

car

[PLUS]

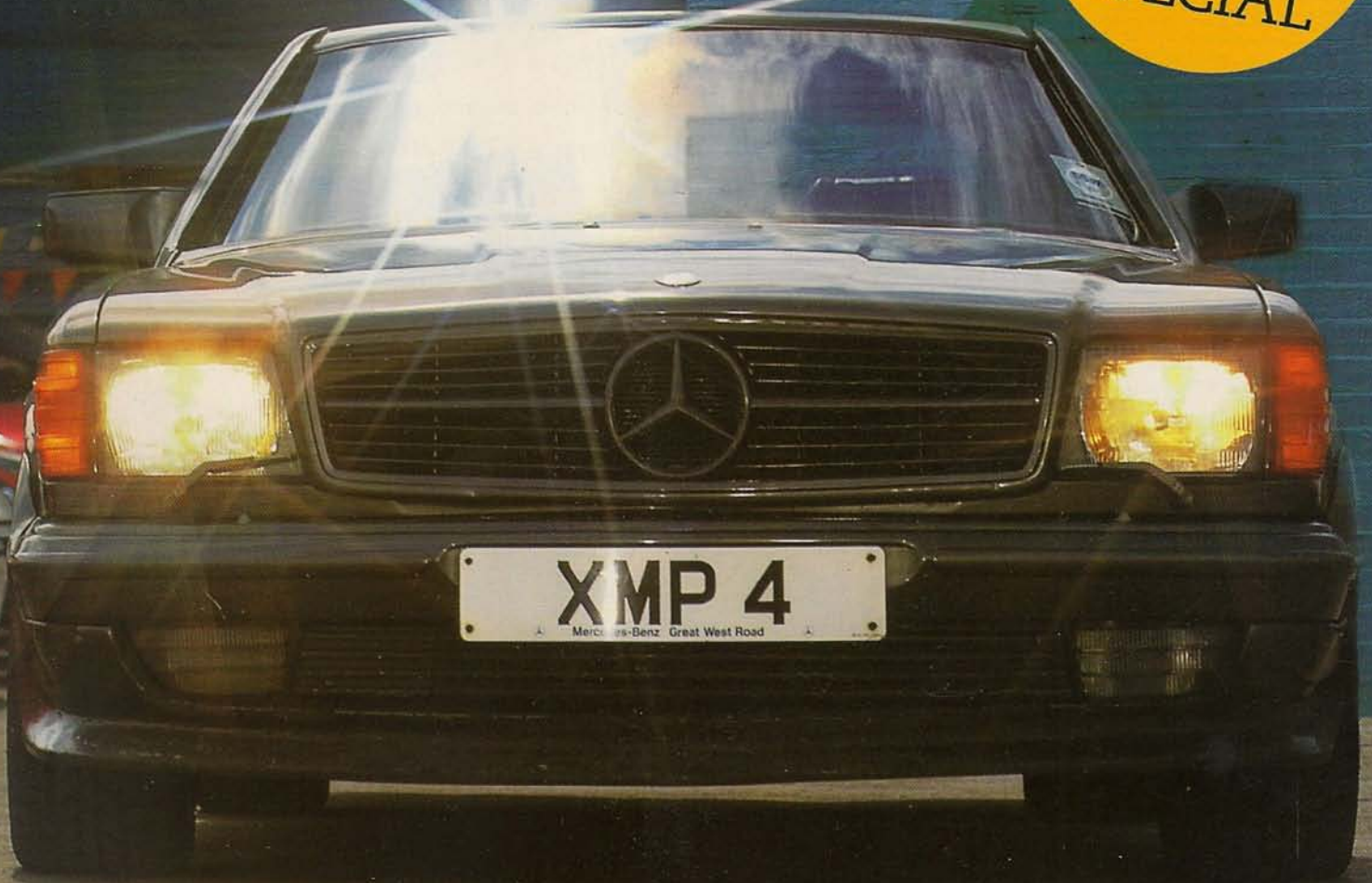
Porsche GT1
Ferrari 550M
XK8 crushed

JULY
1997
£3.00

FRANCE F40
GERMANY DM18.50
ITALY L11,500
MALTA Lm2.00
SINGAPORE \$13.90
USA \$6.95



WE'VE
GOT THE
LOT!
SECOND-HAND
SPECIAL



to **Golf GTi**. Long-termers revisited:
Cosworth we first drove 10 years ago.
Elan S2, **Porsche 968CS**, **Audi RS2**
dealers: Savile Row suits and Rollers
coats. All the lust and none of the rust

Old Flames

Where there's smoke, there's desire

GLA



- ❑ **MERCEDES-BENZ CLK320 SPORT**
- ❑ **PEUGEOT 406 V6 SE COUPE**
- ❑ **BMW 328i COUPE**

Move up into three-litre coupés, and cars can get really special. Bodies that are slinky but still carry four; smooth power; top-notch handling. BMW's established coupé leader meets new challenges from two flanks

AMT

[TEST]





Fine-cut Italian tailoring

PEUGEOT 406 V6 SE COUPE: £26,420, 147mph, 7.5sec 0-60

HERE'S THAT UNSETTLING scenario again, with established orders poised for a potential topple: a Peugeot being compared to a pair of upmarket Germans. The 406's mechanical mix has been completed by giving it a proper engine, the better to be wed to a Pininfarina-penned, and Pininfarina-built, body of spectacularly good looks.

Looks count for a lot with a coupé. Otherwise there's not much point in having one, given the twin penalties of smaller space and bigger cost. And the Peugeot delivers a healthy dose of visual feelgood. The shape of the side windows, the flow of the rising waistline, both resemble the Mercedes but the effect is lower, squatter, more dynamic. Partly this is because there's less metal acreage between wheel-arch and window,

partly because there's less rear overhang and so less of an impression of bulk, partly because the Peugeot's edges are sharper and better defined and the detailing less fussy.

