



Mercedes-Benz Classic

Press Information

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Sport, luxury, lifestyle: The Mercedes-Benz SL

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An integral relationship: Mercedes-Benz SL and the United States of America

An industry expert's idea: A compact and agile Mercedes-Benz sports car – ideal for the North American market. This was something Max E. Hoffman emphatically advocated for as the brand's importer for the eastern United States. He even travelled to Stuttgart-Untertürkheim to sell the idea. The Austrian-born New Yorker was convinced of the importance of such a vehicle for the US. The minutes of a meeting of the Board of Management on the topic dated September 2, 1953 noted: "Mr Hoffman is confident [...] that big business cannot be expected in the US without enhancing the range by models that are more than suitable for the local market. [...] In the US it is expected from Mercedes-Benz – as a company with a particularly good reputation – that, whatever happens, they develop a sports car that can evolve to become the sole basis for the dealership organization's survival."

The birth of SL sports cars: The project quickly took shape. On September 7 and October 3, 1953, Karl Wilfert, then Head of Mercedes-Benz Vehicle Testing and later Director of Body Development, reported the current status. It centered on the "compact sports car" (what would go on to become the 190 SL), and also around the 300 SL for export to the Americas. This exclusive series-production sports car was developed on the basis of the successful 1952 300 SL racing car (W 194) and the injection engine of the racing car prototype for the 1953 season. Walter Häcker, Head of Mercedes-Benz Body Design, was tasked with "designing the body shape and appearance" of the 190 SL. The Sindelfingen plant was awarded the task of designing the vehicle and model type of the 300 SL.

Preparing the US premiere: The debut of the two sports cars had been scheduled for the 1954 International Motor Sports Show in New York. Associated preparations were on the agenda of the Board of Management meeting of Daimler-Benz AG on September 14, 1953. CEO Dr Fritz Könecke, Head of Development Dr. Fritz Nallinger and the Member of the Board of Management responsible for export, Arnold Wychodil, decided that "a 180 model sports car will be launched in due time; the two 300 SL demonstration vehicles will be handed over to Mr Hoffman in February or March 1954." Over the following weeks the 180 became the 190 SL, as Mercedes-Benz was keeping the abbreviation "SL" as a result of the associated racing success. In 1952, the press information about the racing car already explained that the "S" stood for "super" and the "L" for "light".

Flamboyant debut in New York: The 300 SL Coupe (W 198) and the open-top 190 SL (W 121) were at the center of attention of the International Motor Sports Show in New York between February 7-14, 1954. What Mercedes-Benz had achieved up to this point was Herculean: only six months after Max E. Hoffman's visit to Untertürkheim the 300 SL "Gullwing" was attracting plenty of attention. The vehicle had almost reached series-production maturity, mere details of the production version were subsequently modified. The 190 SL showcased in New York in 1954 was still a prototype. It differed from the subsequent series-production version by elements including the bonnet that stretched down to the radiator grille featuring a small air scoop, deviating radiator grille proportions and smoothly shaped rear wings without the characteristic fins. Walter Häcker was to revise these design

details until the start of series production in 1955. The public and press were thrilled by the premiere: both vehicles, neither of which had been available in Mercedes-Benz's portfolio up to this point, hit the nail on the head in North America.

Questions about the future: Max E. Hoffman was aware of how thrilled customers in the US were about open-top sports cars. For this reason, he reiterated to Arnold Wychodil that he also wanted a roadster version of the Mercedes-Benz 300 SL, even while the International Motor Show was still ongoing. As early as February 20, 1954, Mercedes-Benz commissioned a corresponding sample vehicle for a 300 SL Roadster featuring a steel-sheet outer skin. The roadster celebrated its premiere in March 1957. The sports car with conventional doors replaced the 300 SL Coupe with its characteristic gullwing doors in the model range.

