



2014 Mercedes-Benz S-Class S350 BlueTEC

The mark of a professional

Mercedes-Benz has come a long way since it first arrived in South Africa over 100 years ago.

By **Richard Webb**

Ask most South African car enthusiasts what make of car debuted in South Africa and they'd probably respond "Mercedes-Benz". They'd be partially right, of course: on 4 January 1897, John Percy Hess from Berea Park in Pretoria paraded his freshly imported Benz Velocipede for spectators to marvel at. Joined by Hess's business partner, AE Reno, the pair charged two shillings and six pennies to watch automotive history unfold. The then president, Paul Kruger, attended the spectacle but declined to be a passenger, while state secretary WJ Leyds enthusiastically took up the offer to ride in the Benz.

Hess went on to become the sole agent for Benz Motors in South Africa. Coffee importer, AH Jacobs was the second owner of Hess's Velocipede and he was known to show the car off for free to anyone who purchased 500g of coffee from his Pritchard Street, Johannesburg shop.

It was 24 years earlier though, when automated personal mobility was still nothing more than a pipe dream and petrol was hard to come by, that Karl Benz filed a patent for his Benz Patent 'Motorwagen'. The Benz was widely regarded as the first purpose-designed and commercially available car.

In 1926, German car company Daimler Motoren Gesellschaft merged with Benz & Cie to form Daimler-Benz, after which all cars were branded 'Mercedes-Benz' and the name has been linked with South African history ever since.

Mercedes-Benz's reputation grew, fuelled in part by their on-track success and the superlative comfort and innovations pioneered by their engineers. While there is hardly any other vehicle with which Mercedes-Benz is identified more closely than the S-Class, it was only given its official 'S-Class' designation in 1973. Assembled in the firm's East London plant, the new S-Class featured comprehensive safety innovations including a protected fuel tank fitted over the rear



Mercedes-Benz 220SE Fintail

axle, conspicuous indicators and ribbed taillights to minimise dirt build-up on dusty African roads. A total of 473 035 were produced and by 1978 the S-Class had become the world's first series production vehicle to become available with the ABS anti-lock braking system. At the time a worldwide sensation, ABS is now standard across the automotive industry.

But the S-Class traces its roots much further back than 1973. The genes of the luxury S-Class were found way back in the Mercedes-Simplex 60 PS of 1903. This 'Super Mercedes' launched in 1930 and was driven primarily by crowned and uncrowned heads of state and high-ranking figures from the world of industry and finance. 1949 saw the arrival of the 170S version of the W136, often considered the first 'S-Class' Mercedes-Benz, and in 1954, the same year that Mercedes-Benz South Africa started assembling cars locally, the 220 was introduced, with its ultra-modern, spacious 'ponton' body.

In 1956, the 'S' designation became a permanent fixture in the names of high-end Mercedes-Benz models. Six years later the South African plant began assembling the 'fintail models', earning their nickname from the subtle fintails that adorned their rear wings. True to the 'form follows function' mantra, it was the world's first passenger car to be fitted with crumple zones to absorb impact energy, thereby protecting the occupants.

In 1963, the 600 became the new flagship model: its 6.3-litre

V8 engine carried this huge car at speeds of up to 200km/h. The favoured vehicle of African dictators and celebrities alike, optimum ride comfort was ensured by air suspension, automatic transmission and electronic power steering, while providing owners with the ultimate in comfort and luxurious appointments with sports car-like performance. When it came to leather upholstery, fabrics, woods and interior trim, customers had a huge range of colours and materials to choose from.

The possibilities offered in the rear of the car seemed almost infinite: the folding centre armrest was optionally available as a 'cosmetics box with Braun Sixtant razor'; other contents were listed as '1 mirror, 1 comb, 2 scent bottles, and electric sockets'. Transmitting and receiving equipment for the optional car telephone were stowed in the boot. Television, radio and recording equipment, traditionally with a fine burr walnut trim, were almost always a feature of individualised equipment specifications – transforming it into a mobile office. Another popular extra among the car's well-heeled customers was a refrigerated minibar, stylishly named a 'refreshments bar'.

The 1965 280SE that replaced the six-cylinder 'fintail models' was also assembled in South Africa. Characterised by classically elegant design and generously proportioned windows, a powerful 300 SEL 6.3 was presented in 1968 and provided the template for today's powerful AMG models.



Mercedes-Benz 2005 M54



1973 Mercedes-Benz S-Class

The 126-series S-Class firmly underlined the South African connection. Not only was it assembled in South Africa between 1981 and 1992, it was a 500 SE that was presented to Madiba.

Its replacement, the S-Class of 1993 was the last of the S-Classes to be assembled in South Africa. Designed for a high level of recyclability, it boasted innovations like double-glazing for acoustic insulation, side airbags for front passengers, a voice control system and a keyless access and drive authorisation system.

