

MERCEDES-BENZ C36 AMG

YOU CAN'T HAVE TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING

This is the best hot Mercedes ever made. **PAUL HORRELL** took one home and liked it so much that he couldn't stop driving it. He did hundreds of miles non-stop, but even that wasn't enough

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER BURN

'Properly quick cars all feel alive, dodging side-to-side along the little ruts that nibble the road surface'



*'The C36 feels like a proper sports car,
hard and jiggly and sharp and full of kick'*



SOMETIMES YOU JUST CAN'T STOP driving. It happened to me the other day. Got home, but couldn't cut the ignition and climb out. You know how it is: no idea why the urge takes hold, but it does. Could be your mood, the weather, the road. Or the position of the planets, state of your biorhythms or, for all I care, the vibes coming off your new-age crystal. But today I know exactly the reason. It's a calm, hot evening and I've got a hot car. A 280bhp Mercedes C-class, tuned up and tied down by AMG. Built for speed, built for distance. So here I am, three hours north of home, wafting up the A1, road-music cassettes blaring.

There is a peculiar tension, almost addictive, about cruising slowly in a very fast car, sticking to 80mph-odd on a motorway, using half the available speed, for hour upon hour. You're holding back, tight on the reins. You can't slacken off. Let your right ankle relax, and the slightest extra weight on the throttle sends the car steaming ahead. Your steering has to be spot-on, because properly quick cars all feel

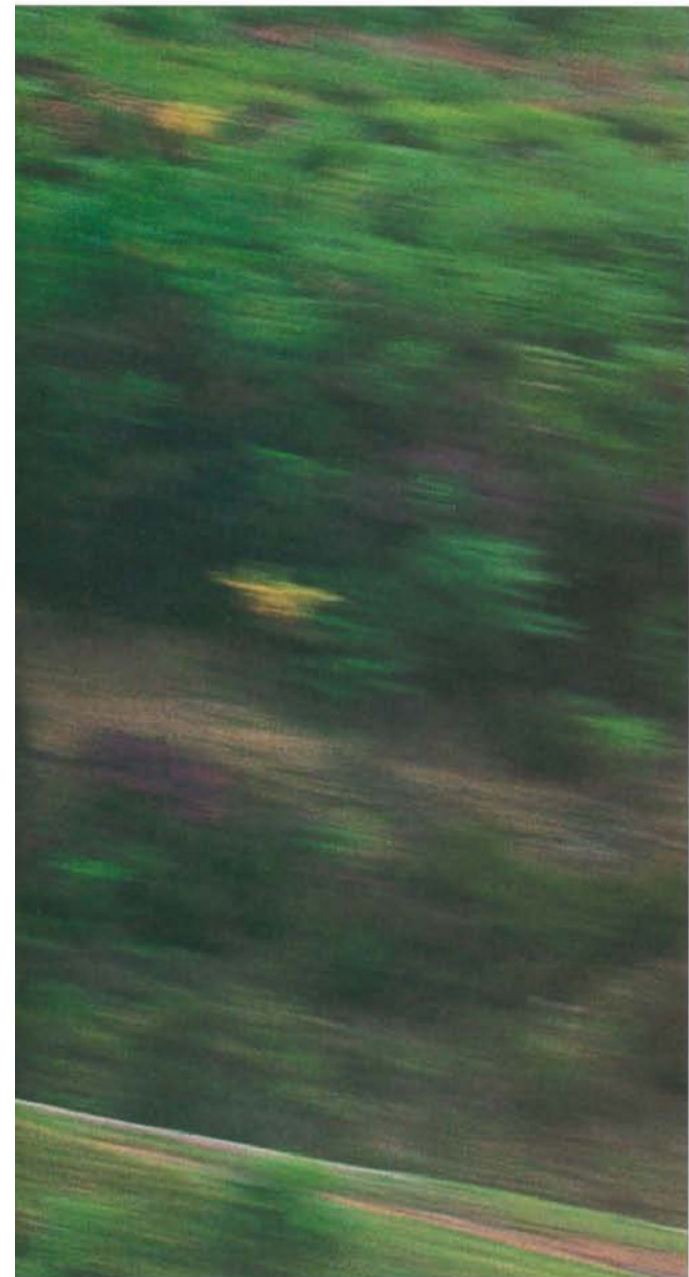
alive, dodging and nudging side-to-side along the little ruts and tramlines that nibble the surface of any arterial road. The rear tyres (big 40-profile 17-inch jobs that amount to little more than a smear of rubber around the alloys' rims, rather than anything actually pneumatic) slap-slap against the concrete joints, and hum coarsely if the surface has any texture. The engine has a harsher bark than is usual for a Benz, reminding you that what it really wants is to be given a wide-open road and a wide-open throttle. But no. You're just restraining it with the rest of the traffic, making this shark swim with the minnows.

