

Drop-head



gorgeous

Smooth performers, with sumptuous interiors and lashings of style, these gorgeous drop-tops are real grand tourers. Best of all, you could have any one of them for £10,000 or less.

Martin Buckley helps you choose

IF YOU LIKE YOUR OPEN-TOP ADVENTURES TO BE soft and easy then look no further than these three. Swift rather than truly fast, elegant rather than aggressive, the Mercedes-Benz SL, Triumph Stag and Peugeot 504 Cabriolet are cars built to enjoy the good life, and ideally when the sun's shining.

Comfort comes before performance so these are cars that ride gently and steer easily, their long legs more suited to the grand tour than the short sprint. What they lose in outright speed they gain in weekend practicality. Four grown-ups can enjoy the delights of a balmy summer night in the 504 and Stag (the SL is a little tighter for more than two) and all have decent-sized boots for ➤





those who like to take more than a change of underwear on that long Continental tour.

Unlike some icons of the Seventies, all have worn well aesthetically. They have handsome, square-jawed looks, bereft of gimmickry. What's more, they have proper hoods that are raised easily and stowed flat, making for clean, elegant profiles that set them apart from less luxurious two-seater roadsters with pram-like headgear.

In many ways, the Mercedes SL defines this genre of alfresco Grand Tourers – a car much emulated but rarely equalled as a soft-top with strong feminine appeal. Announced in 1971 as a replacement for the much-loved 'Pagoda' SL, such was its popularity with the well-to-do upper-middle classes that it became a design immune to fashion. Rivals came and went, yet the SL's hold on the market was as unshakable as the bank-vault build quality of the car itself, and production lasted until 1989. Always power-steered and invariably automatic, the SL came with a succession of big, injected V8s (and a

couple of straight sixes), majoring on torque and smoothness. Although not as rapid as the last 500SLs, the original 350SL – the car featured here – was decently swift.

And apart from a couple of discreet spoilers, the first 350SL looked much like the last of the 500SLs, which probably accounts for the incredible way these cars have held their value over the years. Rapid, safe and cosy in the winter months (with the hard-top fitted) even if you don't like the image, the appeal of these beautifully engineered cars isn't difficult to appreciate.

If only the Triumph Stag had led such a charmed early life. With its modish roll-hoop and svelte Continental lines, it looked a clever package when it was launched in 1970, a bargain-priced SL ready to take on Mercedes at its own game. Tragically, engine problems trashed the Stag's reputation early on and a desperate sales performance in its biggest intended market – the United States – sealed its fate. Buyers loved its versatility, its sound and its style but quickly tired of the fragility of its under-developed V8 and the poor service offered by BL, then in its darkest hour. Some binned the cars, others did engine conversions but somehow the Stag transcended its dodgy image in the Eighties to become a sought-after classic with one of the most enthusiastic of followings.

Which leaves us with the 504 Cabriolet, our wild card and something of a rarity in Britain where the car was never officially offered with



OUR TESTERS



GARY CHARLTON is an accountant who owns four 504 Cabriolets and two rusty Coupés as well as a couple of 604 saloons, one of which is his everyday car. He runs the 504 Coupé/Cabriolet register for Club Peugeot UK. Safe to say, he's a fan. The late Cabrio here was bought by Gary (43) from the original owner.



JILL DAVIDSON and David Gutteridge bought their superbly original SL a year ago, to join a stable of modern Mercs. Jill uses it daily but doesn't cover great mileages, so the 18mpg consumption isn't an issue. 'I always wanted a white Triumph Stag for my 21st birthday,' she says, 'but I think I'm better off with this.'



