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OLD SCHOOL

Manufactured from 1997 to 2000, the eight-cylinder C43 AMG is showing promise as a collector's car - so what should you be looking out for prior to buying?

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THE W202 C-Class was, at first, a compact Mercedes-Benz saloon for discerning, prosperous customers who were not particularly interested in high performance. However, just a few months into production, in September 1993, Stuttgart launched the 3.6-litre C36 AMG, among the earliest AMG models to be sold in Mercedes-Benz showrooms, and suddenly the discreetly styled, quality car was in

delighting those with fond memories of the 190E 2.3-16 and 2.5-16, the Cosworth engined homologation specials introduced in the 1980s.

Three years later the C36 AMG evolved into the C43 AMG, straight-six power giving way to a big capacity V8 and turning the car from a somewhat frantic, high revving machine into a more refined and relaxed proposition. Unlike the C36, it was also available as an estate, which made it an especially attractive, high

Both generations were expensive for their day, the C36 over £38,000 before extras, and the C43 close on £48,000. Hence both models slipped under the radar in the UK, with small numbers sold and their existence little known beyond the AMG cognoscenti. As a result, these Affalterbach thoroughbreds do not command big money, and rank among the best AMG bargains available - at least for the time being, because prices are now edging up. Here we look at the C43 (the C36 featured

Guide) and ask: should you buy now, or leave well alone a car that's cheap for a reason?

DESIGN, ENGINEERING

The C43 replaced the C36 at the 1997 facelift for the 202-series, hence one of the major upgrades was the Elcode electronic key, ignition and security system, the ignition key an electronic module rather than a traditional key. Extra equipment such as Parktronic and Auto Pilot Guidance (an early satellite navigation) and rain

JUST THE FACTS

**Mercedes-Benz
C43 AMG/Estate (W/5202)**

ENGINE M113 4,266cc V8

POWER 302bhp@5,850rpm

TORQUE 302lb ft@3,250-5,000rpm

TRANSMISSION 5-speed auto, RWD

WEIGHT 1,570/1,610kg

0-62MPH 6.5/6.7sec

TOP SPEED 155mph

FUEL CONSUMPTION 21.6mpg

YEARS PRODUCED 1997-2000

Figures for car as pictured; fuel consumption according to EEC urban; top speed electronically limited



**SPOTTED
FOR SALE**
PRIVATE SELLER
C43 AMG saloon
1999/T, silver, cream and
black leather, 54,000
miles, £9,350,
London

on the C-Class. The cars went on sale in the UK in early 1998.

Across the C-Class range the facelift also brought some light cosmetic changes inside and out, but of course the main interest was the 4.3-litre, three-valve M113 installed under the bonnet – the first V8 in a production C-Class.

Mated to a five-speed, electronic automatic gearbox, it produced 302bhp, and 302lb ft torque from 3,250rpm, increases of nine and seven per cent respectively over the C36 straight-six. On paper performance was unchanged, both cars making 0-62mph in the mid sixes and top speed electronically governed to 155mph.

The C43 looked as undramatic as its predecessor, wearing only slightly different side skirts and spoilers, and the same discreet AMG badge on the bootlid. The same 17-inch five-spoke AMG alloy wheels were retained,

tyres at the front, and 8.5-inch with 245/40s at the rear. Leather and air conditioning were standard equipment – and for £1,400 extra buyers could specify the elegant estate version, whose extra bodywork added just 40kg.

Production of the C43 saloon continued until May 2000 (the estate July 2000), when the 202-series C-Class range was replaced, by which time 3,857, including 772 estates, had been built, compared to 5,221 C36s.