A big-engined S-class is just as mighty in acceleration and speed potential as this hot C-class, but 80mph in the C36 is a world away from the relaxing, silent, cruise-controlled waft of an S500. The C36 feels like a proper sports car, hard and jiggly and sharp and full of kick. It's edgy, ready to pounce, and I'm alert and working with it, my eyes scanning road-mirror-road-speedo, rhythmically in time with the tyre

thump and engine drone and the stereo's beat.

But no-one can keep temptation at bay for ever. After three hours of M1, M18 and A1(M), you crest a rise and view six lanes of divided carriageway, free of junctions and obstructions and any more than a sprinkling of vehicles. What would you do? Same as me. I turn down the music and unroll the pent-up flex in my ankle. Not brutally, just a steady push on the accelerator until it's clenched fast to the carpet.

Almost before the throttle is depressed at all, the harmonic straight-six note hardens, seeming to lift the star-topped silver bonnet a few inches upward. By the time the pedal has reached its full extent, the sound is rising rapidly in pitch, the rev-counter swinging madly upward as the four-speed automatic slurs smoothly but emphatically down to third. There's a real bark to the sound now, and the vehicles alongside are sucked backward, diminishing in the C36's mirrors. The acceleration grows more urgent as the rev-needle growls towards the 6400rpm red block. And now we're really flying, rushing

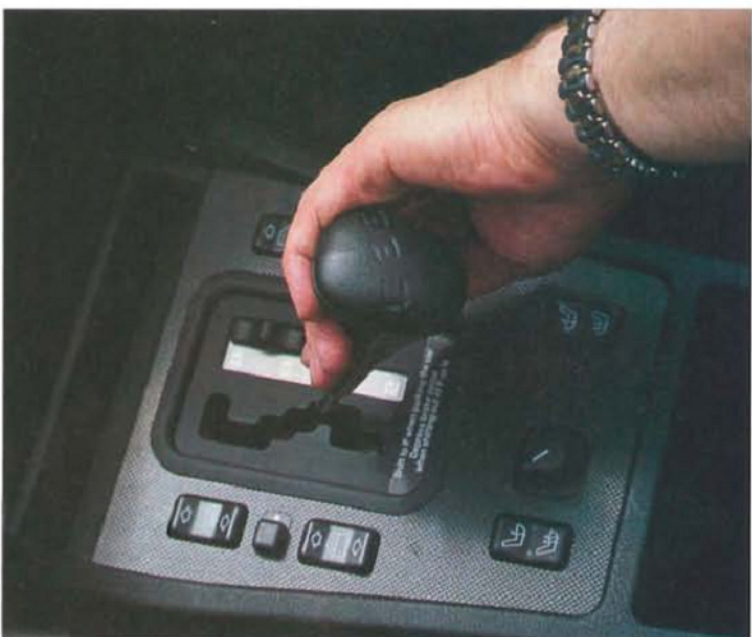


down the corridor between Armco and blurring Catseyes. It's a rush made tenfold more vivid by the slow tension of the preceding three hours. Yet still the tacho needle rotates maniacally clockwise and my neck-hairs prickle.

Although it's perfectly safe, this type of thing is Plod-madness, licence-shredding stuff. So I back right off. The transmission nonchalantly shrugs up to top, letting the engine noise subside. All that's left is a gentle wind-rush and tyre-hum over the smooth bitumen. The speed falls away, but gently. The whole blast has lasted just a few seconds, but I've entirely consumed a small valley of the A1's topography.

Although the car's feel and power are so AMG-special, sitting in the cockpit the visual reminders are more or less exactly as per your ordinary C180 Sport. The gearknob has an embossed C36 logo, the steering wheel has a band of naff grey leather, the speedo reads to 170mph, and the upholstery is the optional leather, yes, but the seats are the usual sensible, supportive, hard chairs, and the controls and

Mock carbonfibre on dash mars otherwise first-class cabin. Engine extensively reworked to produce a Mercedes-reliable 280bhp out of 3.6 litres. It has four valves per cylinder and variable cam timing. C36's autobox is brilliant. It's smooth, and if you really want to hustle, you can use it like a manual



'The steering on most Mercs is remote, but on this C36 it's confident, communicative'



Optional body kit is subtle, enhances looks. C36 is staggeringly fast for an auto – top speed is governed to 155mph. Twin tailpipes hint that this is no ordinary C-class



switches have their accustomed firm precision. The interior design and furnishing is heavy-looking, heavy-feeling, heavy-duty and in places heavy-handed. The only attempt at flair is a series of decorative fillets of black plastic faux-carbonfibre. Even the most ardent supporter of cheap textured plastic would be forced to concede that these are no better than crap, nothing like as pretty or lustrous as the rare and costly real thing.

The car is rare and costly enough, though. It's built as an ordinary C-class, on the Mercedes line, and its engine starts life as a production unit. But AMG's re-working of the straight-six is comprehensive, as it would need to be to get a Mercedes-reliable 280bhp out of 3.6 litres. Helping it along, there are four valves per cylinder and variable camshaft timing. The last of which can claim partial responsibility for the billowing mid-range torque curve. You don't need big revs up before there's a lunge of torque to be had. AMG can also claim responsibility for a lowered, stiffened suspension, the wheels

and the optional body kit. The car is then sold as a complete Merc-warranted item at your local dealer for £40-odd grand.

