

Tops!

Innovative vario-roof versus classic fabric soft-top. The style of the 1950s versus 1990s modernity: The Mercedes-Benz 190 SL first produced 60 years ago and the Mercedes-Benz SLK presented almost 20 years ago are roadster interpretations of a different but timeless and intriguing nature.



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hen Mercedes-Benz presented the SLK Roadster to the international press in early 1996, the venue chosen as the centerpoint for the trial drive by the communication department was the wine-growing estate of the Marchesi Antinori near Florence. Located in central Tuscany, the vigneto under family ownership since 1385 was the perfect starting point for undisturbed, enjoyable test driving. Winding country roads almost devoid of traffic and lined with picturesque cypress trees, townships with historic buildings and bumpy cobblestone roads, occasional stretches on the autostrada for a change of scene, and usually fine weather – Tuscany is one of the world's last paradisaical regions for drivers.

Small, agile roadsters are in their element here, and are able to show what they can do. Also the Mercedes-Benz SLK, which was being critically assessed by professional testers from the automotive press. The verdict on the handling characteristics of the only 3.99-meter long Roadster with its folding and retractable metal roof was positive on all fronts: "Extreme lateral acceleration, outstandingly fade-resistant brakes, and amazing agility, combined with its unspectacular but no less important day-to-day suitability, make the latest Mercedes something new in the entire sports car sector," the magazine "auto motor und sport" reported in April 1996, summing up the general opinion of the automotive press.

Praise in the highest terms

Just as much praise had been lavished on the 190 SL just under forty years before. In 1955, with pre-series production of the Mercedes-Benz 190 SL commencing in January and regular production in May, organized driving presentations for the automotive press did not yet exist. Vehicles were made available to car testers from motoring magazines on request, and they were free to test drive them

The SLK overtakes the 190 SL with ease.





The ergonomically styled cockpit of the SLK.

wherever they wanted – perhaps they too headed for Tuscany. They delivered different but equally positive verdicts: "With respect to driving safety, the 190 SL is one of the very best automobiles currently in production," an author writing under the pseudonym "Tester" reported in the Swiss "Automobil Revue." His overall verdict: "Despite its high performance, the 190 SL is not actually a sports car but rather an uncomplicated and practical tourer ... Thanks to its exemplary handling it is one of the very few cars that allow one to achieve very high average speeds in complete safety, without haste and with due consideration for other road users."

Mercedes-Benz SLK – classic in waiting

Today, with our present level of knowledge, it is possible to assess the two protagonists from new, different standpoints. More than thirty years of automotive history lie between the end of 190 SL production and the beginning of SLK production – and the SLK is already a classic in waiting at the age of almost twenty years. A first glance at the 190 SL in graphite gray (DB 190) and the SLK 230 Kompressor in yellowstone (DB 685) in our cover story already confirms that the golden-age and the SLK represent two vastly different automobile generations. At the same time, however, the two models

have quite a number of significant common factors in their development history.

Both were designed on the technical basis of regular production sedans. The 190 SL was based on the platform of the W 120/121 Ponton series, with a number of welded reinforcements added. It was powered by the M 121 B 11 OHC engine of the model 190, whose output was increased to 105 hp (77 kW) by fine-tuning and two Solex downdraft carburetors. In principle it can therefore be regarded as a sporty version of the W 120/121 series, an antecedent of the E-Class. The SLK, for its part, is based on the technology of the C-Class. With a few minor modifications and some fine-tuning, both the suspension and the engines are derived from the compact sedans of the W 202 series produced from March 1993 onwards. When production began, the SLK was available as the SLK 200 with 136 hp (100 kW) from its two-liter four-cylinder engine and as the SLK 230 Kompressor with a supercharged 2.3-liter four-cylinder developing 193 hp (142 kW). Owing to the vehicle tax regime in Italy, Portugal, and Greece, Mercedes-Benz offered the SLK 200 Kompressor with 191 hp (141 kW) as the top model in these countries.

The biggest difference between the 190 SL and SLK compared to their sedan progenitors is this: Their wheelbase is significantly reduced – while the floor assembly of the 190 SL is 250 millimeters shorter than that of the Ponton sedan, the difference between the SLK and the



Lounge-like atmosphere in the interior of the 190 SL.

The 190 SL pleases the eye with its sensuously curved front fenders, convex flanks, and rounded rear end.

C-Class sedan is 290 millimeters. At the same time the result is the major common feature of the two sports cars: Their wheelbase measures 2400 millimeters – which is incidentally exactly that of the 300 SL (W 198) and the later W 113 Pagoda series.