The 1998 S-Class was all about understatement. Weight saving, safety and comfort were among the primary development goals. Electronically controlled air suspension and proximity-controlled cruise control were combined with a preventive occupant safety system, which enabled the vehicle to prepare occupants for an imminent collision by automatically initiating measures for their optimum protection.

An alphabet soup of pioneering technical innovations followed in the 2005 S-Class: Blind Spot Assist, Lane Keeping Assist, Night View Assist, DISTRONIC PLUS, Brake Assist Plus and PRE-SAFE brakes with autonomous partial braking all kept the car at the leading edge of safety innovation. The point was to reduce the strain on the motorist while aiming for safe, accident-free driving. The last S-Class of the current series, an S 500 4-MATIC, rolled off the production line at the Sindelfingen plant on 3 June 2013 and went straight into the corporate museum.

The S-Class's dominance of the global luxury car market looks set to continue with a technological tour de force of comfort, space, efficiency, safety, quality and connectivity as the first units of the latest S-Class (W222), roll out of the Mercedes-Benz Sindelfingen Plant. The sixth generation of the flagship has seen management spend a billion euros on the production facilities for the car, bringing with it an ergonomic assembly line, which allows assembly line workers to mount the control units on the back wall module at a height that is most comfortable for them. A lifting device does the job of transporting the component into the vehicle, reducing the strain on the workers.

The new S-Class is the only car to entirely dispense with filament light bulbs both inside and outside the car. In all, there are over 500 LED units distributed throughout the car, feeding the headlights, taillights and interior lighting. At night and at traffic lights the car's taillights diminish in intensity to avoid dazzling other road users. Thoughtful stuff indeed.

Bumpy road ahead? No problem for the new S-Class. Road Surface Scan employs a stereo camera to scan the road ahead for undulations or potholes and then adapts the Magic Body Control suspension to suit. Two large 31cm screens dominate the new S-Class's dash. One serves the driver by displaying all of the relevant instrumentation, navigation info and audio system, and another sits in the centre, displaying usual entertainment and climate control functions.

This car is charged with the task of replacing not one but two product lines. Primarily developed to fill the role of the previous generation S-Class, it has also been conceived to occupy the same territory vacated by Mercedes-Benz's discontinued Maybach 57 and 62 limousines. Dieter Zetsche, the current Mercedes-Benz boss, has revealed the car is to support no less than five different variants: the standard saloon, a long wheelbase, extra-long wheelbase saloon, a coupé and a cabriolet.

Gorden Wagener, head of the globally active design division of Mercedes, has worked for Mercedes-Benz since 1997, and has given the car what he calls a "more noble visual character" than its predecessor. All recent Mercedes-Benz models have significantly undercut their predecessors in terms of aerodynamic efficiency, and this big saloon is no different. Its slippery surface is claimed to have a drag coefficient of just 0.24, which will help fuel economy and reduce wind noise.

The wide traditional grille is adorned with plenty of chrome and nestles between much larger headlamps, a heavily structured front bumper and a sculptured bonnet. It has lost the more prominent wheel arch flares of the outgoing model, but has the current signature dropping line along the flanks that runs from the trailing edge of the headlamps to a lower point above the rear wheel arches.

Predictably, it is in the area of electronics where the car's safety features impress. These include airbags within rear passenger safety belt straps, for example. Considerable effort has also been taken to ensure that the essence of luxury is characteristically evident. Lightweight materials used in the construction of the S350 BlueTEC mean it weighs in at just 1 900kg, 20kg below its predecessor despite the new additional kit.

Petrol, petrol-electric, diesel and diesel-electric drivetrains will

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all be manufactured, all with a seven-speed automatic gearbox, driven by a huge range of engines: a 3.0-litre V6 diesel in the S350 BlueTEC and a 2.1-litre four-cylinder diesel in combination with a 20 kW electric motor for the S300 BlueTEC Hybrid.

On the cards is a twin-turbocharged 4.7-litre V8 petrol engine for the S500 and a plug-in hybrid version for 2015, which will emit less than 75g/km of CO₂.