Mainstays of passenger car model range: Export figures reflected how popular the Mercedes-Benz SL was in North America. In 1954 and 1955 alone, 85 percent of the 300 SL Coupe models (850 of 996 vehicles) produced over this two-year period were exported to the United States of America. All in all, by 1963 Mercedes-Benz had delivered more than half of all 300 SLs (Coupe and Roadster) to North America. In its first production year – 1955 – around 40 percent, or 830 units, of all US exports by the Stuttgart-based brand were 190 SLs. Nearly half of all 190 SLs were destined for the United States in 1955. The proportion of this sports car's annual production exported to the US was even higher in 1957 at 54 percent. In total Mercedes-Benz sold 10,368 of 25,881 190 SLs ever produced in North America – amounting to 40 percent, and making the US the most important individual market for the compact sports car. Here Mercedes-Benz SL vehicles proved to be a mainstay for the brand's entire passenger car range.

US Sports Car Champion: The Mercedes-Benz 300 SL also underlined its sporty heritage by claiming motorsport victories in the United States. US American racing driver Paul O'Shea won the category D US Sports Car Championship three times in a row. He was victorious both in the 1955 and 1956 seasons in a 300 SL Coupe. In 1957 he claimed the championship at the wheel of a 300 SLS – a special variant of the 300 SL Roadster that was built only twice. Compared with the series-production sports car, the 300 SLS was characterized by elements including its lighter weight – which had been reduced to 2,138 lbs – and an engine output that had been boosted by 20 hp, now totalling 235 hp. Externally, it was immediately distinguishable by the absence of bumpers, a specially shaped cockpit cover with air inlet slit, a narrow racing windscreen and a roll-over bar behind the driver's seat.

“California” Roadster: In 1963 the “Pagoda” W 113 model series SLs succeeded both predecessor models. A very special variant of the sports car celebrated its premiere in February 1967 with the introduction of the 250 SL. The “California” Roadster did away with the roadster soft top and soft top compartment, thus granting space for some rear seats. This variant of the sports car offered unadulterated driving pleasure in regions with

very little precipitation as it did not have a soft top and merely offered the add-on coupe roof. This “Pagoda” SL version was extremely popular in the United States. Whenever these vehicles were exported to Europe from the US, “California” Roadsters regularly caused quite some astonishment. Retrofitting a soft top to this body variant is only possible with complex and costly conversions.

Engine variants for North America: In the early 1970s the R 107 model series Mercedes-Benz SL was initially available in the US as the 350 SL 4.5. Just like the 350 SLC 4.5 Coupe, this was a version featuring the low-compression version of the 4.5-liter V8 M 117 engine which had been adapted to US exhaust emissions standards. As a result of more stringent emissions legislation in California, no less than two versions of this vehicle were delivered from 1974: vehicles supplied for California generated around five percent less output. As of model year 1975 Californian values then applied to all US export vehicles.

Striking outline: All R 107 model series 380 SLs, introduced in 1980, which were exported to America were equipped with modified bumpers to comply with US American crash regulations. They protruded significantly further at the front and rear than those fitted to vehicles for other markets. In total the SL became 9.8 in longer as a result.

Almost an independent USA model: As of model year 1985, Mercedes-Benz offered the R 107 model series 560 SL as the variant with the largest displacement. The engine was devised by extending the stroke of the 500 SL unit. The 560 SL with a catalytic emissions control system as standard generated 230 hp, and thus 15 hp less than the 500 SL without a catalytic converter. The sports car with the 5.6-liter V8 engine was almost exclusively sold in the United States of America (93.75 percent), with further markets being Australia and Japan.

Special US models: The technologically innovative R 129 model series Mercedes-Benz SL was available in several special model variants for customers in North America. For instance, the particularly exclusive Mercedes-Benz SL 500 “US 500 Edition”. A mere 40 vehicles of this model were produced on the occasion of the “U.S. 500” race on May 26, 1996 at Michigan International Speedway as part of the Champ Car World Series (CART). Further R 129 special models for North America included the “40th Anniversary Roadster Edition” (1997), the “Formula One Edition” (2000) and the “Silver Arrow Edition” (2001).

