



MERCEDES
POWER &
LUXURY



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A friend of *Classic Mercedes*, Bob Gunthorp, native Californian and whose vehicles we have frequently featured, is a long-standing Mercedes-Benz enthusiast. Indeed, his history with the Fintail goes back almost five decades. It started in 1970 with his first Mercedes, a 1961 220SEb saloon. “I found it in a field in Chula Vista, California [just north of the US-Mexican border],” said Bob. “It had been more or less abandoned there with a knock in the engine. But that 220SEb would become my daily driver for the next 19 years.”

“Then in 1977, for my birthday present, I bought a 1967 230S Universal station wagon,” he recalled. “Unfortunately, the Universal was from the east coast. It was originally sold in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and lived in Rhode Island before going to Texas where I bought it, sight unseen. The Universal was badly rusted in the undercarriage, so what I did was use the Universal body parts and my 220SEb

saloon, and combined the two into a rust-free Universal.

“My next Fintail was a 1967 200D,” Bob continued. “It was an extended-wheelbase ‘Taxi’ model, exceptionally rare, a total of 689 of these extended-wheelbase models having been produced in either 200D or 230 configuration over an eight-month period.”

Then Bob rattled off even more 1960s Mercedes-Benzes he’s owned, including a 1966 200D hearse acquired in 1981. This was followed in 1988 by a 1965 190c Binz-bodied station wagon with right-hand drive, and in 2000 he found a 1967 230 extended-wheelbase ambulance converted by the German coachbuilder Miesen, stored in a warehouse in San Francisco. It had been there for 25 years and the odometer showed just 79,000km (about 49,400 miles). And this was followed by the fully documented 220SEb saloon once owned by Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza.

That brings us to the subject of this feature. Bob bought this now smart looking 300SE long-wheelbase project in

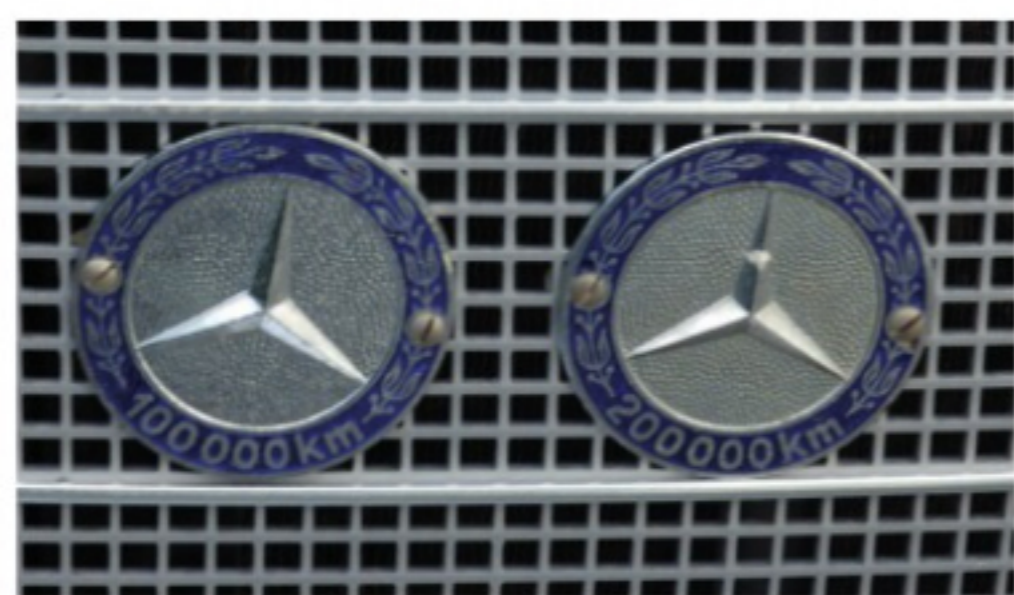
ABOVE FAR LEFT
 Kühlmeister air con would have been fitted by the importer.