The fact that the 190 SL and SLK have the same wheelbase is hardly noticeable – for with a practically identical overall height of around 1.3 meters, the body of the 190 SL, which was designed by Mercedes-Benz stylist Walter Hlärker and heavily inspired by the 300 SL, is around 23 centimeters longer than the SLK body created by designer Michael Mauer under the aegis of Bruno Sacco as Head of Design. The effect is astounding: While the SLK makes a compact, agile impression with its short overhangs and wedge-shaped body lines rising sharply towards the rear, the 190 SL appears to be considerably longer and more distinguished. It pleases the eye with its sensuously curved front fenders, convex flanks, and rounded rear end. And with its generous chrome trim, which also includes the massive, curved bumpers, it has all the appearance of a boulevard cruiser.

Although both roadsters reflect the spirit of their respective eras, their lines by no means appear as mere fashion statements from a present-day perspective – and a look into the cockpit confirms this. In the 190 SL, thickly upholstered seats invite the occupants to sit down comfortably. The driver – in many cases a lady – has a view of



dial instruments with chrome surrounds in the same look as the 300 SL when sitting at the large, slim 43-centimeter steering wheel. This is notable for its chrome-plated inner ring, which is pressed to sound the horn and rotated to the left or right to operate the turn signals. A number of chrome-plated rotary and pull switches above the lower edge of the padded dashboard reflect the worldly style of the 1950s and 1960s.

The interior of the SLK is quite different: Ergonomic bucket seats designed according to safety aspects, with pronounced side bolsters and optional two-tone leather upholstery, already convey the visual message that they provide outstanding lateral support. In contrast to the armchair-like seats of the 190 SL, which obliged their occupants to find a hold by gripping the steering wheel or the passenger door armrest when cornering at speed, the seats of the SLK were the first Mercedes-Benz passenger car seats without the classic spring core upholstery. Harking back to historical Mercedes-Benz sports car glamor, the dashboard of the SLK, designed according to the latest safety aspects at the time, features chrome bezels surrounding the beige faces and the stylish numerals of the dial instruments. The carbon-fiber look of the control panel on the SLK's center console provides a contrast which is typical of that time.

World safety champion

Otherwise the interior is decidedly functional in appearance, with the typical Mercedes control stalk to the left of the steering wheel and clearly arranged switches. The beautiful exterior of the SLK conceals numerous new safety features which, in conjunction with the innovative safety bodyshell, made it the roadster with the best passive safety level of its time. The fixed steel roll bars, for example, protect the occupants in the event of a rollover, and the newly developed ellipsoid firewall enlarges the front deformation zone should a frontal collision occur. The body developers also took an innovative approach to lightweight design: For the first time in a regular production model, Mercedes-Benz used diecast magnesium as a body material – for example for the additional bulkhead between the fuel tank and trunk.

But the most creative engineering triumph in the light, sporty, and compact roadster is undoubtedly the vario-roof. Whereas other car manufacturers had proved unsuccessful with fully retractable hardtops in the past – when retracted they invariably occupied almost the entire trunk space – the Mercedes-Benz body developers Arno Jambor and Dieter Gürtler came up with an elegant, space-saving solution: a sheet steel coupé roof that was fully retractable using intelligent electrohydraulics. Its

The four-cylinder of the 190 SL has an output of 105 hp, while the SLK 230 Kompressor delivers 193 hp.

The vario-roof of the light, sporty, and compact roadster was a creative tour de force by the engineers.

innovative feature: The roof is transversely divided in two. Within 25 seconds, at the touch of a button, it detaches itself from the windscreen surround, divides into two segments and lowers itself into the stowage recess under the simultaneously opening trunk lid. It remains there in a folded state to save space.

Yet there is more to the name "vario-roof" than just a foldable metal roof that turns a coupé into a roadster with a hardtop in the trunk: This was the world's first practicable day-to-day roof of its kind. All convertibles with a retractable fixed roof in production today use the folding principle first conceived of by Jambor and Gürtler in 1986, and first implemented in large-scale production with the SLK. Systematic development work on the vario-roof commenced in 1989, more than 30 prototype roofs being tested until over 20,000 opening and closing cycles were absorbed without problems, corresponding to opening and closing the roof six times each day over a period of ten years. Under the folded roof there is still sufficient room for the nylon travel bag available as an ex-factory accessory, which together with a smaller bag makes optimum use of the trunk space. Many SLK owners also purchased items on the accessory market, such as a set of two small suitcases.

