

C MONSTER

C55 corners flat and hard, but throttle needs care; power oversteer is never far away

SUPERCAR TEST **MERCEDES-BENZ C55** AMG's outrageous saloon is too expensive, too powerful and too good for Hugo Andreae to resist



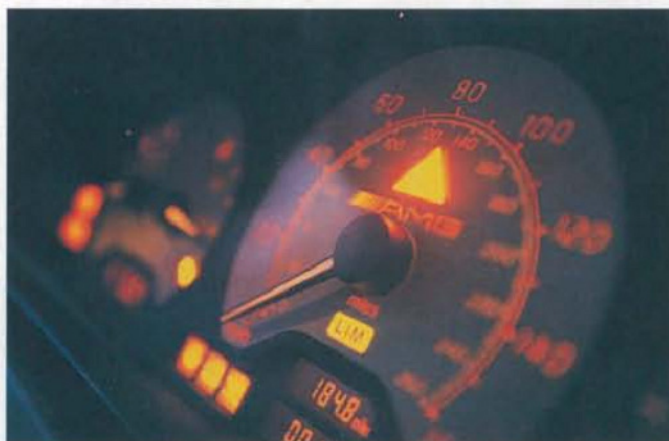
grip as well as the lumbar and underthigh support by means of four electronically inflated cushions, but either way you're not going far from their all-enveloping grasp. Place your hands on the chunky four-spoke steering wheel and your fingers automatically lock into the 10 to two position. A small series of grooves on the underside and a raised hump to hook your thumb around make it uncomfortable to hold it any other way. In short the cabin is designed not to please the eye or the touch but to focus your attention on the business of driving and hold it there whether you like it or not.

Slot the bladeless infra-red key into the dash-mounted ignition and a small series of electronic whirrs and buzzes indicate that you have privileged access to what lies in front of the bulkhead. Two

clicks to the right and a series of dash-mounted warning lights flash orange to indicate that all is well. Brightest of all is a large triangular hazard sign that illuminates in the centre of the speedometer. Remember it well. You'll be seeing it again later. One more turn and the

starter motor jumps into life with a fast, insistent whine. Not even the resistance of eight high-compression cylinders slows its pace, and before the crankshaft has completed a full revolution the 5.4-litre V8 is spinning under its own momentum. For a moment the

revs swing up to 1500rpm before settling back down to 700rpm. If a big-capacity V8 brings to mind a lazy off-beat idle that rocks the car from side to side with its uneven rhythm, think again. This engine sounds urgent, smooth, and impatient; like an edgy ♦



Five-speed automatic is no hindrance to performance. Traction control is kept busy.

◆ racehorse waiting for the stalls to open.

Work the slim automatic gear lever through its crooked gate until it locks into Drive and keep your left foot planted on the brakes. Even at idle this engine develops more torque than a hard-charging Ferrari F355. Take a deep breath, check once more that the mile straight is clear, then push your right foot through the heavy Mercedes throttle spring while simultaneously lifting your left foot off the brake. Almost before you've registered the



Massive torque of 5.4-litre V8 makes C55 a handful in the wet; wheelspin at 90mph



shove in your back, that orange traction control light is winking at you again. Try as it might the electronic brain is unable to match the power of the engine to the grip of the tyres, and the rear wheels continue to spin away some of the excess. Not that this seems to slow the C55's progress. It breaks 30mph in 2.3sec (C43 2.7sec), hammers past 60mph in 5.2sec (C43 6.4sec) with the traction control light still blinking and shows no sign of slowing down as it blasts through the 100mph barrier in 12.4sec (C43 15.2sec). What it would manage on a dry, still day will remain the subject of hushed speculations over a pint or six. So for that matter will the top speed. Road test editor Stephen Sutcliffe volunteers to take it onto Millbrook's banked high-speed circuit to verify the owner's claim that the normal 155mph limiter has been removed, but returns five minutes later looking several shades paler. The C55 breezed past 155mph alright and was still pulling like a train when the computer logged 170mph, but a combination of rear-end lift, a damp surface and the circuit's notorious bump flicked the tail out into momentary oversteer. Not the kind of experience that's conducive to a steady heartbeat. Sutcliffe wisely decides to call it a day.

Suffice it to say that if you can find a long enough straight and a driver with few enough brain cells, it may well reach the high 170s before finally running out of puff.

Impressive stuff, but these dry facts and figures still can't convey what it feels like to drive a C55 on the road. After all, to go by these indications alone the C55 is no quicker than a BMW M3, let alone a Porsche 911. That's why you have to go somewhere with fast, open roads punctuated with bumps, curves, straights

C55 uses the same 5.4-litre engine as E55, although power drops from 354 to 347bhp



C55 packs thuggish performance without compromising high-speed ride quality

and the occasional burst of traffic. Roads where torque, throttle reaction, comfort and vision play as much a part as absolute power. Roads like the ones we found near Chatteris, Cambridgeshire. Typified by their long raised straights, rippled tarmac, humpback bridges and sudden 90-degree corners, they demand the utmost respect from car and driver. Choose a wrong gear and you'll feel like you've hit

the rewind button; misjudge a hump and it'll knock you metres off course; underestimate the severity of a bend and you'll end up in one of the watery dykes that run alongside.

This is where the C55 comes into its own. With 376lb ft of torque at a lazy 3000rpm and what feels like 90 per cent of that all the way from idle to 6000rpm, there is no such thing as the wrong gear. If the

five-speed automatic gearbox chooses not to kickdown from third you suffice with what amounts by any normal standards to brutal acceleration. If on the other hand it does kickdown you'd better be prepared for the consequences. The first sign that anything unusual is about to happen is a brief let-up in the rate of acceleration as the torque convertor absorbs the slack between third gear

disengaging and second gear slotting into place. Just enough time for you to tighten your grip on the wheel and prepare for the coming onslaught. If the road surface is anything less than perfect the tyres will instantly be ripped from the road in a banshee shriek of rubber against tarmac. If it's wet the same thing happens in third and even fourth. Find a good surface, however, and the C55 flings you down the ♦



Optional 18-inch alloys bring 255/35 tyres but even these can't tame C55's traction deficit