The front could hardly be simpler while still retaining a family face: the slimmest of headlights and air intakes above a gapingly aggressive lower air scoop like the mouth of a shark. The tail, too, is hyper-simple but without blandness, while the squat stance is aided by an increase in track over the saloon's dimensions.

There's a 2.0-litre version for those content with the looks alone, but the 2.9-litre V6 (Peugeot hypes it up to 3.0 litres, but capacity is actually 2946cc) is where the interest lies. It's a four-cam 24-valve motor with variable inlet manifold, transversely mounted and driving the front wheels. Transmission is a five-speed manual, but a four-speed auto is optional.

Under the sleek skin lie familiar 406 mechanicals, with strut front suspension and a double-wishbone-based arrangement at the rear. But as well as the increase in distance across the axles, there is – for the V6 only – an uprated braking system with big discs and hunky Brembo calipers whose sculpted form is readily visible past the wheels' six spokes.

There are two V6 variants. The regular article costs £23,620 while the SE, which equates to this French-registered car except that it gains plusher mats to augment the rather industrial carpeting, gives you leather trim, electrically adjustable and heated seats (all options on the Mercedes) and other luxuries in return for your £26,420. Electronic damping, which firms up the suspension when firmness is a good idea and is fitted to our test car, is an extra £735. You can have side airbags, too, but they'll cost you



£170 the pair. They're standard in the Benz.

Sounds promising so far? Then maybe the driving will show what's missing for your £10K saving. The suspension is a little less yielding than the CLK's, and while the steering is sharper and more consistent in its responses, it feels numb and artificial in the way that ZF Servotronic systems do. But there's absolutely no doubt as to which is the quicker, and the more satisfying, around corners. It's the 406.