In the UK, 406 C43s were sold (compared to 378 C36s), 86 of them estates: 166 in 1998, 187 in 1999 and 53 in 2000. It's estimated that some 30 C43 saloons and estates were converted into C55s by AMG (listed as an official model in Daimler's archive), these running the 5.4-litre M113 giving 342bhp/376lb ft. At least one saloon is right-hand drive, having been featured in *Mercedes*

DRIVING THE C43

Whereas the C36 feels vibrant and harsh, the C43 is an altogether more forgiving car. It starts with the special sports seats (often in distinctive two-tone leather, also applied to the steering wheel), which are more comfortable and supportive, while the interior trim of the facelifted car has a classier appearance. The low speed ride is also notably improved, the suspension soaking up bumps that would be fed straight through to C36 occupants.

Of course the biggest change is the V8 drivetrain. The engine is much quieter at tickover (although, like the C36 engine is still rattly by normal Mercedes standards), and revs rise and fall with a muted roar. Cornering is sure-footed and the brakes well up to the performance. However, the C43 can sometimes feel an overpowered car, it being all too easy,

Programme (ESP), to spin the rear wheels if a touch too much throttle is applied, especially in the wet.

WHAT TO PAY

You would think that with so few sold in the UK, C43s would be rarely seen for sale, but there is a surprising number offered. And looking at what is advertised, the C43 can be little more than another old C-Class, priced at £3,000 to £4,000, or it can be an appreciating modern classic with an asking price of up to £15,000. A C43 has to be mint at that price, which not many are, given the high mileages most have covered and also the rust prone nature of the 202-series bodywork.

Assuming the overall state of the car is reflected in the price, a 'safe' amount to pay is £5,000 to £8,000. As far as it is possible to make comparisons on cars at least 16 years old, estates are likely to

C43 AMG INSIDE AND OUT

POWERTRAIN

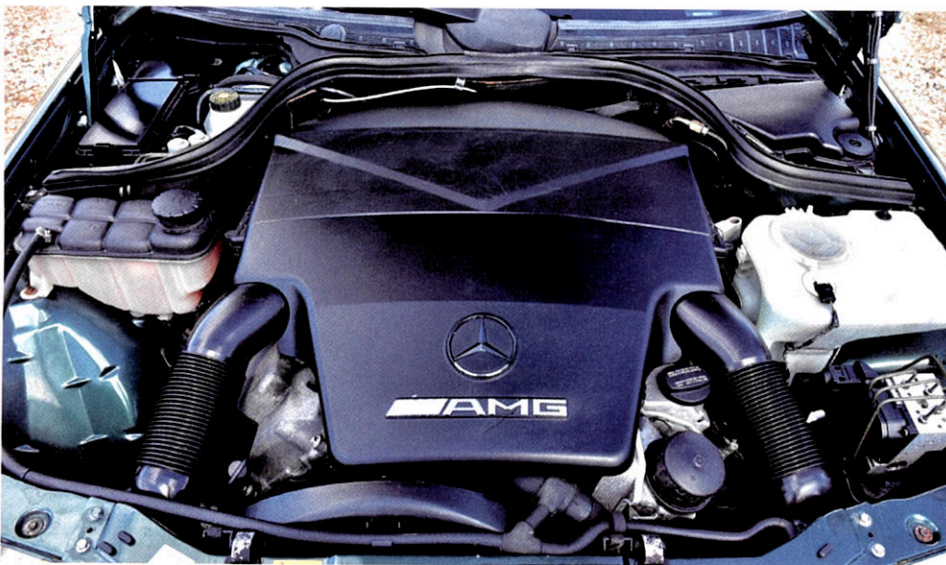
Like all Mercedes' modern V8 petrol engines, the M113 is tough and reliable, and capable of huge mileages, but there are several points that need inspection, according to Olly Stoner of Mercedes specialist Prestige Car Service in Hampshire. "They tend to leak oil," he says. "The rocker covers on the cylinder heads leak, as do the oil seals on the oil cooler. But neither are a major expense - the oil seals on the oil cooler are easy to change."

It is quite likely that the engine mounts, a hydraulic configuration, will be worn. "It's a big heavy V8, which is quite hard on the mounts," Olly tells us. "If they need replacing, when you start the engine it will feel quite harsh."