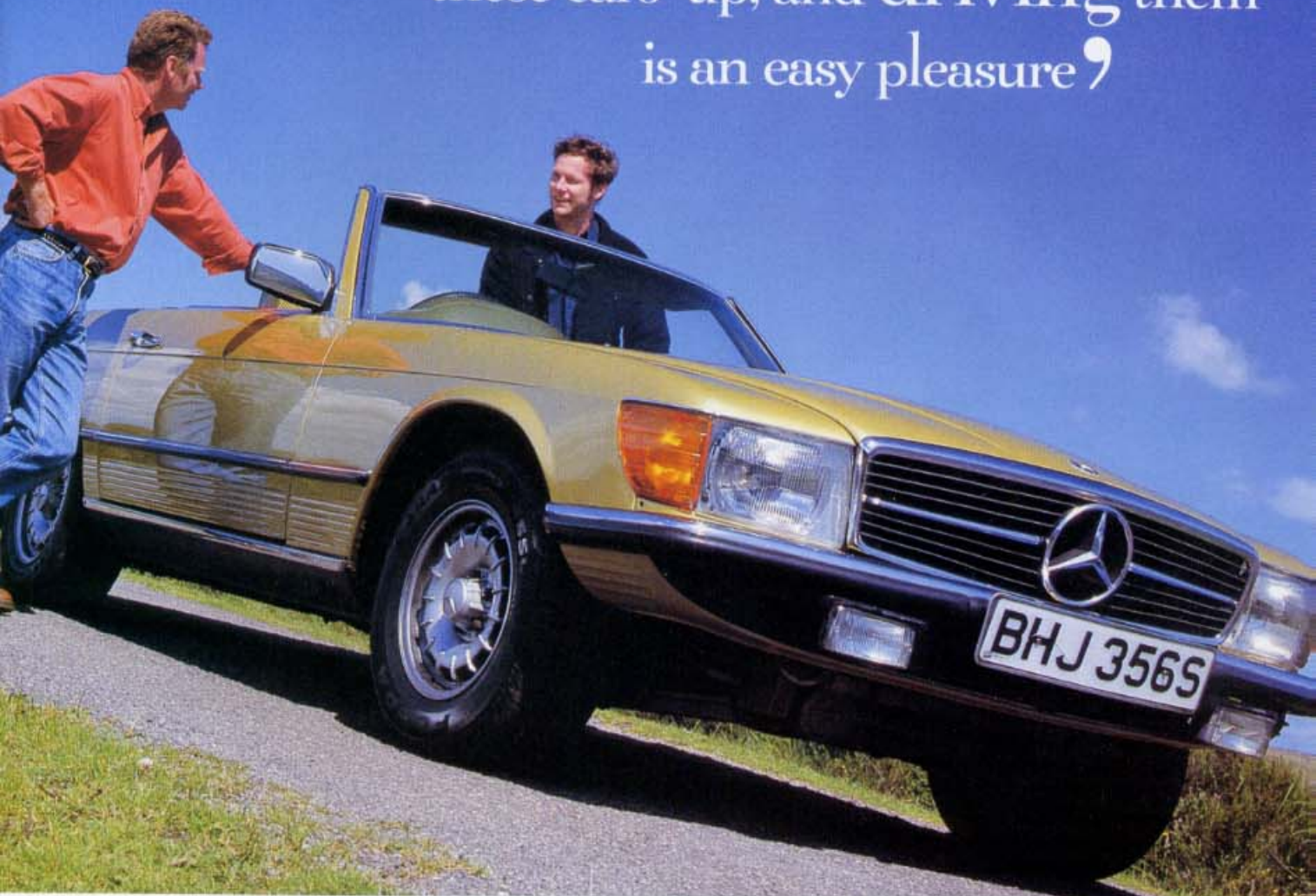
DANIEL STRONG (23) cut his journalistic teeth on *Performance Car* magazine where he developed a liking for hopelessly fast and expensive cars. 'A car's got to have the right blend of style and performance,' he says 'and while these soft-tops lack a bit of go, they've bags of character. Picking a winner won't be easy.'



MARTIN BUCKLEY (31) used to own a 504 Coupé and held a fond ambition to convert it to a V6 until he found out how rusty it was. The Stag reminds him of his Chopper bike (same kind of gearshift on the auto). He admires the SL but says its stockbroker belt/bank robber's wife image has all the wrong associations.



‘Civilised is the word that sums these cars up, and driving them is an easy pleasure’



The Mercedes may have star quality, but the Peugeot and the Triumph are class acts too. The Peugeot is the oldest design, but updates kept it looking fresh

right-hand drive. Its beautifully balanced looks, from Pininfarina, have a sophistication and a mystique perhaps lacking in the Stag and SL, and if a mere 2 litres and four cylinders sounds a bit weak, then remember the Safari Rally-winning durability of Peugeot's four-pot plodder, its smooth torque and potential 30mpg economy. The V6 version would have been a fairer comparison but, as there are only four in the country, perhaps a rather unrealistic one.

The shape dates from 1969; the floorpan and all-independent suspension came from the 504 saloon, the classic Paris taxi. Like the Merc, the 504 had a long production run – the last cars manufactured in 1983 – but typical rust problems

mean there are very few survivors.

Nobody could have predicted that really good 504 Cabriolets would be fetching as much, if not more, than equivalent SLs and Stags, but the truth is you really will need ten grand to buy an excellent example, such is the rarity and desirability of the model which had no real successor in the modern Peugeot range.

Stags are in much stronger supply as most of them stayed in the UK and rust was never such a desperate problem, a curious and happy state of affairs on a British car. Ten to twelve grand is the absolute tops for a great Stag.

The Mercedes is a tricky one. The trade regards it more as a used car than a classic and it would take an exceptional 350SL to make much more



than £10,000, although the last of the 500SLs would easily command £20,000. Truth is, there are very few really good 350SLs around any more, but it can only be a matter of time before the model becomes collectable.