ABOVE CENTRE LEFT
 Leather front seat, cloth rear: seems odd but is period correct.

ABOVE
 It wasn’t just the star that made customers buy the Fintail sixes.

ABOVE RIGHT
 Vertically arranged instruments are part of the ‘60s Benz style.

RIGHT
 The M189 motor is a version of that used in late 300SL Roadsters.



ABOVE
Amassing 100,000km and then 200,000km entitled the Fintail to these badges.

TOP
The owner's running in information sticker has remained on the screen.



2010, and by 'project', he means that it consisted of two vehicles. The first one (the good car) was a 1965 US model in Graphite Grey with a red leather interior. But the donor parts car was a different story, as Bob explained. "It was a rusted-out pile of junk. But it did have a factory divider [a cabin division] window. We installed the divider window in the 'good' car during its restoration. This was a bolt-in operation – there were no modifications needed in transferring the divider window from one vehicle to the other. During the restoration we added rear headrests, rear reading lights, and a boot-mounted heater for the rear compartment."

Having owned so many Fintails, Bob is something of an expert on the subject, telling us that the total number of 300SE long-chassis models produced, coded W112.015, was 1,546 from 1963 to 1965. "The factory didn't keep a record of the number of divider vehicles produced because when one was ordered, they simply removed one of them from the assembly line, installed the window and then put it back on to the line," he explained. He adds that he believes that currently the most knowledgeable person on the Fintail is Bernd Köehling, who has written several books on the subject and puts the number of divider window-equipped vehicles produced at 11. "At this time there are just two known to exist," said Bob. "I know of one more in North Carolina – and I own the other one."

Given that the 300SE was offered simultaneously with the start of 600 production, we asked Bob if he knew if any 300SE models had served in head-of-state duties? "As it turned out, the 300SE long wheelbase, especially with the divider window, didn't sell well," he replied. "That was because they had evolved from the same platform that was used on the lowly Fintail 190Dc four-cylinder, and when wealthy people bought a divider window vehicle they certainly wanted it to be noticed that they could afford a more expensive vehicle – and not one that looked just like the many thousands of taxi cabs of the period."

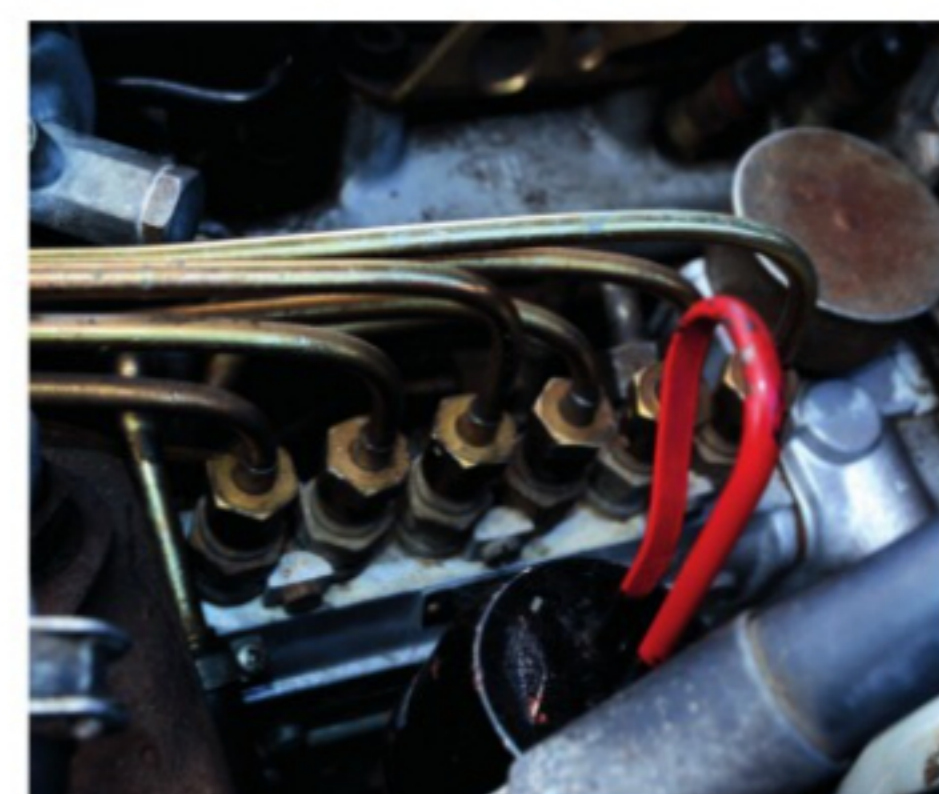
BELOW
This is the 'donor' car, from which the divider window assembly was sourced.