Strictly speaking: In 2006, when Mercedes-Benz introduced the facelifted R 230 model series SL generation, the SL 500 had been equipped with the new 5.5-liter V8 M 273 engine (388 hp) instead of the 5.0-liter V8 engine. This also brought about a modified model designation for customers in North America, given that US legislation at the time specified that model designations derived from the vehicle’s displacement had to reflect the actual value. For this reason, the vehicle was available in the US as the SL 550.

The tradition of the Mercedes-Benz SL

On March 12, 1952, Mercedes-Benz unveiled the spectacular 300 SL racing sports car to the media on a motorway. From 1954 onwards, that very successful competition car shaped the tradition of the Mercedes-Benz SL sports cars.

A stretch of motorway near Stuttgart became the stage for the presentation of the Mercedes-Benz 300 SL (W 194) on March 12, 1952. Two days before that, the Stuttgart brand's press office had caused a sensation when it issued invitations to selected journalists. It was not simply a question of the "new Mercedes-Benz 300 SL (super-light) sports car [...] undertaking test drives in public for the first time". This was a clear statement that the brand was returning to motorsport, as the press release noted: three 300 SLs had already been registered for "that famous Italian road race, the 'Mille Miglia', to be held on 3 and 4 May 1952".

The press photo sent out with the invitation showed a dynamically drawn sports car depicting the archetypal SL lines. Its gullwing doors ended at the waistline of the body. Later, Mercedes-Benz enlarged the cut-outs downwards, making it easier to get inside. What was completely new was the structure hidden under the body and made of thin aluminum-magnesium sheet: this was the roll cage, developed by Rudolf Uhlenhaut especially for this racing sports car and weighing 110 lbs, made of thin tubing that was subjected only to compression and tension. It was this frame design that made it technically necessary to hinge the gullwing doors to the roof. The M 194 engine was derived from the M 186 production engine used in the Mercedes-Benz 300 (W 186) representation car presented in 1951. For use in the racing sports car, the engineers increased its output to around 170 hp. By tilting the engine through 50 degrees to the left and employing dry sump lubrication, it was possible to lower the installation position. Other technical components in the 300 SL were also derived from the Mercedes-Benz 300, the legendary "Adenauer" saloon, and the sporty-luxurious 300 S touring car (W 188).

The 300 SL was the car of the season. In the 1952 Mille Miglia, Mercedes-Benz took second and fourth places with the 300 SL in the very first race. The racing sports car also took a triple victory in the sports car race in Bern, a one-two victory in the 24 hours of Le Mans and a quadruple victory in the sports car race on the Nürburgring. The last race of the 300 SL – which now had an output of 180 hp – was the third Carrera Panamericana 1952 in Mexico. Karl Kling/Hans Klenk and Hermann Lang/Erwin Grupp achieved a legendary one-two victory.

For 1953, a successor model to the highly successful 300 SL racing sports car was developed, the W 194/11. It was nicknamed "Hobel" ("carpenter's plane") because of its characteristic front design. However, that car was never entered in a race. From 1954, Mercedes-Benz decided to compete in the Formula One World Championship and concentrated on developing the W 196 R racing car.

An unbroken tradition of production vehicles since 1954

The motorsport successes of the 300 SL racing sports car in 1952 quickly prompted calls for a production version. Mercedes-Benz responded and presented the 300 SL (W 198) super sports coupe and the sporty but elegant 190 SL (W 121) in February 1954. To this day, the Stuttgart brand has continued to uphold the success story of the SL without interruption.

The future is dedicated to the new SL: The performance and sports car brand Mercedes-AMG is applying its comprehensive expertise to developing the R 232 model series, which will debut soon.