Civilised is the word that sums these cars up. Driving them is an easy pleasure any time, such is their laid-back charm and modern feel. You'll rarely risk your licence in them – the Stag, 504 and SL are cars that suppress aggression rather than encourage it – yet they will make you feel special and glamorous on every journey. ➡

We couldn't have done it without... Among the experts who helped

with this test, special thanks to: John Fox, Peugeot 504 Cabriolet specialist (tel 01729 822 107) Tony Hart of Stag specialists HRS (tel 0181 963 1080) and Robert Schmitt, Mercedes specialist (tel 0171 624 0884).



‘It’s not difficult to see why the **Peugeot** is a favourite with the media trendies...’

Who could deny that the 504 Cabriolet is a truly beautiful car? There is a delicacy about its simple, curvy waistline, a superbly judged balance to its proportions that show Pininfarina at its best. We may prefer the early models with chrome bumpers and four-shot lights – but let’s not be picky.

Entering through long, wide doors, which shut with a downmarket twang, you settle into deeply-cushioned seats covered in a pseudo-leather that cracks and splits like the real thing but has none of its other, more desirable qualities. As the deep cushioning folds around your buttocks and embraces your torso, you can begin to take in the dash – a bleak collection of coffee-coloured plastic mouldings relieved on this late car by some afterthought veneer. It lacks the upmarket gravitas you would expect in a coachbuilt machine, but which Peugeot ever won any prizes for its interior?

A Kugelfischer injection allows the engine to fire on the first twist of the key. It responds quite



sharply to a blip of the throttle but sounds, and feels, uninspired. The blend of subdued pushrod thrash and a hard-to-define noise from the injection tells you right away this is not an engine with sporty pretensions but merely an unobtrusive power-source: willing, strong but bereft of personality.

Not that the 504 is a slow car: it winds up eagerly through five well-spaced gears and, more to the point, has a good, even spread of torque for swift and seamlessly unobtrusive progress. There is no need to push the engine to get the

best out of it and once you’ve heard it you wouldn’t want to. Four thousand rpm is usually plenty enough.

Although a little notchy in character, the gearchange is positive and light in action and – allied to a light, well-cushioned clutch – this means there is no excuse for driving the 504 anything but smoothly. We liked the firm pedal and sharp, decisive bite of the car’s all-disc brakes which pulled the 504 up short and strong in the dry.

Peugeot put power-steering on these late Cabriolets and also took the opportunity to quicken the ratio, so although it lacks the pin-sharp response and realistic feel of a good modern, the 504 doesn’t disgrace itself in the handling department. Far from it, in fact. The car turns in faithfully, understeers gently, rolls a bit yet never really puts a wheel out of place, even through a series of twisty curves attacked with verve. Wearing chunky Michelin TRX rubber, the 504 always seems to whisk through quicker than you’d expect, with no loss of poise over bumps.



The 2-litre four isn't much to look at and doesn't sound great either, but it's a solid puncher. Big, comfy seats are covered in what looks like leather (even cracks like leather) but isn't

Which brings us to the ride, a masterful combination of firmish damping and soft springs allowing the car to take any kind of pothole or bump in its stride at low speed yet remaining free of wallow and able to float over undulations taken at a speed that would catch out lesser machines. There is an eerie lack of road noise, too, adding to the feeling of mature composure. Suddenly the dreary engine doesn't seem to matter so much and you begin to enjoy the refinement and usability of the roomy 504. Its owner Gary Charlton uses this Cabriolet – one of a stable of Pininfarina 504s – every day. But you can make a case for the 504 purely on style. It's not difficult to see why the 504 is such a favourite with media trendies more concerned with image than urge. ➡



FIVE WAYS TO AVOID A BASKET CASE

1. Don't worry about the engines: they're bulletproof and, besides, components are relatively cheap. The fuel injection needs expert setting-up and beware of a cooling fan that has been wired-up to work constantly – the head gasket has probably gone. V6 models are very rare in the UK but it's easy to up-rate the cabriolet to later V6 spec.

2. Do worry about the bodywork. Check sills, floor stiffeners, where subframe bolts into the floorpan and

on older cars strut turrets, especially under the wings. The bracing piece that goes into the bulkhead cracks, letting the strut tops lean inwards. In bad cases the strut will start to put dints in the bonnet as it moves.

3. Look at door bottoms carefully. You can't get pre '78 doors: the later type are £500 from Peugeot but you can make them fit the early car. Bootlids are unobtainable. Only late-model bonnets and front panels are available but, again,

they can be made to fit.

4. Beware of missing or generally doggy exterior trim, as much of it is unobtainable – specifically rear lights and lenses, bumpers and even side glass. Interior trim is hard to get hold of. Hoods are pricey (£1000).