After the Mercedes, it feels much more the sports car. Servotronic or not, you know exactly where you are in the Peugeot, because the front wheels bite so decisively into the bend and the rears follow so faithfully. Front-wheel drive



Chrome-rimmed dials specific to coupé version of 406. Column stalks include stereo controls



doesn't spoil the fun, unless you can programme a power-slide into your commute. And the ride, while firm, is not jitteringly uncomfortable; there's no crashing or banging, just a distant rubbery tremor unless you (pointlessly) disable the dampers' automatic setting and render them permanently firm.

You'd expect the 406 to be fast, and it is. Ultimately it's a shade slower than the Mercedes, but with its manual transmission, actuated by an aluminium-knobbed lever and a light, swift shift, the Peugeot's pace is easier to exploit. The engine's note is more abrasive than that of the creamy Benz when revved into action, but the audible edge is hard and hearty rather than harsh and horrid, and there's a lovely deep burble from the tailpipes on tickover. The motor feels more urgent all round, and has mighty mid-range pull, too.

Inside the 406, the fascia is the same as the saloon's except that the fake wood has been booted out in favour of a textured metallised plastic in dark grey. This looks better than it sounds, and the sparkly particles are echoed in the chrome instrument surrounds. Dash apart, the cabin is bespoke Coupé but impressively roomy. The view aft is rather better than in the higher-waisted Benz, too, which makes the Peugeot easier to park (unless your CLK has the optional Parktronic system, which warns of impending obstructions). And in terms of fit and finish, there's no obvious evidence that the Benz is better made. That's something to ponder as you ready your cheque-book.



Climate control, aluminium gear knob (right)



'The front could not be simpler while still retaining a family face: the slimmest of lights above a lower scoop like a shark's mouth'

Reaching the turning point

HANDLING

HOW DO YOU LIKE YOUR steering? Quick, crisp, responding in proportion to your commands, telegraphing to your hands a picture of what lies under-tyre? None of these cars will be a key to drive-time ecstasy, then, because none is quite right.

They're pretty good, though. Closest to the notional ideal is the Peugeot, whose helm is much the quickest to respond either side of the straight-ahead, and marginally the quickest-witted overall. It's the most precise, too, and the weighting is fine, needing minimal effort at parking speeds but giving something meaty to hold on to when the pace goes up. It's just a shame that there's so little feedback; all you get is the occasional distant tug – the first stirrings of torque-steer, but it doesn't come to anything – when accelerating hard on an uneven surface. There's no traction control in the 406, nor is it needed.

You get a purer feel of what's going on in the BMW, but the steering is too slow to respond to initial movements. It feels oddly disconnected if you've just come from the Peugeot, although it proves precise enough when you're fine-tuning a cornering line. That of the CLK is more proportional in its responses, but it feels rubbery and there's a delay between cause and effect, as though there's some slack being taken up.

All three cars are firmly damped, with no lurching into a bend or out of it, but the 406 stays the flattest. It also corners the fastest, its nose eventually drifting wide under power but still responding to your steering adjustments. It responds to throttle trimming, too, tightening its line if you ease the power but never snapping into a tail-slide unless you force the issue. And the faster you go, the better the Peugeot feels as the steering's artificiality floats away.

The rear-drive cars are thoroughly well-behaved with their traction controls in play, but if you want to do the playing and switch the controls off, you'll find the CLK the more considerate partner. Everything happens a little more slowly and progressively (partly thanks to the softening effect of the autobox), and there's a longer 'neutral' phase before



Benz is foolproof, thanks to very intelligent traction control. Steering is stodgy, though

ultimate understeer under power will switch to oversteer if you back off, followed by more oversteer if you pile lots of power back on again. The BMW is more sensitive to the amount of power fed through its rear wheels, which makes it more fun – tail-slides are easy to induce, tricky to tame tidily – but more demanding. But of the three, the Peugeot gives the most reward in return for the least effort.

It's pleasing that the 406 Coupé's Brembo brakes don't suffer from the saloon's snatchy servo-assistance. The foot-operated, hand-released parking brake in the Mercedes isn't as easy to use as a handbrake, though. You have to cushion the pedal with your foot as you release the sticky-acting catch, otherwise there'll be a loud thump.