After the successful 300 SL racing sports car (W 194), three iconic production vehicles filled customers all over the world with enthusiasm: they were the 300 SL Coupe of the W 198 model series (1954 to 1957), the open 190 SL sports car of the W 121 model series (1955 to 1963) and the 300 SL Roadster of the W 198 model series (1957 to 1963). Together, these sports cars defined many of the key characteristics of future SL generations. As their joint successor, the 230 SL of the W 113 model series with the safety body designed by Béla Barényi debuted in March 1963. Due to the unusual shape of the hardtop, the sports car was quickly nicknamed the “Pagoda”. The R 107 was then built for 18 successful years from 1971 onwards. At the same time, the roadster formed the basis for the luxurious SLC Coupes in the C 107 model series. The R 129 appeared in 1989 as a pioneering technology car. Its successor, the R 230, introduced the folding Vario hardtop roof in 2001, combining the automotive pleasures of travelling in a roadster and a coupe. The consistently applied lightweight design, amongst other features, aroused considerable enthusiasm from 2012 onwards, when the model series R 231 Mercedes-Benz SL debuted. The new Mercedes-AMG SL of the R 232 model series will lead the SL legend into the future.

Mercedes-Benz 300 SL Coupe from the W 198 model series (1954 to 1957)

What a launch: In February 1954, the 300 SL standard-production sports car (W 198) celebrated its world premiere at the International Motor Sport Show in New York. Next to it at the show was the near-production level prototype of the future 190 SL Roadster (W 121). Both cars underlined the direct tradition of standard-production sports cars with the race-proven SL abbreviation. Max E. Hoffman, importer of Mercedes-Benz cars for the US market, dedicated considerable effort to encouraging their production.

As a coupe, the 300 SL with its characteristic gullwing doors thrilled experts and the public alike. Not only the shape was reminiscent of the racing sports car, but such technical details as the roll cage also originated from the successful competition car. This makes the 300 SL unique amongst the standard-production sports cars of the era. The doors that were hinged on the roof, which was a necessary feature of the design, earned it such nicknames as “Gullwing” and “Papillon” (butterfly).

The M 198 engine with direct injection was originally developed for the 1953 racing prototype. In the standard-production sports car, the straight six-cylinder engine produced up to 215 hp, which gave the car a top speed of 260 km/h (161 mph), depending on the rear axle ratio. That was an impressive figure for a road-going sports car of the time. This was underlined by the successes of the 300 SL in races and rallies with numerous victories as well as championship titles.

The 300 SL was a super sports car of its time. It became an iconic car of the 1950s with an appeal that remains unbroken to this day: in 1999 it was voted “Sports Car of the Century” by an international jury of experts. Between 1954 and 1957, a total of 1,400 of the 300 SL Coupes were built. Of these, 29 had an aluminum body, and one individual model was fitted with a body made of GRP (glass-fiber reinforced plastic), a new material at the time, for testing purposes.

Mercedes-Benz 190 SL of the W 121 model series (1955 to 1963)

The Mercedes-Benz 190 SL was designed as an elegant, open sports car. In 1954, the Stuttgart-based brand presented it together with the 300 SL at the International Motor Sports Show in New York. “Due to its high standard of comfort, [it is] intended for a group of buyers wishing to cover even long distances at high cruising speeds in this car of highly sporty outer appearance.” This was how Mercedes-Benz designer Josef Müller summed it up in 1957.

The body design of the 190 SL was closely based on the Gullwing, but designed as a two-seater roadster. It was available with a fabric top and with a removable hardtop – optionally with or without a fabric top. On request, a third seat could be accommodated in the rear at right angles to the direction of travel. The 190 SL was assigned to the W 121 model series, like the Mercedes-Benz 190 “Ponton” saloon, which appeared later in 1956. The 190 SL was technically closely related to the W 120/W 121 “Ponton” model series. The – shortened – floor assembly, the front suspension and the subframe concept were carried over from the saloon. From the 1956 Mercedes-Benz 190 onwards, the saloon and the 190 SL shared the single-joint swing axle with a low pivot point.