5. Gearboxes tend to leak oil – most owners put up with it. Diff's hardly ever give trouble but watch for rotting wishbones, allowing the springs to push through. Similarly the spring saddles at the front can rot through.



KNOW YOUR 504s

1969-74 Early car has 1800cc 404 injection engine. Column handbrake, different bonnet scoop. 1970-74 2-litre car with centre pull-up handbrake, new-style bonnet scoop. All have four-headlamp nose, separate tail-lights. Four-speed manual or three-speed ZF auto boxes. £3-10k.

1974-78 'Mk2' model distinguishable by long one-piece headlights, flush door handles, new bumper over-riders and one-piece back lights. Appeared first as carburettor-fed 2.6-litre PRV V6, then 2-litre four-cylinder reintroduced when V6 failed to sell enough in the fuel crisis. PAS and five-speed 'boxes on later versions but V6 Cabriolet never came with injection. £3-16k (V6).

1978-onwards Colour-coded bumpers (with a bit of an afterthought look) on all models. £3-10k (£16k V6).

1982-83 Veneer dashboard, different dials and generally more upmarket interior. £3-10k (£16k V6).

Peugeot 504 Cabriolet (2 litre)

Engine	4 cyl, 1971cc
Fuel system	Kugelfischer mechanical injection
Gearbox	Five-speed manual
Brakes	All disc
Suspension	Front: coil springs, struts, anti-roll bar. Rear: coil springs, semi-trailing arms, anti-roll bar
Steering	Rack and pinion, PAS
Body	Monocoque four-seater all-steel convertible
Length	14ft 4in
Width	5ft 7in
Weight	2568lb
Power	110bhp @ 5600rpm
Torque	131lb ft @ 3000rpm
0-60	12secs
Top speed	111mph
Consumption	22-25mpg

CALL THE CLUB

Club Peugeot UK has a 504 Cabriolet/Coupé register. For details of club membership call John or Françoise Saxby on 0151 334 0748.

Group Test

Triumph Stag v Mercedes-Benz 350SL v Peugeot 504 Cabriolet



THE STAG IS AT ITS MOST GRACEFUL in Mk1 form, bereft of those unflattering body-stripes and vulgar sill trims. Even so, its Michelotti looks still fall short of catwalk beauty in our book, let down by screen pillars that are too thick and excessive fuss around the nose.

Inside, you sit quite high in relation to the dashboard in seats that lack under-thigh support but are otherwise good. The hood lowers easily, leaving the padded T-bar exposed, but proves awkward to secure to the header rail when the time comes to put it up again.

The fittings and furniture are inoffensive but maybe a bit too closely aligned to lesser Triumphs to give the car the sophisticated feel its makers were always looking for. The dials, readable and complete apart from an oil pressure gauge, are straight out of the 2000 Saloon and set in matt walnut. The black plastic trim is heavily grained and has all the charm of a chair in a dentist's waiting room.

As well as being the car's greatest potential weakness, the V8 engine is also its most endearing strength. It seems almost silent at tick-over (if not perfectly smooth) yet a stroke of the Stag's throttle produces a deep, off-beat V8 warble from the twin, big-bore tail-pipes that couldn't be mistaken for anything else. The aggression in this signature-tune exhaust bark is slightly at odds with a car whose true nature is of a laid-back and easy-going boulevardier. At 145bhp,

the overhead cam 3-litre V8 – basically two Dolomite fours on a common crankcase – is in a low state of tune, delivering usefully strong torque in the mid-range rather than screaming top-end power.

Which isn't to say the Stag doesn't go well. In manual form, bereft of its heavy hard-top, it pulls smoothly and strongly to its redline in all its direct-drive gears and will sit happily at three figures in overdrive top on any long straight. Here, perhaps, the car



is at its best. It feels very stable and unstressed in this long-striding ratio with eager passing power just a twitch of the thumb away on the overdrive switch in the top of the gearknob. There are effectively six gears in the Stag's 'box with overdrive on third as well as top, but the synchromesh felt obstructive when rushed yet didn't like lazy, slow changes either. A snatchy clutch, allied to typically Triumph drivetrain shunt, didn't help smooth changes. We decided we preferred the car as an automatic, which most of them are. The power steering feels promisingly well-weighted at low speeds but fails to relay vital messages about understeer and grip when

FIVE WAYS TO AVOID A STINKER

1. Engines are intolerant of poor maintenance or sloppy rebuilds. Problems with case-hardening on crank should all have been sorted by now – but it still happens. Look for flashing oil pressure warning light at idle. Look also for obvious signs of overheating and lack of anti-freeze in the cooling system. Proof of regular 3000-mile oil changes a good thing too. Long timing chains are susceptible to tooth-jumping – make sure they aren't noisy at idle.