ABOVE
The 'good' car, the one restored and which is the subject of this feature.

BELOW LEFT
These are the air pump and control unit for the 300SE's air suspension.

BELOW
Original two-plunger injection pump upgraded to this six-plunger item.



Specifications

Mercedes-Benz 300SE long wheelbase (W112)

Engine M189 2,996cc 6-cyl Power 168bhp@5,400rpm Torque 184lb ft@4,000rpm
Transmission 4-speed auto Weight 1,615kg 0-62mph 11.5sec Top speed 125mph
Average fuel consumption 23.9mpg Years produced 1963-1965 Number built 1,546

All figures from Mercedes-Benz, and for a post-January 1964 car



⇒ How the 300SE came to be part of the Gunthorp stable is an interesting story, as well. “I had heard about the project in about 2002 and tried to locate it, and I did find it but it was not for sale,” Bob told us. “But by 2010 I had the feeling that it might finally be for sale so I went online looking for it. The next day the owner contacted me and said that he was now ready to sell, so we put together a deal that included delivery from Phoenix, Arizona.”

The two vehicles had been in an aeroplane storage facility there for many years. “This made them ‘hangar find’ rather than ‘barn find’ Mercedes-Benzes,” Bob observed.



With his own Mercedes-Benz restoration business in Chula Vista, Onager Corporation (+1 619 421 3254, www.onagercorporation.com), the rebuild was not hard for Bob. In fact, when *Classic Mercedes* Editor David Sutherland visited him in California in summer 2013, he and I saw the ‘good’ 300SE in his workshop, albeit in pieces. However this car was actually in very good overall condition and little was needed for it. As with any vehicle that has been standing, the braking system needed reconditioning, but the restoration was straightforward, the only parts used from the donor vehicle those relating to the divider window. There was never any hesitation in whether

or not to restore the vehicle, because Bob had been looking for the project for many years. And this turned out to be a fast turnaround for a complete cosmetic restoration, Bob having the vehicle completed in time to drive it to Monterey, California, for the 2014 Legends of the Autobahn Show during Pebble Beach Week that year, where he took second in class in the concours.

When driving the car to and from our photoshoot location, we noted that the front compartment was leather while the back was velour. It seemed to be an unusual combination, and if anything we thought the upholstery selections should have been reversed. But Bob explained that extensive research had established that this was the way they typically left the factory, leather up front and velour in the rear compartment. Showing its luxury car roots, this 300SE is equipped with port- (the vehicle preparation centre) or dealer-installed Kühlmeister air conditioning that has no problem cooling off the cabin on California’s 30C-plus summer days. ⇨

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Space travel

The 300SE long wheelbase was the first of many stretched Mercedes saloons

The Fintail was launched in 1959 to replace the Ponton, and until 1961 was offered in W111, six-cylinder form: the 220b, 220Sb and 220SEb. The SEb had fuel-injection rather than carburettors, and produced 118bhp, 24bhp and 9bhp more than the 220b and 220Sb, respectively. In 1961 the W110, four-cylinder was added, recognisable by its shorter nose and round, rather than stacked headlamps.