The 1.9-liter petrol engine of the sports car had been completely redesigned by Mercedes-Benz. The four-cylinder unit with an overhead camshaft produced **77 kW** (105 hp) in the 190 SL and accelerated the car from 0 to 100 km/h in 14.5 seconds in the version with the fabric roof and its top speed was 170 km/h. During its production period from 1955 to 1963, the details of the 190 SL were improved several times. Over that period, the Sindelfingen plant produced a total of 25,881 cars.

Mercedes-Benz 300 SL Roadster of the W 198 model series (1957 to 1963)

In 1957, the 300 SL Roadster replaced the “Gullwing” coupe. Like its predecessor, this car was created on the initiative of Maximilian E. Hoffmann. Technically, the roadster corresponded to a large extent to the coupe; by modifying the side sections of the roll cage, it was possible to reduce the sill

height to such an extent that normal doors could be used.

The rear suspension was fundamentally improved compared to the coupe: the single-joint swing axle with its low pivot point introduced in the “Ponton” six-cylinder models of the W 180 model series in 1954 was now also fitted in an adapted form in the 300 SL Roadster and, for the first time, was equipped with a compensating spring. Seat belts were available as optional equipment from 1957 onwards. Starting in October 1958, a removable hardtop roof with a wrap-around rear window was available as optional equipment. The sports car’s details continued to be enhanced throughout the production period. Amongst other things, it was fitted with Dunlop disc brakes on the front and rear wheels from March 1961 and an alloy engine block from March 1962.

Production of the 300 SL Roadster in Sindelfingen ceased at the same time as construction of the 190 SL on 8 February 1963. A total of 1,858 of these open sports cars were built. Both versions of the W 198 model series, the roadster and the gullwing coupe, were collectors’ cars from the very beginning. Today, they are amongst the most sought-after and highest-priced classics.

Mercedes-Benz SL of the W 113 model series (1963 to 1971)

Mercedes-Benz unveiled the new 230 SL (W 113) at the 1963 Geneva Motor Show. It was designed as a comfortable, high-performance two-seater touring car and replaced the 190 SL (W 121) and 300 SL Roadster (W 198). The exterior featured clean, straight lines and the SL front with the large central Mercedes star. The optional hardtop with its high windows and the concave shaped roof supported by narrow pillars was reminiscent of Asian temple buildings, which quickly earned the W 113 the nickname “Pagoda”. The basis of the floor assembly were the Mercedes-Benz “tail fin” saloons of the 111 model series, the world’s first passenger cars with a safety body. This SL generation also benefited from corresponding contemporary research.

The chassis, taken from the Mercedes-Benz 220 SE Saloon, was tuned to the needs of sports-orientated cars. Its suspension was firm and, at the same time, atypically comfortable for a sports car of its time. The six-cylinder engine was also taken from the saloon, but modified for use in the SL. The engine, bored out to 2.3 liters, produced **110 kW** (150 hp) and was a sporty power pack.

In 1967, the Mercedes-Benz 250 SL replaced the 230 SL. The changes were mainly to be found in the engine and brake system. The larger-displacement engine offered ten per cent more torque, making the 250 SL much more flexible to drive. In addition to the three familiar body versions (roadster with a folding top, coupé with a removable roof and coupé with removable roof and roadster top), the 250 SL was also available as a 2+2 coupe with a rear seat bench on request. Less than a year after its presentation, the 250 SL was replaced by the Mercedes-Benz 280 SL with a 2.8-liter engine and **125 kW** (170 hp) output. From 1963 to 1971, a total of 48,912 “Pagoda” SLs of the W 113 model series were built.

Mercedes-Benz SL from the R 107 model series (1971 to 1989)

The SL of the R 107 model series premiered in spring 1971, starting with the 350 SL. For the first time in the history of the Mercedes-Benz SL, the car was powered by an eight-cylinder engine. The 450 SL followed in 1973. The model series exuded elegance and solidity. The crash performance of this open-top two-seater car was way ahead of its time. From a technical point of view, for example, this was reflected in the carefully defined crumple behavior of the body and body shell structure, as well as an interior that was consistently designed to accommodate safety criteria.