2. Beware of cheaply converted Rover-engined cars, although there is nothing wrong with these hybrids if the job's been done well: it's the engine the car should have had in the first place, some say.

3. The Stag doesn't rot that badly but is vulnerable to bodgers as most cosmetic problems are easy to hide. Check the cross members under the front seats, out-riggers behind the front arches, under the back seat and, of course, the sills.

4. On manual cars second and third gear synchro may be weak. Rough changes and a lack of kick-down will be obvious on the auto 'box which 70% had. Beware manual conversions using the less robust 'box from the 2000/2500 saloon. A leaky rear axle may develop a whine, which means it isn't far from packing up.

5. On the suspension listen and feel for worn bushes and beware lowered cars that haven't had rear-end geometry sorted.

‘A stroke of
the **Stag’s**
throttle produces
a deep, off-beat
V8 warble’



you begin to corner the car vigorously. It becomes lighter, more vague as you search in vain for the correct degree of lock for smooth cornering. This is a shame, as the Stag's modest degree of roll and impressive levels of grip on slightly wider than standard 195/70 rubber suggest poise and good manners. Of our three cars, the Stag's ride was the most jolty and hard, though not uncomfortably so. More impressive was the lack of scuttle-shake for an open car, no

The Stag's cabin looks good, though is closer to the 2000 saloon than the Merc SL. Its T-bar roof gives that famous British stiff upper lid. The V8 growls, but won't cause aggro

doubt attributable to the T-bar structure.

The spark of brilliance in the Stag's concept is heavily countered by the compromise inherent in its execution, but somehow this doesn't seem to lessen the car's appeal as a four-seater fun car with enough character to transcend its flaws. ➡



KNOW YOUR STAGS

1970-73 Mk1 Stag 3-litre V8 has Borg Warner automatic or four-speed manual gearbox with overdrive option, disc/drum brakes, electric windows and PAS as standard. Has steel wheels with Ro-style trims. Hard top and overdrive not standard. No seams in the rear tonneau panel on very early cars; stainless steel trim strip on late ones. £3-12k.

1973-77 Mk2 Stag is instantly recognisable by black-painted sills and tail panel, twin coach lines and black 'Stag' badges. Tail pipes are smaller bore and Triumph badge on bumper is smaller and no longer incorporates the reversing light. Mechanically the car has higher compression, quicker steering and a new type of alternator. Overdrive and hard-top are now standard. £3-12k.

1976 Stainless steel sill covers, body colour tail panel and alloy wheels now standard. £3-12k.

1977 Borg Warner automatic changed from Type 35 to Type 65 and car has smaller radiator. £3-12k.

Triumph Stag

Engine	V8, 2997cc
Fuel system	Twin SU carbs
Gearbox	Four-speed with o/d on 3rd and top. Or three-speed automatic
Brakes	Discs front, drums rear
Suspension	Front: struts, lower links, coil springs, anti-roll bar Rear: semi-trailing arms, coil springs, telescopic dampers
Steering	Rack and pinion, power-assisted
Body	All-steel monocoque, 2+2 convertible
Length	14ft 6in
Width	5ft 3.5in
Weight	2811lb
Power	145bhp @ 5500rpm
Torque	170lb ft @ 3500rpm
0-60	9.3secs
Top speed	117mph
Consumption	20-23mpg

CALL THE CLUB

For more Stag info, write to the Stag Owners Club, The Old Rectory, Aslacton, Norfolk NR15 2JN (tel 07071 224245), or call the Triumph Stag Register on 01425 274638.

Group Test

Mercedes-Benz 350SL v Peugeot 504 Cabriolet v Triumph Stag



IT WOULD BE PERVERSE TO CALL IT A weakness, but the Mercedes 350SL doesn't actually feel like an old car. Jill Davidson's '78 SL goes about its business with the cool efficiency of a vehicle half its age, and with none of the tell-tale failings – let's call them character-building flaws – usually associated with the term 'classic'. If you like Mercs then that won't matter; if you are looking for something full of idiosyncratic charm, then look elsewhere.

The SL loses out to the Stag and 504 in its lack of rear-seat space but gains in the spaciousness of the cabin generally and the size of the boot, which is much bigger than the Triumph's.

Such a large swathe of plastic would look downmarket in lesser cars, yet Mercedes managed to make the SL's dashboard both classy and rational (though the plasticky wood isn't so fab). The seats, trimmed in checked cloth, are broad and buttock-numbingly firm but offer lots of legroom to stretch out. And if the steering wheel feels dauntingly large then, after a

while, you'll feel reassured by its chunky rim.

