





DREAM DATE

... Wherein Your Editor Drives Every SL Model Ever Made. And Then Wakes Up.

By Don Klein

COMING UP WITH THE IDEA to test-drive the 2003 SL500 along with its predecessors was easy; coming up with the cars themselves, however, could have been a problem. Gullwing coupes and 280 SLs are hard to find, and even harder to borrow. But as the saying goes, "It isn't what you know, it's who you know"—and I know Alex Dearborn. Alex—a lanky, soft-spoken native New Englander—has been involved with classic Mercedes since before some of them were classics. Luckily for me, his specialty is SLs. >>



CLASSIC PROFILES

ALTHOUGH THE 2003 SL500, bottom, is light-years away from the original 300 SLs in terms of technology, performance, and safety, a strong family resemblance is evident throughout the years.

Alex assembled a fine selection of classic SLs for me to drive, including a gorgeous black '56 Gullwing coupe; two 280 SLs (one stick, one automatic); a low-mileage 560 SL; and a pristine '99 SL500. The plan was to drive these cars, plus the 2003 SL500, over the same route (which included winding country roads, highways, and stop-and-go traffic), so that I could see firsthand how the SL driving experience has evolved since the first production 300 SL coupe was introduced in 1954. The plan also required that my wife, Michaela, pinch my arm frequently to remind me that I wasn't dreaming. Alex couldn't, however, prearrange the weather. However, Mother Nature must be an SL fan, because she provided two beautiful New England fall days. In fact, the sun was shining warmly enough for us to lower the roof on the '03 for our drive north, even though it was just two days before Thanksgiving.

We met at Alex's place, where I first saw "our" Gullwing, a superb, low-mileage car in original condition. The coupe was originally delivered to a member of the DuPont family, who kept it at his summer home in Oyster Harbours, Massachusetts. The doors still bear the crests of the Wianno Yacht Club—small, hand-painted crossed flags—and the DuPont family. Everything worked like new, including the heater and radio. The car started at the first twist of the key.

With Alex leading the way in the Gullwing, we headed north to Maine, where the rest of the SLs were assembled. Although the trip lasted less than an hour, it took us through Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Maine, giving motorists in three states the opportunity to ogle our two-car caravan. The sight of the rare 300 SL and the even-rarer 2003 SL500 resulted in more

"thumbs-ups" than we could count.

After lining up the cars for a family portrait, I finally took my turn at the wheel of the 300 SL. I quickly discovered that getting into a Gullwing is easier said than done. Even with the doors raised to their full height, there's no graceful way to do it. "Just put your butt in first and the rest of you will follow," Alex advised. He was right. I would worry about getting out later.

Securely ensconced in the firm leather bucket seat (the early 300 SLs came standard with distinctive plaid wool upholstery; leather was

optional), I pulled my aircraft-type seat belt tight and surveyed my new environment. Forward visibility was excellent. I peered out across the seemingly endless hood, with its signature twin bulges, and felt as though I were in command of a vintage single-seat fighter plane. A rectangular dash-mounted mirror provided a surprisingly large view to the rear, while two small-diameter mirrors atop each front fender did their best to provide lateral information.

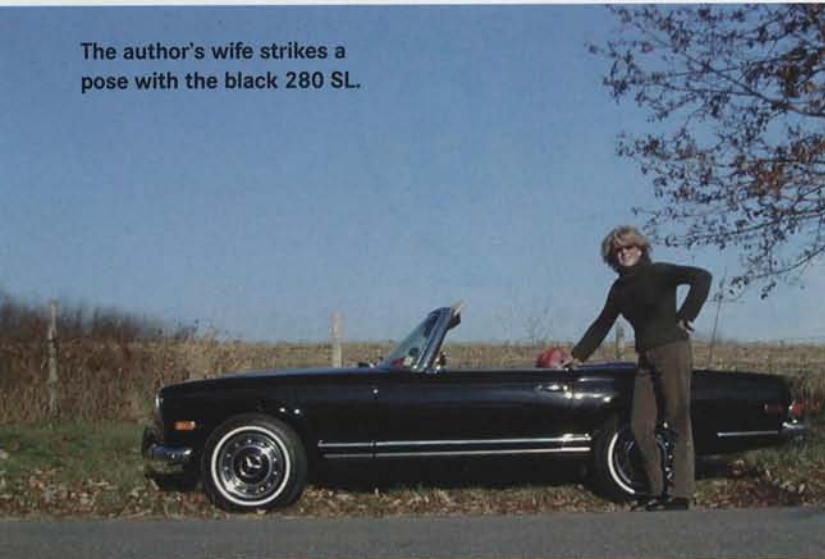
The 300 SL has both a choke and a pressure regulator to help get the fuel-injected six-cylinder engine started when cold, but since it was

