

CLASSIC DRIVER

Timeless Classics: Mercedes-Benz 280 SE 3.5 Cabriolet

Lead

Before we get into the details of why this car is such a powerhouse of touring luxury, just leave that bonnet closed for a moment. First, sit back and appreciate the car's forceful good looks.

If you were asked to close your eyes and picture a classic Mercedes convertible in the 'grand tourer' tradition, this is quite probably the car that would pop into your mind. Not the sleekest, not the sportiest open-topped Mercedes, perhaps – but surely one of the most impressive. The car's big, bold grille and characteristic double headlights assure us that this is the quintessential grand tourer, sitting halfway between flashy and restrained. It was designed for people who had clearly made a success of their lives, but who were refined enough to avoid the brash statement of an overtly ostentatious automobile.

V8 appeal



The name, 280 SE 3.5 Cabriolet, is slightly confusing. Usually, you'd expect the numerical part of a Mercedes' name to be based on engine size – and so it was with the 220 SE, 250 SE, and the earliest 280 SE, the latter of which was powered by a 2778cc, six-cylinder engine. But in the last two years of the great W111 model series, Mercedes produced 3.5-litre V8 versions of the Coupé and Cabriolet and dubbed them 280 SE 3.5 to distinguish them from their lowlier counterparts.

In the 24 months that these final W111 models were produced, from August 1969 to July 1971, just 3,270 Coupé and 1,232 Cabriolet versions came into existence. No wonder that, today, these V8 versions are rare and much sought-after.

Fast and fun



But it's not just their rarity that makes them so desirable, since they also represent some of the quickest Mercedes of that era. Built on the revered W111 chassis that underpinned so many great Mercedes built between 1959 and 1971, the 3.5-litre V8 had to contend with a large, heavy car but, even so, the claimed 230bhp provided enough oomph to accelerate it smoothly – and quietly – to high speeds without seeming to draw breath. The pictured car ([an authentic, numbers-matching example in Silver-Blue](#)) also boasts such refinements as four-speed automatic transmission, all-round independent suspension and four-wheel hydraulic disc brakes.

According to Autocar magazine at the time, the 280 3.5 SE was "a copybook example of how experience plus careful design can create a simple-to-make high-output engine of considerable refinement." On the other hand, according to RM Auctions (which is offering the pictured car for sale in [Arizona on 15-16 January](#)), "American buyers just called it fast and fun."

Both opinions are equally valid.

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