And the 190 SL? It has considerably more generous trunk space (for which a three-piece, made-to-measure luggage set was available ex-factory) and a classic fabric soft-top for overhead protection. This was very carefully designed, excludes drafts, is naturally completely waterproof, and can be easily opened and closed. It is only necessary to release three catches at the top of the windscreen surround, then fold the entire roof to the rear in one go. The roof disappears completely into the roof compartment, without occupying any trunk space. Once the

MODEL HISTORY

Mercedes-Benz SLK

R 170 series



Mercedes-Benz created a sensation at the 1994 Turin Motor Show, and at the Paris Motor Show in the same year, with two near-series design studies of an avantgarde two-seater sports car with a retractable steel hardtop. In 1996 the two-seater entered series production as the Mercedes-Benz SLK 200, SLK 200 Kompressor (for export) and the SLK 230 Kompressor. The vario-roof Roadster was produced at the Mercedes-Benz plant in Bremen,

where 600 new jobs were created to meet the lively demand. In early 2000 a comprehensive facelift included slight design modifications (e.g. different headlamps and rear lights), and above all electronic innovations such as ESP and a new six-speed transmission. As an addition to the existing four-cylinder models, whose engines were thoroughly revised, Mercedes-Benz now offered the SLK 320 with a 3.2-liter V6 developing 218 hp (160 kW). The top model from 2001 was the SLK 32 AMG, which delivered an output of 354 hp (260 kW) with the comprehensively modified V6 of the SLK 320. By the time the model was replaced by the R 171 series in early 2004, a total of 311,222 units of the first Mercedes-Benz SLK model had been produced.

Mercedes-Benz 190 SL

W 121 B II series



Only 20 months of development and testing time lay between the first design drawing for the Mercedes-Benz 190 SL and the start of series production: Max Hoffman had proposed production of the 190 SL in September 1953 (see page 48), and full series production already commenced in May 1955. The Mercedes-Benz stylists under Walter Häcker had created a highly attractive two-seater whose lines were inspired by the spectacular 300 SL designed by Friedrich Geiger. The 190 SL was

available in three different versions: as a roadster with fabric soft-top or as a coupé with a removable hardtop, either with or without a fabric soft-top. Hundreds of minor technical improvements were made under the skin during the production period from May 1955 to February 1963. The exterior of the Roadster remained practically unchanged. The changes made included wide chrome strips on the upper door edges, larger rear lights from the models 220 a, 219 and 220 S (1956) and license plate lamps moved from the trunk lid and integrated into the bumper horns (1957). From October 1959 there was a new hardtop with a larger rear window. From 1955 to 1963, at a basic price of 16,500 deutschmarks (when production commenced), a total of 25,881 units were sold, of which around 18,000 went to the USA.





The vario-roof of the SLK opens within 25 seconds.

tonneau cover is fastened, the roadster is ready for the road. With a little muscle-power and practice, the fabric roof can also be heaved rearwards from the driver's seat. Today's 190 SL owners definitely prefer the method that means getting out first – the best way is for two people to stand on either side of the car and make sure that the plastic rear window is not kinked.

Driving these two very different roadsters relativizes the verdicts reached by the test reports of their respective times: The 190 SL, which was only ever available with the less than smooth-running 105 hp four-cylinder engine, likes to take things easy. With an acceleration from zero to 100 km/h in 14.5 seconds and a top speed of around 170 km/h, its performance is certainly not sporty by today's standards. According to measurements by "auto motor und sport" at the time, the most powerful variant of the SLK, the 230 Kompressor, accelerated from standstill to 100 km/h in 7.2 seconds. That is still very

respectable today. The top speed also clearly illustrates the generation gap: The SLK 230 Kompressor is capable of reaching around 230 km/h.

On the winding country roads of Tuscany, it is highly unlikely that any present-day owner of a Mercedes-Benz 190 SL would wish to take the then standard 6.40 – 13 Sport bias ply tires at the double-wishbone front axle and the rear single-joint swing axle to the limits of lateral stability. In this respect no compromises have to be made for the almost 20-year-old SLK: Its wide 205/55 R 16 radial tires at the tautly set-up double-wishbone front suspension, with 225/50 R 16 tires at the multi-link independent rear suspension, allow a sporty driving style. While the 185/80 R 13 radial tires now usually fitted to the 190 SL improve the roadholding of this classic, they cannot disguise the effect of four decades of suspension development.

But anyway, the 190 SL has no need to measure itself in sporting competition, and certainly not with the SLK:

When driving it, even the 90 km/h allowed on country roads in Italy, or the 100 km/h permitted in Germany seem fast. With no draft-stop – a feature of the SLK – and thanks to the low, steep windscreen and relatively high seating position, the airstream makes for a breezy open-top driving experience that purists bemoan the lack of in today's convertibles.

"Beauty and the little beast" would be a possible conclusion to sum up the comparison – yet that too would not be apt: The outstandingly sporty SLK is at the same time a very biddable day-to-day car. And the beauty is more than just beautiful: The appeal of the 190 SL also lies in its qualities as a comfortable touring car, and as an icon of the automotive and cultural spirit of the 1950s. *



More information and illustrations can be found online: ➔ www.mb-qr.com/0pq



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The soft-top of the 190 SL is folded back in classic style – by hand.