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Test Drives

2004 Mercedes-Benz SL600

Michael Frank



Overview

If General Motors' vice chairman of product development, Robert A. "Bob" Lutz, wants Cadillac to sell cars for more than \$100,000, perhaps he should study the Mercedes-Benz SL600.

General Motors (nyse: GM - news - people) already has the Hummer brand, which sells its H1 for over \$100K—but that's another story. The V-12-powered, \$126,670 Mercedes SL600 is much closer in spirit to Cadillac's 16-cylinder Sixteen concept vehicle, which GM would also like to market in the six-figure range. The challenge is convincing consumers to spend that much on a Cadillac.

Lutz commented at this year's 2004 North American International Auto Show in Detroit that the Sixteen prototype, shown a year ago, might still see production, since Cadillac's strategy is to attack the high-end market in order to regain its lost prestige.

Unlike the Sixteen, however, Mercedes' SL brand has a very long history, dating back to its famous 300SL Gullwings from the 1950s. GM can't just roll out a new behemoth like the Sixteen and win instant credibility—or, more importantly, instant profits. But it could learn a few things from Mercedes.

HIGHS:

Serious V-12 muscle, nifty folding top, sexy looks

LOWS:

It's not as exotic as the competition.

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DaimlerChrysler's (nyse: DCX - news - people) Mercedes-Benz division sold more than 13,000 SL-Class cars last year in the United States, at an average price of about \$100,000 each. That's a huge pile of cash (and you can bet that per-unit profits are much higher at this range than at, say, the \$35,000 category, where Cadillac shifts its CTS sedan). Although Cadillac has just introduced the well-received, \$70,000 XLR roadster, the company has to fight its way back to the top, one model at a time if need be.

For proof, look at BMW. That carmaker's splendid Z8 was meant to be an SL rival, but those who could vote on the matter—buyers—didn't seem to want \$100,000 two-seat BMWs as much as the SL600. So the Z8 lived only for a few short years, selling about 400 units per 12 months; Mercedes sells 2.5 times that many SLs every 30 days.

But it's more than just a legacy. There's serious substance to the SL600,

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way beyond that three-pointed star on the bonnet—not that the Z8 had any shortage of performance chops and sex appeal, but the SL600 is a hot car by virtually any measure. Just consider the V-12: With 493 horsepower and 590 foot-pounds of torque, it'll launch the SL to 60 miles per hour in 4.5 seconds, yet at 80 mph it's barely breathing, only churning at 2,500 rpm; so, unlike other machines that can accelerate this quickly, the Benz is true to its heritage. Smooth power is this car's raison d'être, and it is manifested through luxurious packaging, an unbeatable reputation and excellent engineering.

And the ride, too, can be as yielding as you'd ever desire from a car this powerful (not as cushy as big-sedan plush, but remember, this isn't a big sedan). Can be, because Mercedes lets you adjust both the ride height and the sportiness of the suspension, so you can nail the car to the road or let it cruise more softly. That's a lot more flexible than what Porsche offers in its 911 line, making the Benz a better choice if you want a sports two-door that can be driven all day, every day, for commuting.

Then again, this isn't a pure sports car, like the Porsche. And that begs the question, naturally, that if you're spending \$126,000 on the SL600, what might you be missing?

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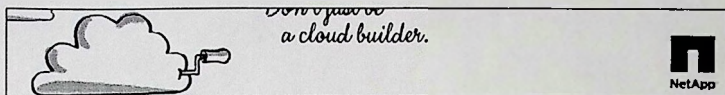
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Test Drives

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 Michael Frank

From The Driver's Seat



Everything about the SL is meant to be refined—not cartoonishly exotic.

One of the niftiest things about the SL is how well Mercedes controls wind noise, even with the folding metal/glass top in the retracted position. There's an electrically deployable wind brace that folds up behind the rear seats at the touch of a dash-mounted button, and when the windows are up you can drive at 75 mph without even adjusting the stereo. And since the 600 comes standard with a hands-free, voice-control Motorola (nys: MQT - news - people) V60 cell phone (that you can remove from the car), you might just want to drive around with the top down—and talk at the same time.

Drive with that folding metal lid in the up position, by the way, and you'd never even know this car is a convertible—it's that quiet inside.

You can also delight in standard, radar-based cruise control that keeps your pretty machine at a safe distance from other cars, not to mention sonar-assist for parking. Not that I wanted to get out of the 600 when I was parked—it also comes standard with active-ventilated seats with massage functions.

This is a pretty nice place to linger. There's double-stitched leather bisecting the dash, as well as a retro-twin hood for the whitish-blue LED gauges; metal rims grace the air vents and metallic wheels poke out of a wood-backed center console, so you can adjust the temperature of both passenger and driver compartments.