In its very successful 18-year production period, the R 107 model series received a wide range of six- and eight-cylinder engines. The model designations are equally diverse. In July 1974, the 280 SL was launched. This meant that there was a choice of three engines for the sports car. Today, that amount of choice is not unusual, but at the time it represented a novelty in the tradition of the Mercedes-Benz SL cars. Until the end of production in August 1989, all the engine variants were revised with slightly modified performance figures in order to comply more closely with the emission limits that had meanwhile been made more stringent in most European countries.

With more than 18 years of production, the R 107 model series set an internal brand record that is unlikely to be surpassed: apart from the G-Class SUVs, no passenger car model series in the entire history of the company has been produced over such a long period. A total of 237,287 open sports cars were built in Sindelfingen during this period. This figure underlines the tremendous popularity of the model series. Alongside the open-top SLs, the corresponding SLC luxury class coupes of the C 107 model series were produced: from 1971 to 1981, a total of 62,888 of these were built.

Mercedes-Benz SL from the R 129 model series (1989 to 2001)

At the Geneva Motor Show in 1989 Mercedes-Benz presented the SL from the R 129 model series. The confidently stylish, straightforward lines of the slightly wedge-shaped body, the flared wheel arches, the split front spoiler, a very steeply raked windscreen, the skillfully modelled rear and alloy wheels as standard equipment made for an exceptionally harmonious overall effect. With this vehicle the brand hit the bull's eye: production capacity was soon fully booked. Some customers accepted delivery times of several years.

The car set new standards in safety. This was underlined by rigorous Mercedes-Benz crash tests with very good results in frontal and rear impacts at the time. Other integral components of the safety concept were the pop-up roll-over bar, which deployed within a few milliseconds under sensor control in the event of an imminent roll-over, and the integral seats, which could absorb many times the possible forces in the event of a crash. The chassis was tuned to the requirements of an elegant-but-sporty roadster and enabled precise, high-speed driving with a high level of comfort. In autumn 1992, the 600 SL with a twelve-cylinder engine (290 kW/394 hp) took over the top-of-the-range

position.

In the summer of 1993, the Stuttgart brand adapted the model designations of its open sports cars to use the nomenclature that is still valid today. Since then, the legendary abbreviation “SL” has preceded the three-digit number that refers to the engine capacity. For example, the 600 SL became the SL 600.

The facelift in autumn 1995 brought a slightly changed body design, a more extensive set of standard equipment and with finer details in its sophisticated technology. A second facelift in 1998 added subtle stylistic touches for an even more dynamic look. It also brought a modified engine range with new six-cylinder V-engines, instead of the previous in-line engines, and with a new V8 engine. The absolute top model of the model series was the SL 73 AMG with 7.3-liter V12 engine and **386 kW** (525 hp) which was presented in 1999.

In the summer of 2001, production of the R 129 model series ended after twelve years and a total of 204,940 cars. This meant that the total number of units of this SL generation was lower than that of the predecessor model series R 107. However, in terms of its average annual production, the R 129 was much more successful, with around 16,500 units.

Mercedes-Benz SL from model series R 230 (2001 to 2012)

In 2001, the next SL generation with the internal code R 230 made its debut. Its most striking innovation was the steel folding Vario roof: for the first time in the history of the Mercedes-Benz SL, it enabled both an open car and a coupe in one. The transformation took place within 16 seconds. The design of the R 230 model series combined tradition and the future by means of striking details. For example, the marked air vents in the front wings picked up on a typical feature of the legendary 300 SL from the 1950s. The narrow, ridge-like profiles on these side air openings were also reminiscent of the fins of the legendary W 198. Top models were the SL 55 AMG (**350 kW/476 hp**, 2001), SL 600 (**368 kW/500 hp**, 2003) and the SL 65 AMG (**450 kW/612 hp**, 2004).

