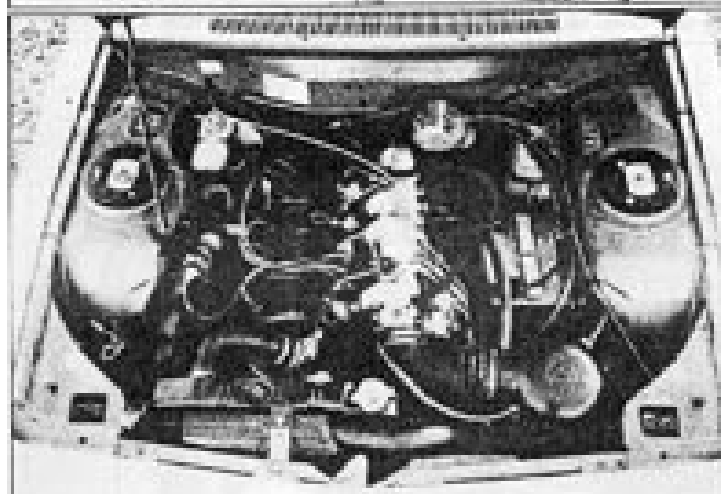
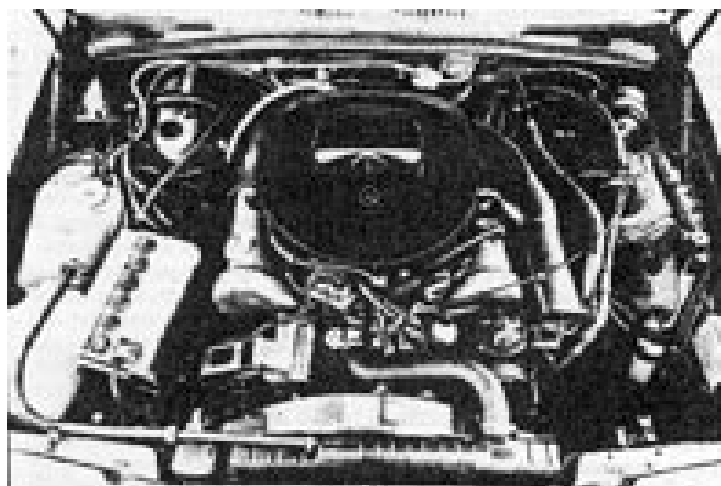


SOMEBODY ONCE SAID THAT BECAUSE IT WAS A CAR MADE BY Protestants for Catholics, the Peugeot just had to be good. Presumably the Mercedes-Benz, being in that very expensive bracket where the customers are nowadays so often Muslims, has to be equally good since it is made by Christians... but with all those Turkish Gastaroeitertailing for Daimler-Benz, the effect may be less acute. At any rate, here are two very comfortable cars, two of those rarities in which there is plenty of room in all directions for the denizens of the back seat. They are cars which attract people to whom comfort must be a subliminal assumption and luxury an avowed ambition. People to whom a long journey is something to be done quickly. Most significant of all, they are cars for which surprisingly large numbers of people feel an enthusiasm bordering on obsession.

At the outset I must declare that I do not share these enthusiasms. This is doubtless all to the good, for an enthusiast's judgement is not always to be trusted, especially when comparisons are to be made. Peugeot fans would deride the Merc; Mercedes-Benz fanatics could only feel contempt for the Peugeot. Personally I thought the Merc very good in its way, and the Peugeot probably very good in its day; but the 450 SEL is not a commonplace car, and in its class it has to face very stiff competition from others that cost less and are in some respects more appealing. The Peugeot is 10 years old and will not be produced in its present form much longer: qualities of ride comfort and roadworthiness that impressed a decade ago are less than impressive now.