Various Mercedes V8s including the M113 can suffer a failed crankshaft sensor, which causes poor starting, but this is usually a once in lifetime failure on the car and is cheap to fix.

The gearbox too can leak, the fault being the pilot bush, which is the electrical connector that plugs into the gearbox to enact gear changes. Mercedes-Benz said the gearbox was a sealed for life unit, but Olly, along with other specialists, feels this is unrealistic, leading to premature wear. "The gearbox is reliable but it needs an oil and filter change every 40,000 miles," he insists. "If it doesn't get this, by 90,000 miles you'll get slack changes and it will slip, with engine revs rising and but not road speed."

Left to right: It is quite normal for the M113 V8 to drink oil, so don't be too alarmed if yours does this; the two-mode, five-speed auto is lazy in action but responds well to an oil change come service time.



SUSPENSION, STEERING AND BRAKES

There are no major problems here, just a series of issues more related to the car's age than anything else. "You'll see an occasional broken suspension spring, and the bushes in the lower front suspension arms can crack," Olly tells us. "It's a nightmare to get the old bushes out, so we just fit a new suspension arm. If a C43 has worn bushes it will feel a bit wandery on the road."

As with most Mercedes of that time, lower front ball joints wear out, leading to creaking and clonking. At the rear, the trunnion bushes where the wheel hub is connected to the suspension arm



uneven rear tyre wear. There is good news on brakes: prices, notoriously high on AMGs, have come down. "The only problem is wear and tear, and the brake

come down to around £50," Olly reveals. The recirculating ball steering will feel vague - that's just the way the car is. "All that tends to go wrong is the steering

JB Motors in Surrey has this metallic green, 134,000-mile C43 AMG up

**SPOTTED
FOR SALE
INDEPENDENT
DEALER**
C43 AMG Estate
 2000/V, silver, cream and
 black leather, 101,000
 miles, £7,889,
 London



Left to right: AMG wheels, bumpers, skirts and a fruity, twin-pipe exhaust system; a full body respray is about £4,000; 17-inch Monoblocks.

BODYWORK AND WHEELS

The 202-series, along with the 210-series E-Class, has a bad reputation for corrosion, which Olly knows only too well. "The biggest thing about C43s is body rust," he warns. "You need to check the front wings, the rear wings, the sills underneath the sill covers, the boot floor, the battery tray, the rear subframe mounts - pretty much everything! Most of them have had work done on the bodywork." Some cars will have had rust attended to under

Mercedes-Benz's anti corrosion warranty, but that will have been many years ago and could now be rusting again.

Check that the wheels are in good condition, free of aluminium corrosion and parking scuffs. Should you feel a new set is in order, it's not too hard to find a set second hand - but ensure they are genuine Mercedes, not lookalikes. "The genuine AMG wheels have an AMG stamp and also the Mercedes part number," Olly advises.

Like all Mercedes' modern V8 petrol engines, the M113 is tough and reliable, and capable of huge mileages

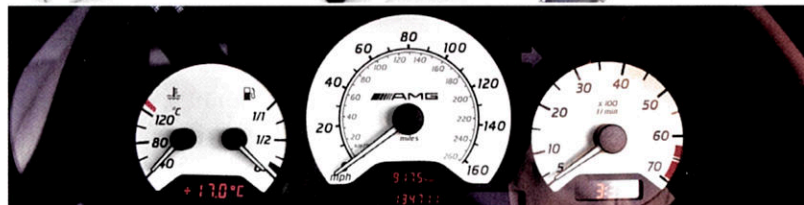


INTERIOR AND ELECTRICS

While the 202-series era was hardly a high point of Mercedes build quality, the C43 cabin, with its lovely leather trim, lasts well. "It's pretty good, we've seen C43s with 200,000 miles that look almost brand new," Olly comments. However the seats can be problematic, with the pipes that provide the pneumatic, orthopaedic adjustment prone to coming detached. But usually these can easily be reconnected.