Because of the wheels and dressed-up body, people do recognise this car as something special, which is why they ask about the price when I stop for fuel. These aren't the thoughts in my head, though. The glorious moors of Yorkshire and Northumberland are drawing me close and it's time to peel off the A1.

The C-class isn't a small car – if you drive it alongside the BMW M3 against which comparisons have inevitably been made, it feels a little large and slow to the tiller – but this AMG is a fabulously controllable and controlled one. I find the steering on most Mercedes saloons remote and unnervingly artificial, but on this AMG it's a confident, communicative mechanism that out-feels the M3's. All of which means that after only a short way I feel happy about pouring it into what bends there may be with quite some resolve.

It laps them up. The vast tyres would always

give stacks of grip on a smooth surface, but that's not what we're passing over. And yet the lumps on the road make little difference, which shows just how aristocratic the chassis is. It still hangs on. What's more, it still breaks loose so progressively that you can force it to the very edge without the least sweat. Imagine you get to a long, tight corner at ill-advisedly high speed. It'll understeer, pushing the front tyres out until you back away off the throttle, when it neatens itself up unflinchingly. Which might be a bit unexciting, but is after all a completely safe and reassuring characteristic for a situation in which you have, let's face it, been a bit of a twerp.

Get the entry speed right, though, and you soon realise that the heavens are smiling on you. The C36's balance of grip front-to-rear is as sweet as you like, and the steering wheel loads up, jiggles a little, then lightens in your hands so that you know just when the front tyres' purchase is running thin. Meanwhile, when you catch sight of the exit of the bend, you can mash the accelerator, get the car to squat a little as the

'After all these miles, it's still a wrench to turn the key anti-clockwise and walk away'



Sunset, but Horrell wants more. Ultra low-profile rubber coats lovely 17in alloys, and gives the car a jiggly but nicely composed ride along with prodigious grip and great handling

MERCEDES-BENZ C36 AMG

SPECIFICATION

Price	£38,250
Engine	3606cc 24-valve six, 280bhp at 5750rpm, 284lb ft at 4000rpm
Gearbox	Four-speed automatic
Suspension	Front: double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar Rear: five links, coil springs, anti-roll bar
Tyres	Front: 225/45 ZR17 Rear: 245/40 ZR17
Length	4487mm

Width 1720mm

Wheelbase 2670mm

Weight 1560kg

PERFORMANCE

Top speed 155mph (limited)

0-60mph 6.5sec

In gears First: 42mph

Second: 72mph

Third: 112mph

Fuel consumption: Urban: 20.8mpg

56mph: 33.2mpg

75mph: 28.0mpg

Test: 23.8mpg

huge rear tyres dig in to catapult you down the next straight. And if you've been early enough in your application of the throttle, after the squat will come a little sidestep from the rear as the tyres relinquish hold against the titanic torque. There's nothing scary here: it's a cakewalk to roll your hands on the wheel-rim a little so that the C36 drifts obediently and tidily straight again. No fuss, no mess.

In the wet, the powerslides can be quite lurid, but without malice. There's no snappiness or awkwardness. The amiability of the suspension must surely be down to the well honed complexity of Mercedes' new generation of chassis, which hangs the front wheels off double wishbones, and the rears from five separate links per side. All the better to look after control toe-in and camber angles while you've got other things to think about.

It's worth mentioning the transmission here. Too often, automatics can bring on a bit of

raggedness when you're behaving in such a rowdy fashion. Halfway round a bend, when you floor the throttle they'll shift down with a thunk, sending the engine spinning towards its power peak and the back end of the car into a sphincter-tightening spasm. But the C36's is so well mannered that you can tug the selector backwards on the way into a corner and it'll shift down perfectly smoothly, so you won't need to be unsettled later. You use it like a manual, in other words. And if you leave it in D, it won't ever shift down from 3 to 2 unless you deliberately activate kickdown, so you're protected from any heart-stopping downshifts in the middle of wet corners.

But the rain is clear now, and I'm skimming along favourite roads in Northumberland. It looks like the Garden of Eden tonight, the heathered moorlands and lush patchwork dales all bathed in slanting golden-syrup light. I'm deep into the groove, making the engine sing up

and down through the business end of its rev range, hearing it bark slightly whenever the tacho passes up past 3800rpm, the point at which it really goes to work. I'm slapping the transmission selector up and down through the gate, click-click, as the Benz dives towards each switchbacking bend as it loses speed to its iron-fist brakes, then winding it through the arcs with a big, fat grin.

So the evening fades through pink to red and purple-black, but the driving goes on, concentration now contracting into a flare-pool from the headlamps. And I still can't bring myself to stop. Why is this car so captivating? Something to do with the completeness of a Merc and the complete madness of AMG; the dead hand of the three-pointed star and the liveliness of a real sporting car. It's a creative tension that means, after hundreds of non-stop recreational miles, it's still a wrench to turn the key anti-clockwise, climb out and walk away into the night. 🐾