



Nathan's W123 (left) meets its big brother - the Mercedes-Benz 450 SEL 6.9

I've fallen victim to the hard SEL

THE STORY SO FAR



1980 Mercedes-Benz 450 SEL 6.9

Borrowed by Nathan Chadwick
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Time borrowed Three weeks

Miles this month 150

Costs £150 (!)

Previously The W123 is back on the road

'How far away do your parents live?' editor Phil asked. I eyed the keys to the Mercedes-Benz 450 SEL 6.9 sat teasingly on my desk. 'Forty quid,' I grimaced.

I was exaggerating, but a round trip of 32 miles in an SEL 6.9 is not to be considered lightly. It'll happily do the journey - my steed for the trip may look crispy around the edges but it's had a thorough mechanical revitalisation, and is just awaiting some TLC to the body and paint.

No, the biggest problem is its enthusiasm for fuel, because this is more than just a big old luxury Merc. It's a *six-nine*.

I'd seen them take centre stage in *Ronin*, *Lost Highway* and *Rendez-vous*. I knew manchild hero James Hunt had one, as did Frank Sinatra and Telly Savalas. Brigitte Bardot had an estate version. Fangio embarrassed a racing car on track with one hand on the wheel in his.

So when Justin Lazic, who'd sold me the fresh engine for my W123, mentioned he

had a six-nine and asked whether I'd like to borrow it for a few weeks, my answer was yes, yes and yes again. Please.

But as Justin and I approached the SEL in its underground car park lair, I had mixed feelings. Would it be a disappointment? After all, its headline horsepower figure - 286bhp - isn't exactly huge these days.

I needn't have worried. Dissecting our way out of west London, heading towards the freedom of the motorway, I lost count of the perplexed-looking faces of Range Rover owners left standing at the lights by this rusty old Merc.

The key figure is the torque - 405lb ft, delivered at 3000rpm. Acceleration isn't a punch, it's an unstoppable surge akin to water breaking through a dam - the Hoover dam. There are no flat spots in the torque curve, no kickdowns (unless the driver's being a hooligan), just pure, analogue heave. And it's deeply addictive.

So much so that any journey soon involved a mental recalculation of just how much food I had left for the month - it doesn't take much provocation for the cast-iron M100 V8 to imbibe in the manner of an undergraduate during Happy Hour. An empty, straight road? Just how many chicken breasts do I have left in the freezer?

More pertinent food for thought is just how accomplished the SEL is - it's difficult to think of a car that does everything so

well, and so quickly. It's stupendously fast, luxurious and deeply refined. At whatever speed, any passenger and I could calmly discuss everything from the rigours of my W123's likely sunroof rubber repair to the wonderful, Apache gunship-style whirring noise the six-nine makes when pushing on.

Day-to-day commuting was a challenge because it takes a long time for the engine to fully warm up - using that to excuse why I was late to the office each day elicited only bemusement after a week. Then there were the sizeable slurps of 98-RON that the SEL took when I just had to take the long way home. That's what temptation does to you.

In the end, my bruised wallet breathed a sigh of relief when I handed the keys back to Justin, but I soon missed the six-nine. I desperately want one. As for the fuel consumption? Well, I need to go on a diet...