If the air conditioning output isn't ice cold, a system re-gas may sort it, but it is much more likely that the condenser is leaking - something almost all older cars suffer from. "It's at the front of the engine and quite a tight fit, so leaves and dirt tend to collect there, which can start off corrosion,"

Top to bottom: It is rare to find a C43 that doesn't have the odd squeak in the cabin, which doesn't always have two-tone leather; white backed AMG dials look great.



C43 AMG INSIDE AND OUT**VERDICT**

AMG cars from the 1990s have been underrated 'sleepers' for many years, their values nowhere near commensurate with their special engineering and status. That will change, indeed prices are already slowly ascending, but what no one knows is when they will take off in a big way. Hence for the time being the C43 is an affordable entry to the AMG world, and not only offers as much performance as most owners would ever need, if they're being honest with themselves, but is also comfortable and practical enough to serve as everyday transport.

However, it is absolutely crucial to find a car with rust free bodywork, and preferably a very good interior too. Those that tick these boxes are on their way to elevated classic values – those that don't are likely to remain sleepers for a lot longer.

**C43** how to modify it

Most will prefer a C43 in standard form, but for these who want more, the AMG C-Class lends itself well to a few well chosen modifications, Olly Stoner feels. His favourite upgrade is to install the 5.4-litre V8, an M113 unit, from the C55 AMG – and add a supercharger if that alone isn't enough! "There are probably a dozen out

there in the UK with that engine and we've done most of them," Olly claims.

Less seismic changes can make a worthwhile difference, he points out. "Most C43s will need new shock absorbers, and I recommend Bilstein B8s as a replacement, which are slightly cheaper and give better damping but the same ride quality." He suggests matching these with H&R 30mm lowered springs, and says replacing the standard 17-inch wheels with the 18-inch rims from the E55 AMG of the time works well. "They're wider and make car feel more planted, and they look great." A Quaife limited-slip transmission differential damps the wheelspin on a C43, which Olly

**SPOTTED
FOR SALE**
**CLASSIC CAR
SPECIALIST**
C43 AMG saloon
1999/T, silver, cream and
black leather, 83,000
miles, £13,495,
Northampton

Typical basic servicing costs

(A/B services including VAT)

MODEL	OIL SERVICE	MAJOR SERVICE*
C43 AMG	£200	£300

*Quotes from Prestige Car Service

Non routine servicing costs

- ★ **Oil cooler seals** £90
- ★ **Rocker cover gaskets** £260
- ★ **Gearbox pilot bush replacement** £80
- ★ **Fit new engine mounts** £400
- ★ **Lower front suspension arm (one side)** £255
- ★ **Renew front brake discs and pads** £358
- ★ **Replace the air conditioning condenser** £328
- ★ **Four premium brand tyres (225/45ZR17, 245/40ZR17)** £400

Buyer's checks

- ✓ Look carefully for oil leaks around the cylinder head rocker covers
- ✓ Oil can leak from the seals on the oil cooler
- ✓ A gearbox oil leak usually means the electronic connector to the gearbox is faulty
- ✓ A harsh feeling engine may be down to worn engine mounts
- ✓ Lower front suspension arms can crack, and suspension springs break
- ✓ Few C43s have escaped rust, so check all over the bodywork for corrosion
- ✓ A lack of cooling from the air conditioning is likely to be due to a leaking condenser

What you'll pay

- £3,000-£4,000** The very cheapest C43 saloons – expect rust and mechanical issues
- £4,000-£6,000** Running satisfactorily but looking tired inside and out; likely to have over 100,000 miles
- £6,000-£10,000** The price range most C43s are found in, no corrosion expected
- £10,000-£15,000** Most likely offered by classic specialists. For this money only the best – no rust at all, sweet powertrain and fresh interior

► Thank you to **JB Motors** for the loan of the C43 AMG
Tel 01483 222207 Web www.jbmotorsmini.co.uk, and to independent Mercedes specialist **Prestige Car Service** for technical advice and costs Tel 02392 570123