The noise results from the massive quantities of air rushing through the intake manifold in response to the demand for more fuel. It is a wonderful, viscerally satisfying symphony that I won't soon forget.

What surprised me most about the 300 SL was its tractability. The 1955 Gullwing was the world's first production automobile to use gasoline fuel injection. As a result, the engine provides a very broad, consistent power band that allows the car to be driven at low speeds in high gear. Although I enjoy shifting, I was able to slow to 15–20 mph in fourth and then accelerate hard without sacrificing power. At highway speeds the car seemed to want a fifth gear, but a glance at the tachometer indicated that fourth had a long way to go before topping out. I never got anywhere near its limit.

Handling was about what I had expected. Steering is heavy at slow speeds (a perception that is enhanced by the car's bus-sized steering wheel), but lightens considerably above 50 mph. I had heard about the car's tendency to "swap ends" under hard cornering due to the relatively high mounted rear swing axle, so I was careful to take it easy through the curves. Exiting Route 95 via a decreasing-radius exit ramp gave me a hint of how easy it would be to lose the rear end in a turn on the racetrack. But for spirited grand touring on public roads, the Gullwing is very forgiving and great fun to drive.

The author's wife strikes a pose with the black 280 SL.



already up to operating temperature, I didn't need either. I simply turned the small ignition key to the right and held it until I heard a mighty roar: This is an engine that springs to life with audible authority.

The shift knob in the 300 SLs—both roadsters and coupes—sits atop a long slender lever. Despite its fragile appearance, the stick must be moved firmly and decisively to select a gear. I easily found first, applied the throttle, let up the clutch, and was smoothly under way.

At low revs, the Gullwing's straight-cut gears produce a tremendous amount of transmission noise. It isn't unpleasant, but it *is* loud. Once the tach's red line is approached, the sound is replaced by a throaty growl that is addictively rewarding. Every time I approached a shift point, I backed off the throttle just so that I could build that sound again.



NEXT, I SAMPLED THE two 280 SLs. Like the Gullwing, the first one was black with a red interior and had a manual transmission. When compared side by side, it's hard

to believe that the square, slab-sided W113 evolved from the voluptuous, "extruded" 300 SL. The shared visual cues are minimal, and only the dashboard of the 280 SL seems to have evolved from the previous generation.

Driving the 280 SL confirms that the W113 is very different from its predecessor. For one thing, its big, wide doors make entering and exiting easy. The 280 also has a wider track, which provides not only more interior space, but greater stability, even though the car still employs a rear swing axle.

While the 300 SL produces a lot of gear noise, the 280 SL has virtually none. Instead, a pleasant (if somewhat high) exhaust note dominates the aural experience. Shifting is again via a tall, lollipop-like lever, but the transmission in the 280 feels looser and more delicate than in the 300 SL. I much preferred the automatic, which provides clean, crisp shifts.

GILL-SPOTTER'S GUIDE

1954-1963

Original 300 SL Gullwings and Roadsters



1963-1971

230 SL, 250 SL, 280 SL

1972-1989

280 SL-560 SL/SLC



2003

SL500

1990-2001

500 SL-SL600



On balance, I found the 280 SLs to be fun to drive but not as “serious” as the more powerful 300 SL. Perhaps this is because the W113 series was created to appeal to a broader market, as evidenced by its lower price: When the 1971 230 SL was introduced, its sticker price was less than half of the outgoing 300 SL roadster’s. Today, that difference is even more exaggerated—excellent 280 SLs can be found for well under \$50,000, while Gullwings easily command a quarter of a million dollars or more.

