

MERCEDES-BENZ W114/W115

Reliable, cheap and great to work on. Why wouldn't you want one?

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1968-1976 MODEL YEARS

IS IT FOR ME? Lever aside your preconception that Mercedes-Benz produced nothing but gas-guzzling, awkward-handling luxobarges and let us introduce to you the sensible W114/W115 series.

A distant forefather of the modern everyman E-class, the W114/5 was the company's first high-volume incursion into the work-a-day saloon market. An engine range and body style selection offered an option for all tastes and budgets. Spanning efficient 2.0-litre four-bangers, thrifty six-cylinder 2.8s and the world's first production five-cylinder diesel – a popular candidate for running on waste vegetable oil – the line-up was comprehensive and reliable.

Factory body styles were one of two – the four-door saloon and 4in roof-chopped, longer-booted coupé. But even inside the top-end 280CE coupés, it is surprisingly Spartan, lacking options like power windows, sunroofs and radios you'd find lower down the executive car food chain. Buying a Benz from this epoch doesn't get you the interior frills found in its competitors.

However, most of the good stuff is hidden from view. Super-stiff monocoque chassis, lamp washers/wipers and a semi-trailing arm rear suspension system (advanced enough to be imported onto the über-luxe SLC roadster in 1970) are only obvious while driving.

Despite the predominantly hidden highlights, the styling is sophisticated without being pompous and the engines on offer will happily drub its contemporaries in the longevity and pace stakes.

DID YOU KNOW?

Most components for the W114/5 can be sourced from VWs of the same vintage as they used the same equipment makers. Clutch and brake cylinders, for example, are shared with late-Sixties Volkswagen Beetles.



Pillarless coupés like this come with a 4in roof chop from the factory as well as a six-cylinder engine.

WHAT'S THE HISTORY? Introducing the Mercedes-Benz brand to the mid-size market was attempted in earnest two generations before the W114/W115 era. The W120 Ponton, which started production in 1953, sported globular wings and a down-sloping backside, nodding towards America's 1949 Ford in an attempt to present the marque as accessible. By 1962, the W120 design was exhausted and the company bowed to consumer trends and the car sprouted clumsy fins.

The bling-a-ding additions weren't the only changes – under the skin, front disc brakes, a line of six-pots and an automatic gearbox were added and the instrument cluster transformed to a natty thermometer type. Nearly 60 per cent of production was consumed by the baby fintail and the diesel lump earned it popularity in developing countries requiring rugged, four-door transport for use as taxis.

But after 622,453 units had been built at Stuttgart, M-B decided to freshen things up. In 1968 the W114/W115 was born. The styling was more restrained, and the new Benz featured all-independent suspension, replacing the W120's swing axle with trailing arms. In addition to the engines made familiar by the Ponton range, a harem of weird and wonderful powerplants emerged.

W114s are all fitted with thrifty sixes and W115s got four-bangers as well as the five-cylinder diesel – the first of M-B's famously bullet-proof oil-burners. Come 1970, the coupé body arrived, wrapping the 157bhp 280 engine exclusively, despite wearing distinctive 250CE badges.

For: Reliable, bargain Benz
Against: Six-cylinder models are thirsty; very few luxury extras like leather and air-con



WHAT'S IT LIKE TO DRIVE? Once you've flicked the key clockwise and engaged gear, the car feels poised from the first wheel turn. Despite its bruisherish size, handling is light, responsive and predictable, just as you'd expect from a Mercedes. But what's most surprising is the petrol cars' eagerness to gather speed. With a drop in gear and squirt of juice, the mild-mannered motorway lounge wakes up and in a thoroughly civilised surge, pushes the three-pointed star up to and beyond modern motoring speeds. Diesel variants are less keen but compensate by handing back 30 or so miles to the gallon. For about-town and countryside pottering, the larger-than-average body size is concealed by a taut chassis and firm but forgiving suspension. And it'll turn on a penny – the manufacturer fitted wide steering arcs for the taxi market.

WHAT ABOUT MAINTENANCE AND UPGRADES?

