

A thrilling highlight of the German visit—never to be forgotten—was an all-too-brief ride in a Mercedes Benz prototype sports car C 111, at a speed of 300 km p h (190 m p h). The Company had a private test track where one of their test drivers took all of us, individually of course, for a spin in their latest model. The circular track was short and had two highly banked curves where one really felt being pressed down heavily into one's seat by the high speed. I actually experienced what a Formula 1 driver undergoes during a race.

This opening gambit of our invitation to Mercedes Benz was simply meant to impress us with their massive research and development effort, employing at the time 6800 people at their world-famous Untertürkheim Establishment. Other splendid statistics, which of course we had no means to verify, were given to us by Professor J. Förster, the Director of R + D, who told us that in 1970 they had produced 280000 passenger cars and 150000 commercial vehicles and that this output was double of what had been manufactured five years previously.

Their research philosophy effort was admirable: The car was to serve as an enrichment of life, but only if accidents, noise, air pollution and waste disposal could be reduced to a minimum. Such aims demanded high engineering requirements to increase safety, a reduction of fatigue and a safe packaging of the driver and passenger to ensure survival after an accident.

Professor Förster was not so enthusiastic when he discussed the reduction of exhaust pollution. It was a difficult subject, he told us, with different standards set by Britain, Europe and California. At the time he could see no solution to the demands of the Californian laws: "Neither Ford, nor General Motors, nor ourselves know the answer. Even simple solutions giving partial answers will cost one quarter to one third of the price of the car, such as catalysts in the exhaust system and electronically controlled fuel injection."

[Since the date of my visit in 1971, much of this has become standard in the modern car, without an immense increase of its cost.]

Mercedes was considering other possible, more exotic, solutions to this problem, like gas turbines and Wankel engines, both of which produced less obnoxious air pollution. However, their high costs prevented more serious experimentation. Similarly a totally electrically driven car was ruled out at the time because of development expenses. They had designed a robot car, Professor Förster told us, where the accelerator pedal was varied automatically and which had no gears. It had run without a driver for 80000 km on a special test stand. At the end we visited their splendid Museum of old Mercedes cars, even containing an example of the first model of 1886.