Despite a half-litre and 50bhp advantage over the Stag, the Mercedes didn't feel much quicker, if at all. Surprisingly, the iron-blocked, overhead-cam V8 isn't particularly strong in the low-down torque department and the car gets off the line with a heavily squatting tail but little bite in response to a floored throttle. The smoothness of the engine, and the gearchanges, mask the strength of the urge too. The fact is, the 350 doesn't begin to pull hard until 4000rpm is breached – and then continues to a surprisingly high 6500rpm. Its voice is as polite and subdued as the Stag's is bawdy and loud, a mere whisper to its occupants unless really extended which, somehow, it doesn't invite you to do. Road tests quote a top speed of 128mph for the 350SL and an overall mpg of 16, so it's likely to be the thirstiest of the three.

With its wide track and relatively fat tyres, the 350SL has good manners and lots of grip in the dry, although not everyone will enjoy the huge wheel which tends to mask the fact the power steering has a well-judged feel and sensitivity. The car doesn't roll much and its semi-trailing arm rear suspension is unruffled by mid-corner lift-off: the car feels safe, solid, utterly planted.

This top-drawer handling is matched by great brakes – discs all round, combining a light, progressive pedal action with great strength and resilience.

While the SL feels tighter and more together than the Stag, it can't match the 504's ride quality. It is firmer, less fluid than the Peugeot and produces a lot more road noise from drumming tyres.

Of course, it's the quality of the 350SL that really sets it apart from its two rivals. From the way the doors shut to the feel of switches and column controls, you'll find nothing Mickey Mouse or half-baked here. In some respects it appears to be in another league, a feeling reflected in an original price that would have bought you nearly three Stags in 1972. ➡

Below: the cabin has loads of room up front, but even your dog might object to travelling in the back. The hulking 3.5-litre V8 is the strong, silent type, and not too torquey



FIVE WAYS TO AVOID A CLUNKER

1. Engines are very reliable and long-lived but look for excessive smoke and possibly noisy camshafts on high-mileage cars. Regular oil changes are essential, especially if the car has been used in town a lot, so a service history is important. Listen for noisy timing chains too.

2. Early four-speed 'boxes gave trouble with the brake bands which would slip and judder on take-off.

On all autos look for rough changes. Centre propshaft bearings fail after big miles.

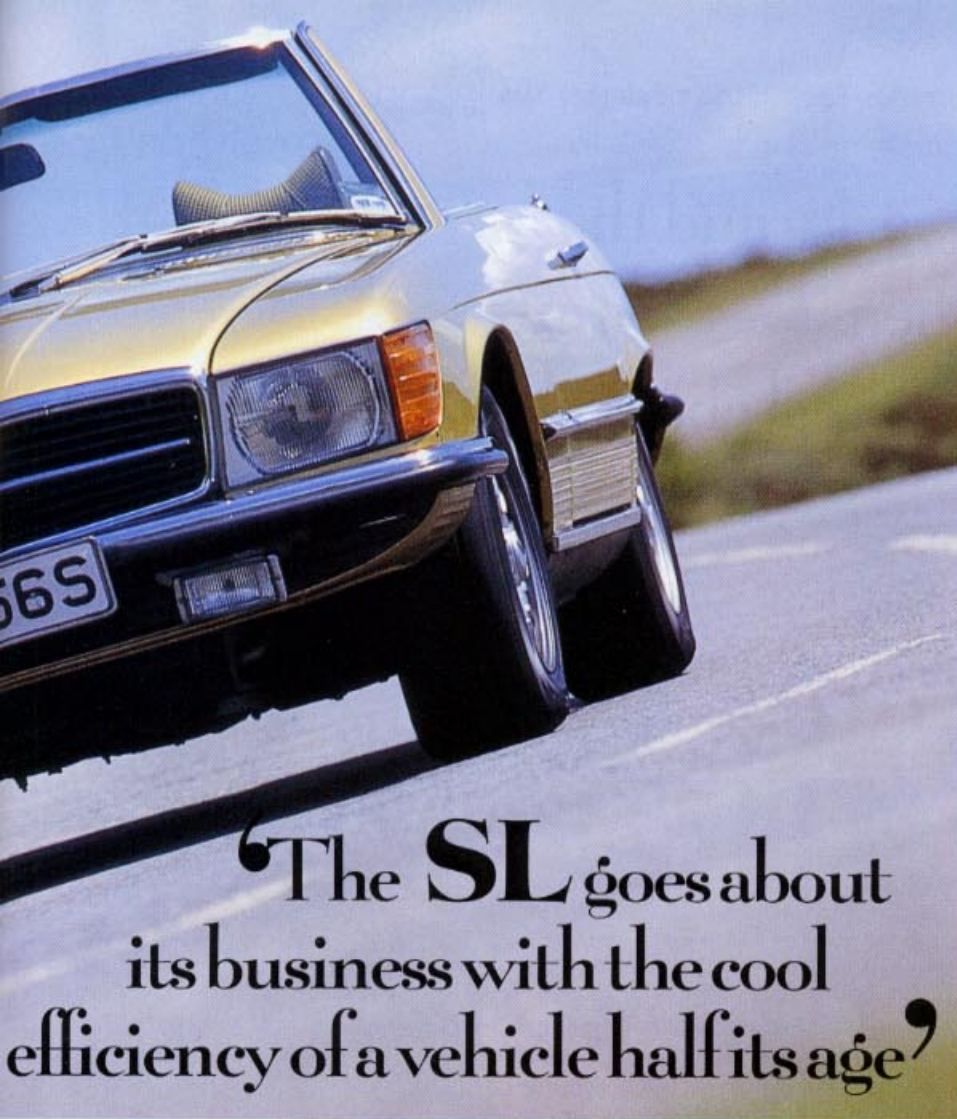
3. You don't often get serious rust on these cars but look where the hard-top fits into the scuttle at the rear, around the front arches and headlamps. It's also worth checking the sills, especially on older cars, and you may even find the rear box-sections need welding up. The front cross member that holds