Peugeot corners quickest, feels most precise, but steering suffers from anaesthesia



BMW doing what a BMW does best: living on the interactive edge of power oversteer

GETTING A HANDLE ON IT

CHASSIS	BMW	MERCEDES	PEUGEOT
Front suspension	MacPherson struts, lower wishbones, coils, anti-roll bar	Double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar	MacPherson struts, lower wishbones, coils, anti-roll bar
Rear suspension	Double transverse links, toe links, coils, anti-roll bar	Transverse and oblique links, coils, anti-roll bar	Double wishbones, toe links, coils, anti-roll bar
Steering	Rack and pinion, power-assisted	Recirculating ball, power-assisted	Rack and pinion, power-assisted
Turns, lock to lock	3.2	3.4	3.1
Brakes, front/rear	Ventilated discs/discs, ABS	Ventilated discs/discs, ABS	Ventilated discs/discs, ABS
Tyres	225/50 ZR16 (option)	205/55 R16	215/55 ZR16
DIMENSIONS			
Length/width/height (mm)	4430/1710/1370	4570/1720/1350	4620/1780/1350
Wheelbase (mm)	2700	2690	2700
Fuel tank capacity (gal/ltr)	13.7/62	13.7/62	15.4/70
Kerb weight (kg)	1320	1400	1460

VERDICT

- ❑ MERCEDES-BENZ CLK320 SPORT
- ❑ PEUGEOT 406 V6 SE COUPE
- ❑ BMW 328i COUPE

2nd

Great car, great fun,
fair value but getting
old now

1st

Great car, great to
drive, looks gorgeous,
right price

3rd

Great car, great idea,
but £10,000 too
expensive

CHOOSING A VICTOR SEEMS, ON first thoughts, close to impossible. Even if you were to dismiss the Mercedes from the running, because it costs around £10,000 more than the Peugeot without seeming to be £10,000 better (if indeed better at all), that won't stop others from thinking it the best – obviously the best – simply because it is a Mercedes. And while people think that, the cars will sell, they will hold their value and won't end up costing anything like as much to run as the cost of funding the capital might have suggested at the start of ownership.

On that basis the CLK's price matters little. What does matter is that, in concept and size, the established BMW 328i and upstart Peugeot 406 Coupé are direct rivals to the pricey CLK, and both are highly capable, highly desirable

cars. Of the three, leaving purchase price aside, no clear winner stands out.

Right. Let's take this business of quality and integrity, things that are supposed to be German cars' strengths. The CLK feels flimsier than the BMW in certain areas, and shows no sign of being any better-built overall. But then it would be hard to improve on the build quality of either. Look closely at the Peugeot, though, and you'll find it's up at the same level. See, the French and the Italians, both involved with the 406 Coupé, can do it too. Quality, then, is not the tie-breaker here.

Looks? A Peugeot win, surely. Pace? Victory to the BMW. Handling? Tricky; the Peugeot satisfies the most for most of the time. Equipment levels? The Peugeot, easily.

Whether or not you prefer the idea of a BMW or Mercedes badge to that of a mere

Peugeot, you can't deny that the 406 Coupé has the looks and the presence to transcend badge snobbery. It rekindles older Peugeot values, of beautiful cars Pininfarina-designed and solidly built before things went tinny. The 406 saloon has already pointed in that direction; this new coupé amplifies the point.

So, let's look at things as they really are, not how the status-conscious would like them to be. Peugeot's 406 Coupé V6 SE is the best-value car here, and in most respects it's also the best, full stop. It wins – it has to win – with the BMW hard on its tail, hiding its years unexpectedly well. And the Mercedes? It, too, is a fine thing. But, depreciation notwithstanding, it's hard to see how its maker can justify such a high purchase price. The quality gap has closed. Let's hope the snobbery gap goes the same way. 🚗