Mercedes maintenance is among the most simple. European specialists like GSF and Euro Car Parts will usually have what you need on the shelf, main dealer parts desks can get bits from Germany within three days and if they're out of stock they'll have their parts office in Stuttgart make you what you need for no extra cost. Unless you're very unlucky, 3000-mile oil changes and an annual coolant flush may be all that's required. Additions like an electric fan and electronic ignition improve running but are strictly optional. W114/5s will totter on for years using the equipment Mercedes originally fitted.

WHAT SHOULD I LOOK OUT FOR? For a cheap, daily driver you can tinker with on the drive, you're best off buying post 1973 – you'll have to pay road tax but a reliable, clean example won't set you back much more than £1000.

Pre 1973 gets you the most desirable W114/W115 jewellery – double chrome bumpers, Bakelite steering wheel and flat-surfaced rear light clusters. Leather is rare – not to be confused with Mercedes' hard-wearing, vinyl-based MB Tex, which looks a lot like it. ABS, air-con and electric windows are sought-after. Surprisingly, the coupé featured here fails to command as high a price tag as the four-door, despite being better appointed.

I BOUGHT ONE

'It was my grandfather's fintail Mercedes that got me into the marque,' says Richard Selwyn-Barnett, owner and founder of www.mercseller.com. 'After riding in his I bought a W115 200D with no power steering. It was woefully slow and very noisy but the styling was gorgeous.'

'They're elegantly designed and the entire petrol range is wonderful to drive. I've motored many thousands of miles with few problems.'

Floor corners, boots, areas beneath chrome fixtures and door bottoms all suffer from corrosion. Water pumps have a tendency to seize, so watch out for lichen-like white stains where hoses meet the pump and warm-running engines. Listen out for timing chain clatter – most common on cars with 80k or more miles – especially during start-up. If the chain snaps, you're into bent valves and a top-end rebuild. The chain should be changed as a matter of course.

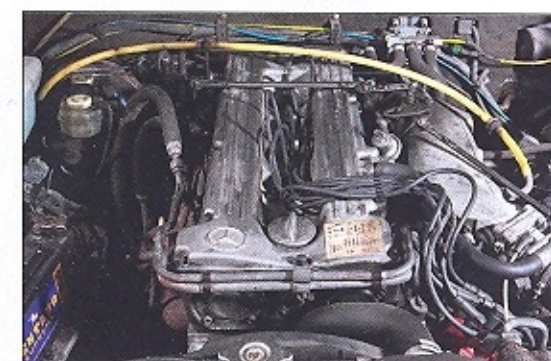
HOW MUCH? Post 1973s with an MoT could cost as little as £300, but minters with the right spec can soar beyond £10k. A serviceable, tidy pre-1973 car with four cylinders and doors, and a modest spec line-up will cost between £1500 and £3000. Coupés tend to stick at the £1800 mark unless they're very clean or fitted with every conceivable extra. There's a giant market for European diesel W115s in Africa, and strong money's given for them, so the price has been driven up. But you can still pick up reasonable derv-powered W115s for under £2000. Six-cylinder W114s will tend to host the extras and options that make those in the know salivate and have crept up to £3000-£8000. But overall, you'd be surprised how cheap it is to run and buy a classic Mercedes-Benz. ■

HOTLINKS

- Euro Car Parts: www.eurocarparts.com
- GSF Car Parts: www.gsfcarparts.com
- Ken's Benz: www.kensbenz.co.uk
- Mercedes-Benz Club: www.mercedes-benz-club.co.uk
- Merc Seller: www.mercseller.com
- Mercedes-Benz: www.mercedesbenz.co.uk



INTERIORS are spartan but functional, even on a top-end model like this. What looks like leather is probably vinyl-based MB Tex.



ENGINE BAY Every model in the W114 and W115 ranges have famously tough engines. Spares are available from a panoply of suppliers and if Mercedes itself is out of stock the company will make you what you need at no extra cost.



REAR Later models like this one can be recognised by the louvred rear light lenses.

THANKS TO: Richard Selwyn-Barnett, Ken Dalton, Chris Bass

www.practicalclassics.co.uk

SIDE Curiously, coupé versions tend to command lower price tags than four-doors. Diesel saloons go for the most cash.