Since the “Pagoda” at the very latest, the Mercedes-Benz SL has stood for pioneering achievements in the fields of active and passive safety in open sports cars. With its completely new overall concept, the R 230 model series clearly surpassed previous safety standards. This included electronic vehicle dynamics systems such as Active Body Control ABC, Brake Assist BAS, anti-slip control ASR and the Electronic Stability Program ESP®, as well as structural safety aspects of the body in many different accident scenarios. Occupant protection also included two-stage airbags for driver and front passenger, head-thorax bags in the doors, integral seats, high-performance belt tensioners, belt force limiters and the sensor-controlled roll-over bar, which also functioned when the folding Vario roof was closed.

The 2006 facelift brought, amongst other things, new engines with four-valve technology and reduced fuel consumption coupled with higher performance. The 7G-TRONIC seven-speed automatic transmission became standard equipment, with the exception of the AMG models. The most striking feature of another facelift in 2008 was the redesigned car front, which brought the SL into line with the brand's passenger car design current at the time. In the upper performance range, the SL 63 AMG with a new 6.2-liter naturally aspirated AMG engine (**386 kW/525 hp**) and the exclusive SL 65 AMG Black Series (**493 kW/670 hp**) with a fixed coupé roof rounded off the model range in 2008.

From 2001 to 2012, a total of 169,433 sports cars of model series R 230 were built at the Mercedes-Benz plant in Bremen. The most successful was the SL 500 with 99,556 production vehicles. The three AMG models also accounted for a large share of the total, with a combined total of 29,570 units.

Mercedes-Benz SL of the R 231 model series (2012 to 2020)

In January 2012, to mark the SL's 60th birthday, the R 231 model series was unveiled at the North American International Auto Show (NAIAS) in Detroit. One focus of the new design was on reducing the weight of the sports car. The aluminum body shell weighed 256 kilograms. Despite its more size, it was 110 kilograms lighter than its predecessor and featured 20 per cent greater torsional rigidity. The boot lid was a composite construction of steel and plastic, the elements of the electrohydraulically folding roof consisted of a magnesium frame with plastic paneling. The roof, painted in the color of the vehicle as a standard feature, was available on request with a transparent center section and roller blind (standard equipment from 2016) or as a glass roof with adjustable tinting and transparency (MAGIC SKY CONTROL).

The R 231's safety features included spring-loaded roll-over bars behind the driver and front passenger seats, airbags and side airbags for the driver and front passenger as well as head airbags in the doors, the MAGIC VISION CONTROL adaptive windscreen washer system and also an active bonnet to protect pedestrians in the event of a collision. Dynamic safety features included ESP®, PRE-SAFE®, ADAPTIVE BRAKE and ATTENTION ASSIST. Numerous other systems for active safety and comfort were available on request.

The SL 500 (SL 550 in USA) (V8 engine with **320 kW/435 hp**) sports car was among the first models launched, were followed as of March 2012 by the high-performance variants SL 63 AMG (**395 kW/537 hp**) and SL 65 AMG (V12 engine with **463 kW** (630 hp). Only automatic transmissions with seven or nine gears (9G-TRONIC from April 2016 onwards) were used. In the course of the construction period, the engine and model designations, as well as interior touches, of the sporty-luxurious R 231 were updated. The new SL in the R 232 model series is scheduled to make its debut soon.