Also, Mercedes is smart enough to make sure the seat's rake is quite long but also can get smaller drivers close enough to be comfortable at the wheel. The automaker is also smart to make the portion of roof over your head (when it's closed) out of glass, so you won't miss having a moonroof, even in winter when top-up driving in some convertibles feels like piloting a rolling, claustrophobic cave.

Another distinguishing factor of the SL is how seriously Mercedes incorporates safety features. There's the usual brace of six airbags, but even better, the SL600 gets standard traction and stability control. Active suspension also aids handling by cutting squat and dive during braking, which can alter the delicate balance of traction in slippery conditions.

When the weather isn't frigid or slippery, the active suspension also cuts side-to-side body roll (using four hydraulic pistons on top of each of the coil springs that get signals from road-sensing computers). As you round turns hard, the suspension gives you more control because the weight of the car isn't bending away from the wheels that are fighting for grip. Hit the "Sport" mode, and active suspension ratchets things down even more; the compromise here, however, is that in Sport even minor road dips and ruts will be felt through the wheel and in the seat of your pants.

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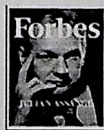
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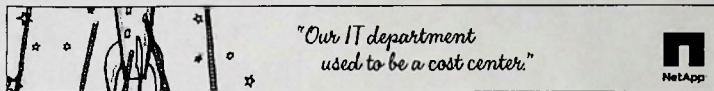
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Test Drives

Page 3 of 4 from 2004 Mercedes-Benz SL600
 Michael Frank

Should You Buy This Car?



Courtesy Mercedes-Benz
 Metallic origami--the SL roof in action.

Honestly, the only thing missing from the SL experience is that slightly raw edge you might desire from a 911 Turbo--or, if you can afford one, a \$160,000 Lamborghini Gallardo. These are all rarified cars, but if you're thinking about the SL, we doubt you're considering Lamborghini or even Porsche Turbo. The Benz is nothing like those cars, nor should it be; although they are more expensive, Aston Martin's DB7 convertible and Bentley's new Continental GT coupe are, as stately 12-cylinder showboats, more similar to the SL600.

What it gives you in place of machismo is refinement. For instance, the roof folds or unfolds in only 18 seconds, so you can deploy or close the sucker electronically at any stoplight. Oh, and if going fast is what you desire on the odd Thursday commute, the top speed doesn't arrive until 155 mph. Want to head out of town? With the roof up, there's room for two large suitcases in the trunk (one large bag and one soft-sided will fit with the top down). What more could you want from a near-exotic sports cruiser? We might also mention that, compared to other V-12s on the market (think Aston Martin, Ferrari, Lamborghini), we have a hunch the Mercedes motor will be a lot less painful to maintain--not to mention less expensive to buy.

And even if you do need work on this baby, Mercedes dealers tend to exist in places where you won't find an Aston Martin service bay--or even a Porsche one. The drawback is that availability can turn into saturation. While more rarified than the average Mercedes, the SL600 may not be exclusive enough for buyers with this kind of cash to throw around, who may opt for an even more unusual nameplate.

But Mercedes has earned its reputation making quality automobiles in large numbers. The company is confident enough in its brand that it can offer a car in virtually every price range. For those who want to buy a \$100K-plus sports car that they know will be as comfortable as a luxury sedan, the SL600 should be at the top of any prospective buyer's list. This isn't an extreme exotic. It drives more smoothly, it corners less aggressively, and its engine lives in front of you, not out back. But we can't think of why that should really matter. This is an SL, a slightly exotic, very sexy, very easily driven machine. If you don't get it, you shouldn't buy one. If you do, there's no excuse (save lack of funds) not to.

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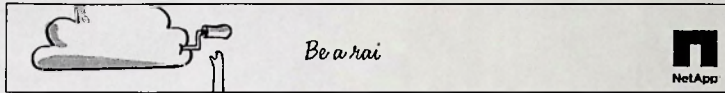
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Manufacturer Contact: The Mercedes Web site

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Suspension Type: Front: Independent four-link, active electrohydraulic with load-dependent spring rates, gas-charged shocks, coil springs, level control; Rear: Independent five-link, active electrohydraulic with load-dependent spring rates, gas-charged shocks, coil springs, level control

Acceleration: 0 to 60 mph in 4.5 seconds

Engine Type; Displacement: 38-valve SOHC V-12; 5.5-liter

Horsepower: 493 @ 5,000 rpm

Torque: 590 ft.-lbs. @ 1,800 to 3,500 rpm

EPA Mileage: 13 city/19 highway

MSRP: \$126,670

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