

TopGear

ITALY 

THE VIDEO PODCAST



[Scene opens with a view of desert with rock the color of rusted metal. Camera slowly pans to where a silver coupe approaches down a mountain highway.]



[The camera fades to black and when it comes back, a beautiful silver coupe is parked on the side of the road. In time-lapse, the roof-hinged doors open upward.]





[Voiceover by Kara.]

“This is the iconic Mercedes-Benz 300SL “Gullwing” coupe, one of the world’s most revered cars and a true status symbol of the 1950’s.”

[The camera lingers lovingly on the silver exterior and black leather interior as Kara’s voice-over narration continues.]



“Launched in 1954 at the New York Auto Show, the vehicle was aimed at the booming post-War American vehicle market and loosely based on the 1952 sports car of the same name. To save weight, the racecar laid a metal skin over a tubular metal skeleton, necessitating the gull-wing style doors, which were carried over to the customer model.

“The three-liter inline six-cylinder engine, carried over from the W186 saloon car, made

history by being the first to eschew carburetion for direct fuel injection, resulting in a doubling of power to 192kW and a top speed of 260km/h, making it the fastest production car of it's day. Unfortunately, Mercedes-Benz was strapped for cash at the time and they fitted the 300SL with drum brakes, making stopping from such speeds a lengthy proposition. The car also used the suspension from the saloon, which made the handling...well, terrifying. Like the Porsche 911, lifting off in a corner resulted in snap oversteer and with the poor brakes, more than one SL ended up in a hedge...or a tree."



"Still, the car's looks and speed were amazing and the market responded. Of the roughly 1400 vehicles produced over three years, some 1100 were sold in the United States. In many ways, it was one of the first 'super cars', along with the Ferrari 250 and Jaguar XK series. The Gullwing model lasted only three years, supplanted in 1958 by an open-top roadster, which itself lasted until 1963 and the introduction of the R113 roadster.

"Though the McLaren-Mercedes SLR paid homage to some of the styling cues, for over 50 years the 300SL Gullwing coupe remained unique. And that uniqueness has made it quite valuable on the collector's market. With a retail price of \$7500 US dollars, pristine examples today cross the block for up to 100 times that. But now, almost 55 years later, Mercedes-Benz has reached back to the 300SL and brought it forward to the 21st century.

"And they're pretty happy about it."

[Camera fades and the AMG "Triumphant" Commercial plays. Another camera fade, now showing a beautiful coastline, azure blue waves lapping up against pristine sands. Camera slowly pans to a low-slung red coupe with a prominent Mercedes-Benz three-pointed star in the grill and open gull-wing doors overlooking the setting sun.]



“This is the new Mercedes-Benz SLS AMG. It is the spiritual successor to the 300SL Gullwing and incorporates not only those iconic doors, but also the straked gills aft of the front wheels. Mercedes-Benz hops the new SLS will be as popular with the public as the SL was.”



[Kara walks into frame, dressed in a floral pattern blouse over a white pleated frilly skirt and brown lace-up boots. She walks along the car, running her hand over the long nose.]

“The SLS AMG is certainly more affordable. Off the lot you’re looking at somewhere south of €200.000, depending on options. German buyers can also spring for the €12.000 Alu Beam paint, which will make your SLS appear as if dipped in quicksilver.”

[The camera pans into the well-appointed cockpit, swathed in red leather and carbon fiber.]

“The 300SL cockpit was a very pleasing place to spend an afternoon, swathed in leather, wood and aluminum, even if the high door-sills and low roofline made it feel somewhat claustrophobic. The SLS is equally snug with the doors down and every touchable surface is covered in either soft leather or Alcantara. This car is equipped with the carbon fiber inserts option, but I admit I prefer the standard aluminum, instead.”