More important than these differences is the difference in price. The 450SEL is not merely twice as costly as the costliest 504, the Ti, it costs 3.4 times as much. There is more of it, but not so much more as to offset a much greater cost in terms of £ per inch overall length: the Merc costs $\text{£}79.07$ per inch, the Peugeot only $\text{£}26.15$, so the Merc is still 3.02 times dearer. On a basis of price-weight ratio, the German car is 2.42 times dearer, and if we relate price to payload the factor soars to 3.05, for the Peugeot figure is $\text{£}4.37$ per lb load, while every lb of payload in the Merc accounts for no less than $\text{£}13.35$. Withal, the German car is only 1.5 times livelier in terms of bhp per ton, 1.21 times faster in top speed, and has only 2.9 percent more brake area; on the other hand, its alternator is 1.54 times more powerful than that of the Peugeot, and that gives a clue to the amount of luxury, of sophistication, of lavish apparatus and painstaking detail that the German car has to offer. It is not just a matter of the Peugeot having only the front windows moved electrically, while the Merc enjoys electrical winding (albeit slower) of all four windows and the sunroof. It is more a

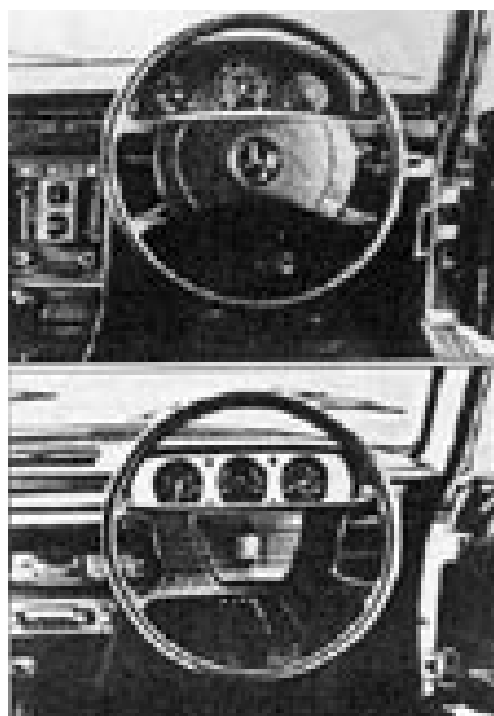


matter of the immense care that has gone into the design of the Merc's systems.

Lock or unlock the driver's door, and the same operation takes place at all the other doors, at the boot lock, and at the petrol filler. Switch off the ignition without first taking care to cancel the rear window heater or the screenwiper delay, and there will be no latent danger of the battery being drained or of the wipers surprising you when you drive away again: relays restore normality, and when you switch on again the wipers will sweep regularly and the rear demister will have to be switched on again if it is wanted. If you switched off before remembering to close the windows, there is no need to fumble the key back into its slot: just open the driver's door, and all the window switches become operative. Close the door again, and the courtesy light stays on for a little while, long enough for you to find the keyhole or to find your way out of an unlit garage. You do not find refinements such as these in cars of the Peugeot's class, especially when they are cars of the Peugeot's age: these are the exclusivities and niceties that make a really high-priced saloon special.

Peugeot put a lot into their engineering, too, but it was all more fundamental stuff. For many long years they were second to nobody in the refinement of their suspension systems to ensure good ride quality with freedom from the noises and vibrations that radial-ply tyres introduced to cars that once squashed around on crossplies, and the benefits of that investment in engineering continue to be enjoyable today: the ride of the 504 is no longer superior to that of anything else, but it is still so good that it can bear comparison with the ride in the Merc, and that is saying a good deal when you consider how much heavier the SEL is. In both cars, road asperities may be heard but are seldom felt.