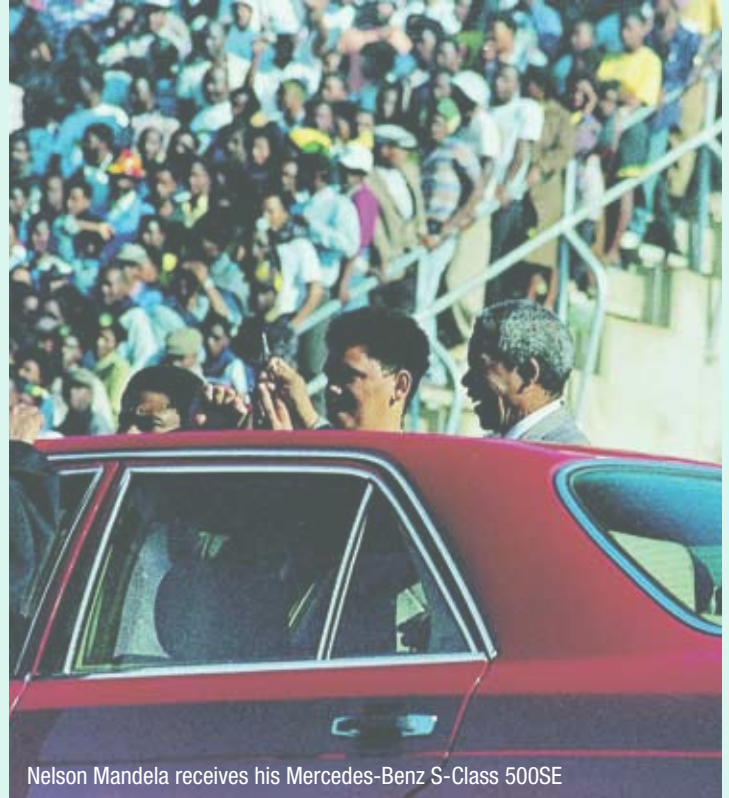
Due to arrive in South Africa in the future, the barnstorming S63 AMG will be powered by a twin-turbocharged 5.5-litre V8. But if you really must V12 grunt, you'll have to wait for the S600 model, powered by a revised version of the outgoing model's twin-turbocharged 5.5-litre V12 unit. This will give rise to a 6.0-litre V12 power S65 AMG flagship to top out the range.

Heading the long list of technological advances incorporated in the new S-Class is Mercedes-Benz's so-called Magic Body Control (MBC) system. Available as an option, it uses cameras mounted within the windscreen to scan the road and detect surface irregularities before automatically adjusting the damping characteristics to reduce body movements, better control roll and pitch and generally improve overall ride comfort.

Other innovations include a pair of dash-mounted 12.3-inch TFT screens. One displays instrumentation while the other functions as a sat-nav, multimedia and settings screen. Further improving interior comfort is the new Thermotronic climate control system, which can filter out viruses, dust and spores.

A bewildering array of options will balloon base prices, like a Comfort package that equips the seats to emulate a hot-stone massage, 24-speaker sound system and a built-in atomiser that diffuses scents into the interior.

The new S-Class is set to go on sale in South Africa in October, with prices estimated to start at around **RXXX XXX**. It's all a far cry from the first car in South Africa and one can only imagine how the entrepreneurial John Percy Hess would respond to the Magic Body Control option on the newest Benz, assuming he knew how to gain access to the cabin. I suspect he'd say, "Accountability matters. Wisdom matters. Love matters. Integrity matters. Innovation gives us a future."



Nelson Mandela receives his Mercedes-Benz S-Class 500SE

The Nelson Mandela connection

If ever evidence was needed that people can be inspired to meet tough goals and tackle impossible challenges if they care about the outcome, the staff of Mercedes-Benz South Africa (MBSA) are a case in point.

Although Madiba didn't know it at the time, his special relationship with Mercedes-Benz began with the announcement of his release from Robben Island in 1990. At the Rivonia Trial in 1964, Mandela, together with a number of other co-accused, was found guilty and sentenced to death. This sentence was changed to one of life imprisonment and he was sent to Robben Island in June that year.

In the late 80s MBSA was the first of the local car companies to give formal recognition to a black labour organisation, which later became the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA). The labour force, through the trade unions, was at the forefront of a battle to isolate the apartheid government and saw the factory floor as a platform from which to make their collective voice heard.

When it was announced that Madiba would be released from Robben Island, NUMSA called a special meeting to decide how best they could honour him. They wished to give him something of great symbolic value and settled on doing what they were best at – building a Mercedes-Benz S-Class – but in their own personal time without pay. When NUMSA approached management with the idea, they readily agreed to supply the materials, equipment and facilities.

Following his release from Robben Island, Madiba was handed the keys to a brand-new, top-of-the-range, red 500SE on 22 July 1990 at a political rally at the Sisa Dukasha Stadium in Mdantsane, near East London. The keys were handed to him by Philip Groom, who remains an employee of MBSA 23 years later.

Those employees at the East London plant during 1990 remember with pride the unparalleled excitement and passion that followed the 'Madiba car'. When it reached the end of its production journey and was subjected to a tough quality audit, it was revealed that the now legendary Mercedes-Benz was 100% 'blemish-free'. To this day it remains the best S-Class built in East London.

A happy side benefit was that the factory also raised productivity and quality at the end of the apartheid era through an even greater gift of hope and reconciliation. They created their own unique gift. In 1998, when then DaimlerChrysler AG chairman, Professor Jürgen Schrempp announced a billion-rand investment in the plant, Madiba was at his side – and was presented with a new S-Class to replace the famous red model, which then took pride of place in the Mercedes-Benz collection at the museum in East London.