“Like the 300SL, the SLS’s dashboard is dominated by two large dials for the speedometer and the tachometer. Compared to the clean lines of the 300SL’s dashboard, the SLS is a mess of buttons, switches and displays. Like all Mercedes, the SLS includes their COMMAND multi-function controller, but it seems that the engineers decided to duplicate every one of those functions in a standalone button and splash them across the steering wheel, dashboard, center console, and door panels. I may be a modern girl, but I much prefer the simplicity and elegance of the 300SL’s cockpit.”

[Kara slips into the deeply-bolstered driver’s seat and pushes the memory button to set it for the optimal driving position.]



“What I do prefer about the SLS is the 6.2-liter V8 engine, which puts out an astonishing 420kW. From a standing start, 100 km/h arrives in 3.8 seconds and the car has been electronically limited to 317 km/h.

“Since I’m not on a track, I won’t be exploring either number in anger, but that doesn’t mean I can’t take advantage of this beautiful and twisty coastal road.”

[Kara starts the car, the engine note a deep rumble. She gives the throttle a good press and the car launches smartly with an almost flatulent note as it climbs through the rev range.]

“If this car ran on bio-diesel instead of premium unleaded, I’d think it had been hitting the sauerkraut and kielbasa...”

[Kara climbs up into the nearby hills, taking advantage of the lack of traffic to open up the car, closing in on 150 km/h at points.]

“The SLS is quite stiffly-sprung. Compared to the SLR, it transmits more of the road’s imperfections into the chassis. It also makes the car a bit tail-happy exiting corners if you’re too heavy-footed.”

[Kara proceeds to hammer the throttle coming out of a sharp corner and the back end steps out, but not in an uncontrolled way. Instead of a lurid slide, a quick counter-steer snaps it back into place and the car launches past the camera.]

“The 300SL came with a four-speed manual gearbox. The SLS has a seven-speed dual-clutch semi-automatic transmission and you’ll want to keep your hands close to the paddles during spirited driving because the engine just dies when it reaches it’s 7200 rpm red-line.

“Where the SL only used aluminum in the hood, doors and trunk lid, the SLS’ entire body shell is made of the lightweight metal. However, the car is on the portly side at 1600 kg, almost 500kg more than the original SL. Fortunately, the engine has plenty of grunt to sling that weight around.”

[Kara exits onto a nice stretch of straight road and hammers the throttle. Close-up short of the tachometer climbing, Kara changing up a gear just as the engine hits 7000 rpm. Next to it, the speedometer needle climbs steadily to 250 km/h and holds there. Jump shot to the SLS screaming past the camera, which pans hard to follow, the V8 belching noise.

Fade shot to the car parked in a turn-off, the engine ticking over as it cools. Pan to the left as Kara stands on a cliff overlooking the ocean in the distance.]



“The SLS is a different car than the SLR or the CL. It only really shines when it’s pushed hard. At even Autostrada speeds, the car feels more like an E-Class sedan than a taut sports coupe. And for long drives, I think the stiff suspension would become a bit wearing on one’s bum. Nor is it nearly as beautiful as the 300SL it draws its inspiration from.

“Does that mean it’s a bust? Not at all. It may not eat the miles as comfortably as an SLR, but it’s half the price and just as fast to 100km/h. Like the 300SL, Mercedes is also planning a convertible roadster version as well as an all-electric model called the E-Cell for those who want to save the environment while travelling through it at a high rate of speed. Mercedes will also take the gull-wing back to the racetrack, entering the car in the FIA GT3 Championship next year.

“In summary, the SLS is the spiritual successor to the original 300 SL Gullwing coupe. And as a driver’s car, it’s every bit fifty years better. But it is also a car best enjoyed when driven hard and fast. If I lived in Germany or the Isle of Man, the SLS would definitely be on my short-list of cars.

“I once said that my idea of a classic car was anything built before 1997 and the 1957 Mercedes 300SL certainly applies as a classic car, not just under my definition, but just about anyone’s.

“And in Italy, where style means so much, I have to go with the classic.

“I have to go with the 300SL.”

[Kara slips behind the wheel of the 300SL and closes the door, the setting sun reflecting off the polished silver paint, Kara motors off down the highway.]