The handling of the Peugeot bears witness to suspension design that has been compromised in favour of ride comfort, it is softly sprung at all four corners, their independence being checked by anti-roll torsion bars



Mercedes, top, is paragon of taste and in cabin but Peugeot below, does well for its age - it too has vents at centre and edges of dash but system isn't as complex or efficient. Engines share injection but Mercedes has four more cylinders. Reliability? Both marriages are renowned for it.

it made handling seem irrelevant, but at long blessed last a tolerable servo assistance has been added to the rack and pinion, the opportunity being taken to quicken the ratio so that 3.5 turns of the wheel suffice to travel from lock to lock of a 36ft turning circle. The vast handwheel is still there, unnecessarily; I have driven a 504Ti in which a little leather-rimmed Moto-Lita wheel had been substituted, and it was a lot better for the alteration. Indeed, the smaller wheel made the steering feel even higher geared, and it was tempting to try my usual wiggle-woggie at 40mph to see what happened. The idea is to lay on as much steering as the car will take, alternately left and right, at a frequency of about one complete cycle per second. The result was interesting: the Peugeot went into a violent alternating roll, swaying from side to side so much that the anti-roll bars must have gone into resonance, but travelling ahead in a straight line. Now will somebody believe that all springs should be damped, even transverse ones? Subjected to the same treatment, the Merc (another with an oversize wheel) showed that its suspension had been studied with more than comfort in mind. Vast and heavy the SEL may be, but it moved with an alacrity that must put everything else in its class to shame. dodging from side to side in time with the wheelwitches and never losing its command of the situation. It is a prodigious roadholder most of the time: only when using a lot of power in a tight corner especially on a wet road, did it lose its grip by spinning the inside rear wheel. A diff-lock is just about the only equipment that this magnificent car still needs.

Mind you, there are some things that the frugal Peugeot has but the spendthrift Merc lacks. A clutch pedal is one of them, a four-speed gearbox

Peugeot interior, above, is airy and spacious and seats very comfortable. Latest models have power steering and Ti gets electric front windows. Tachometer oneups Merc and rear comfort is just as good

The finish you're paying for, above, in the Mercedes: fine and beautifully fitted velour. Air conditioning is extra, though, even if standard heating system is excellent; it also ducts air into the door panels to warm your ribs. Cruise control is one of luxuries and so is adjustable mirror even if it's not electric

is another. The Peugeot box is one of the sweetest and lightest I have met, accepting clutchless changes with a silken avidity that prompts the most outrageous analogies from luxurious dalliance. What a pity that the ratios are so spaced as to leave a large gap between second and third - but even so, changes can go through with a smoothness that the Daimler-Benz automatic does not always match, unless the driver uses that wonderful little wand to inhibit the automat and direct gearshifts as and when he wants them. Hanging on to bottom gear up to 60mph, to second up to 95, makes fast motoring a peculiarly satisfying business. Moreover, all the Merc's controls are nicely balanced and progressive; steering and brakes and switches all make modest demands on muscles and offer all the feel one could want. The Peugeot's controls are a clumsy mixture by comparison: the badly-sited pedals all need different weights, the brakes in particular calling for lots of effort; the right-hand control wand for horn and flashers is featherlight and vague, the left-hand stick for lights and wipers is much firmer in both senses. It is a jumble of a car an old-fashioned one - as witness the revcounter. The Merc lacks one, but does not need it; the Peugeot has one, but the instrument is superfluous because the noise and fuss of that pushrod engine virtually enforce a change-up well before the tachometer needle has reached the 5200rpm peak-power point.

With Kugelfischer injection, the Peugeot engine is not bad in its pulling, for a modest 2.0litre four. The Bosch injection of the Merc V8 is a sine qua non, to be taken for granted as readily as the unquestionable power and torque of its 4.5litres. It just cannot be overlooked that this big engine spins, despite its longer stroke, faster than the little Peugeot. An overhead camshaft makes a lot of difference, but the Peugeot's engine (if not for much longer) belongs to an age when overhead camshafts were only for expensive fast cars. Well, the Merc is an expensive fast car, but it is a lot of other things as well. If I remember nothing else from this comparison, conducted as it was with snow on the ground, sleet in the air, and the thermometer in the bathosphere, I will remember how warm I was in the SEL and how chilly in the Ti.