THE 560 SL REPRESENTS ANOTHER interesting evolution of the Mercedes-Benz “big” sports car. Considerably larger than the car it replaced—picture a 280 SL on steroids—the so-called R107 series had the longest production run (1972–1989) of all SLs. The ‘86 560 SL I drove typified what the mid-’80s SLs were all about: luxury and power. Equipped with a monstrous, 5.6-liter V-8 engine, the 560 SL provided 227 horsepower and enough torque to produce adrenaline-inducing acceleration on demand. Inside, the 560 SL offered plush seating and luxurious amenities, including extensive use of leather and wood. But the R107 wasn’t just about glamour and power; it was also a showcase for Mercedes-Benz safety engineers, who chose the 560 SL to debut their anti-lock braking system.

Aside from the fun of getting pushed back into the thickly bolstered bucket seat every time I punched the accelerator, I spent most of my time in the 560 SL longing for the older cars. And then I drove the ‘99 SL500.

Mercedes-Benz technology took a quantum leap between the introduction of the R107 in 1972 and the SL 300/500 (R129 series) in 1990. Almost everything about the new car was different, including the styling, drivetrains, safety features, and attitude. Performance contrast can be reduced to one simple statistic: 0–60 mph time for a stock 1986 560 SL is eight seconds. The ‘99 SL500 gets there in 6.1.

THE SL500 I DROVE was showroom new. It even *smelled* new. The seats were comfortable yet firm, and the controls were easily accessible. Once again, Mercedes-Benz used their flagship sports car to debut new technology—the R129s were the world’s first production cars to offer an automatic pop-up roll bar. Automatically adjusting shock absorbers were also available.

The 302-horsepower V-8 started immediately and idled smoothly. Acceleration was instant and consistent; I felt as though the power band would go on forever. A thoroughly modern car, the SL500 is equipped with Electronic Stability Program stability control with Automatic Slip Control traction control, and anti-lock brakes. If I hadn’t already had the experience of driving the 2003 SL500, I could easily have believed that the R129 would be the ultimate SL. It has just the right balance of elegance and restraint, of power and grace, of aggressiveness and civility. Improving upon this marvelous car would certainly be a challenge.



A beautiful Maine sunset, made more beautiful by the 2003 SL500.

Launch Edition shown.

Simply stated, Mercedes-Benz met that challenge by taking everything they learned in their vast hundred-year-plus experience and putting it into the new SL. Because of industry-leading technologies such as Sensotronic Brake Control and Active Body Control, the new car has already been hailed as the most technologically advanced sports car in the world. But for a driving enthusiast, technology can be a mixed blessing—too much automation can mean too little fun. Not in this case. The 2003 SL500 is purpose-built for spirited driving. The fun factor is enormous.

THE MOMENT YOU SETTLE into the new SL, you know you’re in for something good. The ergonomic cockpit is very comfortable. With two more inches of legroom and a bit more shoulder room than its predecessor, even big drivers feel at home behind the wheel. Fine-tuning is accomplished via an adjustable steering column and extremely accommodating motorized bucket seats, which have three memory settings (not to mention air bladders, heaters, massagers, and eight cooling fans).

Even with the top up, side and rear visibility is excellent. The view inside the car is wonderful, too: a tasteful blend of soft leather, polished hardwood, and aluminum accents. Everything looks and feels just right. Slide the infrared SmartKey into its slot, switch it on, and you’re good to go.

And I do mean “go.” The 2003 SL500 is easily the most responsive car I’ve ever driven. Everything about it is intuitive; it’s as though your brain is somehow wired to the car’s central processing unit. I found driving the new SL to be very much like skiing—look down the road to select your turning point, accelerate to it, threshold-brake if you have to, make your steering adjustment, and accelerate out. Even at speed, the Active Body Control, Electronic Stability Program, and Sensotronic Brake Control allow you to carve curves precisely and confidently, as though you had planted an imaginary ski pole. There is virtually no lean or dive. Tight esses and sweeping, diving curves. You drive this car with your eyes and heart. And a great big smile.

On the way home, Michaela asked me which SL I had enjoyed the most. A tough question. But when she told me that she’d had to pinch my arm the hardest after I drove the Gullwing and the 2003, I figured I knew the answer. The SL has come full circle. It’s a real sports car again. And that’s good news for people who like to drive. •