The launch of the 300SE in 1961 was a move to push the Fintail upmarket, and from the outside the model was distinguished by extra chrome trim, most notably the full length strip along each side of the body; the long-wheelbase car unveiled at the Geneva motor show in March 1963 lacked

the decorative vents seen on the C-pillar of the regular-wheelbase car. The 300SE models featured enough new engineering to warrant their own model designation, W112: a four-speed automatic gearbox, power-assisted steering, air suspension and front and rear disc brakes.

The 300SE used a three-litre, straight-six overhead cam engine, this being the last outing for the all-alloy M189 unit that had begun life in the final 300SL Roadsters. It produced 158bhp, increasing to 168bhp in January 1964 thanks to six- rather than two-plunger fuel-injection. The LWB model, with its 100mm wheelbase and body stretch, allowed wider doors for easier entry to the rear seat, where there was additional legroom. As this point both the regular and LWB 300SEs were offered with a manual gearbox, with a DM1,400 reduction in price. Production of both models ended when the W108 saloon was introduced to represent Mercedes-Benz in the luxury sector.



About a third of 300SE customers opted for the long wheelbase...



...but it's reckoned that only 11 of them wanted the divider window.

FLAGSHIP FINTAIL 300SE LONG WHEELBASE

⇒ Although in some quarters the W112 300SE in long wheelbase form is often referred to as the '300SEL', that is incorrect, as the stretched model was never badged as such. "The use of the 'L' for long-wheelbase didn't come into use until 1969 with 280SEL," Bob pointed out. "Even the 1968 long-wheelbase 280SE remained badged as a 280SE." The

300SE long-wheelbase was the top of the line model until the 250S and 250SE were introduced in 1965, although even then the Fintail 230S carried on until 1968.

We spoke to Bob regarding its relationship to the 600 limousine and he had this to say: "The 600s were actually never considered a true production car, but rather a special production vehicle, with many of them built on a bespoke, special order basis for dignitaries."



TOP
Bob's 300SE won second in class at Legends of the Autobahn back in 2014.

ABOVE
He received the award from M-B Club America's president, Terry Kiwala.

had to offer at the time. It should be noted that the 300SE was first imported into the US by Studebaker-Packard, which Mercedes-Benz, keen to substantially increase US sales, signed to replace the original importer Max Hoffman, but by the time Bob's 300SE made its way to the US – this being an official US-specification car – distribution had been transferred to the newly established, Mercedes-Benz of North America or MBNA, headquartered in New Jersey.

The 300SE, like other Fintails, featured unitised body construction when most luxury cars around the world still



ABOVE
The Fintail's long and high rear end makes for a huge amount of boot capacity.



RIGHT
Little details like the interior lights were designed with thought.

The short run of the 300SE makes it something of a transition vehicle for Mercedes-Benz, as just 6,748 were built in standard and long wheelbase variants. It was the S-Class of its era, an exclusive, luxury car that competed against the best the world

featured a separate body and chassis, one of the exceptions being the landmark 1961 Lincoln Continental. That was a much larger car that featured its signature 'suicide' doors, front and rear doors opening from the centre pillar.

With Bob's car being such a well-restored, sweet-running example, and with several equally well-restored 1961-1965 Lincoln Continentals available in southern California, it might be fun to drive the Mercedes and Ford side by side. This would allow us to compare and contrast the strengths and shortcomings of each. One was a typically American approach to luxury motoring at a base price of \$6,166, the other a Teutonic work costing a third more, priced at \$9,910. Interestingly, prices were approximately reversed in West Germany, where under the official MBNA tourist programme, an American could buy a 300SE with the four-speed automatic transmission for \$6,983). It's the same battle, at least in the US, if not elsewhere, that both marques are still engaged in today, although now Mercedes-Benz is clearly in the lead. CM

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