive	32%

NUMBER OF PROBLEM AREAS

	Mercedes	Avg ¹
Reported by 10% or more	4	6
Reported by 5-9%	9	5
Total	13	11
Reliability areas	1	4

¹Average for all cars surveyed since 1975.

use to improve quality and dependability. That process has obviously worked with regard to later 190 cars.² As one piece of evidence, Heiler cites the 1992 edition of *The Complete Car Cost Guide*, published by research firm IntelliChoice, Inc. The book calls the 190E

PROBLEM AREAS

Brake pads (38%)
Air conditioning (31%)
Window lifts (10%)
Interior parts (10%)
Brake rotors (9%)
Computer controlled sensors/operating hardware (9%)
Valves/guides (8%)
Central door locks (7%)
Exterior body parts (6%)
Water pump (6%)
Instruments (6%)
Gaskets (6%)
Fuel injection (5%)

¹ Reliability area.

BUY ANOTHER OF THE SAME MAKE?

	Mercedes	Avg ¹
Yes	73%	73%
No	14%	14%
Undecided	13%	13%

¹Average for all cars surveyed since 1975.


2,3 the "best overall value" among luxury cars priced at \$40,000 or less.

"I hope I will always be able to afford a Mercedes."

—1985 190E Owner

"Would you buy another of the same make?" is always the most telling question on our Owner Surveys. Altogether, 73 percent of our 190 owners said "yes." That's exactly average for our surveys. By way of comparison, only 59 percent of Jaguar XJ6 owners said they'd buy another Jaguar, while a full 90 percent of Honda Civic owners answered in the affirmative. BMW 3-Series owners, at 83 percent, were also more inclined to buy another of their marque.

"Repairs have all been covered by the warranty without question. However, all the extra trips to the dealer are extremely annoying. I'd like to know if Honda owners have to put up with this."—1985 190E Owner

Although the number of problems reported by our survey respondents isn't a terribly high figure as our Owner Surveys go, it's undoubtedly enough to jolt a great many folks who believe that a car carrying the three-pointed star should be perfection on wheels. 

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