the bumper can also rot.

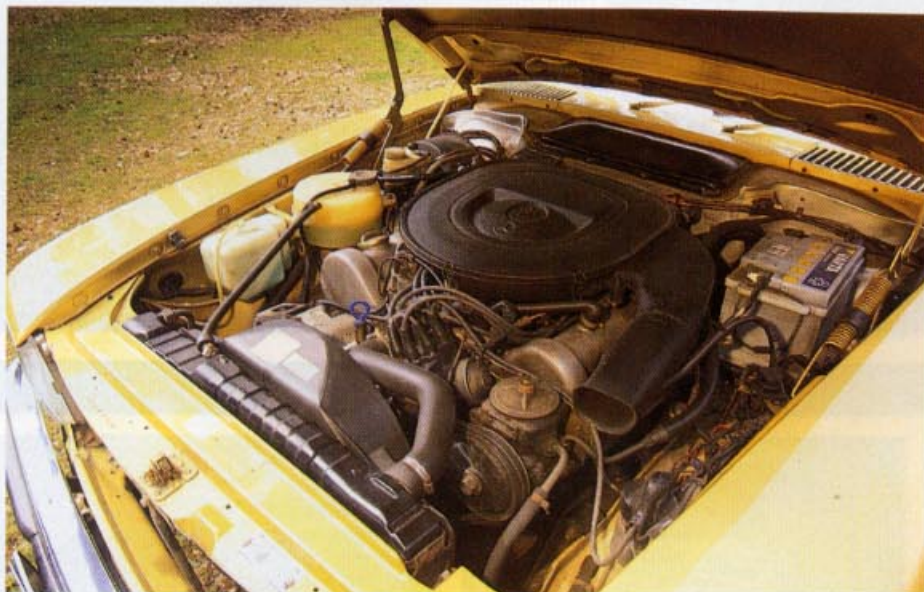
4. An unbonded windscreen can allow leaks into the interior, so check for damp. Boot leaks are also quite common, leading to water in the rear lamps.

5. Suspension and brakes don't give many problems but these cars go through brake pads quickly. You might come across leaky shock absorbers or a worn steering box if it hasn't been adjusted regularly.





‘The **SL** goes about its business with the cool efficiency of a vehicle half its age’



KNOW YOUR SLs

350SL (1971-80) First of the 'Type W107' SLs. Early cars have four-speed automatic transmission, replaced by three-speed in 1974. Optional alloys, hardtop, air-con and LSD. £4.5-10k.

280SL (1974-85) Base model SL with twin-cam straight six, manual or auto transmission but not imported to UK until 1980. £6-13k.

450SL (1973-80) Announced in Europe (in America since 1971) with 225bhp 4520cc V8 giving much more torque than 350 engine. £5-11k.

380SL (1980-85) Replaced the 350SL. New lighter engine and four-speed auto, optional ABS. £7-15k.

500SL (1980-89) New 4973cc light-alloy V8, four-speed auto with ABS. Other than the American market-only 560SL, this was the hottest of them all. £7.5-15.5k.

420SL (1985-89) Replaced the 380. Gently restyled nose incorporating spoiler. £12-16k.

300SL (1985-89) Replaced old 280; 3-litre single overhead cam straight-six. £11-15k.

Mercedes 350SL

Engine	V8, 3499cc
Fuel system	Bosch injection
Gearbox	Three-speed automatic
Brakes	All discs
Suspension	Front: double wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar. Rear: semi-trailing arms, coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar
Steering	Recirculating ball, PAS
Body	Steel monocoque, 2-str
Length	14ft 4in
Width	5ft 10in
Weight	3406lb
Power	200bhp @ 5800rpm
Torque	211lb ft @ 4000rpm
0-60	9.1secs
Top speed	128mph
Consumption	15-19mpg

CALL THE CLUB

You can write to the Mercedes-Benz Club at Brightstone, Over Old Road, Harbury, Glos GL19 3BJ, or telephone 07071 818868.

‘If the SL has integrity and the Stag personality, then it is the Peugeot that has the real charm’

THE VERDICT

IN SOME WAYS THE MERC WALKS IT, A reflection of its much higher cost when new. It feels like a substantial, grown-up car you could own and enjoy with few worries for a very long time. It has the best engine and drivetrain, the finest interior and the most versatile headgear that really will turn the car into a cosy, quiet coupé in the winter months. But complex emotions take over when people go looking for old cars which means, for some, the Mercedes can never win because it is too lacking in the foibles and failings we like to call ‘personality’.

Ah, personality. This the Stag has in abundance, mainly because it demands more from the driver. Noisier and harder riding, it feels like a car of another generation although only a year separates their launch dates. Not that you can’t



make a good practical case for the Stag: it is the best served by specialists and it should also be easiest of this trio to work on should you want to do your own maintenance. But the Stag feels as unresolved as the Mercedes feels complete, a car more suited to the role of high-days toy than everyday user. It depends what you want it for.

If the SL has integrity and the Stag personality, then it is the Peugeot that has the real charm here. Advanced students will love its superb ride and lack of road noise while connoisseurs of Italian styling will appreciate its Pininfarina bodywork, even if it does rust quicker.

Neither would the Peugeot be a choice based entirely on heart over head. It will prove the cheapest to run day-to-day with over 25mpg a possibility from a plodding engine that is likely to be long-lived and reliable. What’s more, it’s got the biggest boot and roomiest rear seats. It’s a glamorous machine which feels as if it could fit into your life, a car with a special, sophisticated image – neither effete nor masculine – that the Stag and SL can’t quite match. The 504 is cool. ●

WHO'D BUY WHAT

JILL DAVIDSON: ‘The Peugeot’s a beautiful looking car; I can’t understand why they didn’t do more in right-hand drive. The engine didn’t sound all that nice but it went better than I expected – very sprightly. The gearchange felt fragile, but the steering was good.

‘I’ve always liked the look of the Stag, and the noise they make, but I didn’t like the gearbox on this one and the ride was hard. It didn’t feel anything like as well made as my Mercedes although they tried hard to give it a similar image. I wouldn’t swap either for my 350...’

GARY CHARLTON: ‘The Mercedes looked good on the road. I liked the way it squatted down under hard acceleration and took a safe attitude through corners. It feels beautifully built, but then they were a lot of money weren’t they? I expected it to be a bit quicker. It would be interesting to try a manual.

‘The Stag and the 504 Cabrio feel very different. The Stag is much sportier, more aggressive, although it’s more noise than action. I also think the Peugeot rides and handles better. But then I would say that!’

DANIEL STRONG: ‘You’d have to be a bit perverse not to take the Merc. So I’m going for the Peugeot. The build quality may not be bombproof, but the image is. And it’s got the best chassis here. The Stag was better than I’d imagined, but it’s just a tad middle-aged for me.’



IF YOU LIKED THOSE, TRY THESE...



Alfa Romeo Giulia Sprint GTC £6-12k

Not the two-seater Pininfarina Spider but a 2+2 Bertone coupé with the roof lopped off. Only offered for two years (1966-67) so quite a rarity, with only 1000 produced. Looks neat, with a hood that folds out of sight, and with the twin-cam engine and five-speed ‘box a delight to drive.



BMW 2002 Cabriolet £3-8.5K

BMW’s answer to the Stag originally came out as a full convertible but gained Targa panels and a folding rear roof section in 1971. Pleasant to drive, practical and fairly well made but not very pretty and more rust problems than the standard ‘02 saloon.



Bristol 412 £6-15K

The least happy-looking of all Bristols, the Zagato-styled 412 is the bargain buy of the V8 models. Four proper seats, lusty V8 urge and robust engineering mean it's a nicer car to be in than it is to look at. Replaced in the Eighties by the even faster, turbocharged Beaufighter.



Lancia Flavia Convertible £3-10k

Styled by Vignale, this short-lived model used the front-drive floorpan of Lancia's refined middleweight saloon with a flat-four engine of 1.5 and later 1.8 litres. Both give over 100mph and handle well. Only a handful imported to the UK but worth looking out for.



Maserati Bi-Turbo Spider £8-15K

Quick in either 2.0 or 2.5-litre form, the V6-engined Bi-Turbo was spoilt by suspect build quality and tail-happy handling that was difficult to catch with low-geared steering. The styling isn't drop-head gorgeous, but open Masers don't come any cheaper than this.