Innovations and facts: Mercedes-Benz SL sports cars

Mercedes-Benz 300 SL racing sports car (W 194, 1952)

- First new competition car of the brand after the Second World War
- The abbreviation SL was derived from the designation “super light”
- Lightweight roll cage whose elements were subjected only to tension and compression loads
- Aerodynamic aluminum-magnesium body with a height of only 1,225 millimeters
- Flat racing car front instead of the classic, upright Mercedes-Benz radiator grille
- Coupés with gullwing doors hinged to the roof
- M 194 engine based on the M 186, installed at an angle of 50 degrees to the left and with dry sump lubrication
- Removable steering wheel to make it easier to get in and out of the car
- Debut at the Mille Miglia in Italy with 2nd (Karl Kling/Hans Klenk) and 4th (Rudolf Caracciola/Peter Kurrle) places.
- Success in the Bern Grand Prix (triple victory), the 24 hours of Le Mans (one-two victory), the Nürburgring Grand Jubilee Prize (quadruple victory) and the Carrera Panamericana (one-two victory).

300 SL racing prototype (W 194/11, 1953)

- In-line six-cylinder M 198 engine with direct petrol injection
- Body with magnesium paneling
- Rear single-joint swing axle with low pivot point
- Transaxle gear arrangement
- Development for the 1953 racing season, but not used due to preparations starting in 1954 for the planned Formula One entry

Mercedes-Benz 300 SL (W 198, 1954 to 1957)

- Lightweight roll cage
- Coupé with gullwing doors hinged to the roof, which was structurally necessary because of the high sills in the roll cage that restricted access
- First petrol injection in a four-stroke engine in a production vehicle
- Twenty-nine 300 SL Coupés were produced with an aluminum body that was 130 kilograms lighter
- One-off for testing purposes with a GRP (glass fiber reinforced plastic) body
- Successful in motorsport: Including class victory at the 1955 Mille Miglia (John Cooper Fitch/Kurt Gessl), European Touring Car Championship titles in 1955 (Werner Engel) and 1956 (Walter Schock) as well as class victories in the USA Sports Car Championships in Production Class D in 1955 and 1956 (Paul O'Shea).

Mercedes-Benz 190 SL (W 121, 1955 to 1963)

- Modern four-cylinder engine with one overhead camshaft
- Modern chassis for improved ride comfort and a high standard of safety
- First open-top standard-production sports car in the SL tradition with a fully retractable folding soft top
- Floor assembly from the planned Mercedes-Benz 180 (W 120) cabriolet
- The successor to the previous Cabriolet A expressed the new product philosophy
- Body design by Walter Häcker inspired by the shape of the 300 SL
- The sport version was built as a small-batch run

Mercedes-Benz 300 SL Roadster (W 198, 1957 to 1963)

- Introduction of Dunlop disc brakes and light-alloy engine block from 1961 onwards
- Seat belts available as optional equipment from 1958 onwards
- Rear wheel suspension with single-joint swing axle
- Available from 1958 as roadster, coupé and coupé with roadster soft top
- Last Mercedes-Benz passenger car model with a separate frame
- Basis for competition car 300 SLS, the winning car of the 1957 US Sports Car Championship in Category D (Paul O'Shea)

Mercedes-Benz SL of the W 113 model series (1963 to 1971)

- Remarkably easy-to-operate folding soft top
- Initially, there were three versions:
 - Roadster with a folding top
 - Coupe with a removable roof and roadster top
 - Coupe with a removable roof, but without the roadster top; more space for luggage
 - For all three: A transverse seat in the rear on request
- As of 250 SL (1967) additionally available: Coupe with rear seat bench
- Six-cylinder engine with six-plunger injection pump
- Automatic transmission available for the first time on an SL
- Safety body with rigid occupant compartment and deformable front and rear sections
- Numerous other safety features such as interior designed so as to reduce injury hazards in accidents and an articulated steering column
- Interior designed without hard edges and corners so as to reduce risk of injury in accidents
- Steering gear moved from the crash-prone area at the front of the car to the firewall, articulated steering column to prevent the dreaded lance effect in a crash.
- As of 1967: Telescopic safety steering column and the dashpot in the steering wheel were added
- Disc brakes on the front axle, as of 250 SL (1967) also on the rear axle
- Nickname "Pagoda" was inspired by the inwardly curved (concave) lines of the hardtop
- First Mercedes-Benz passenger car with radial ply tires

- Successful in motorsports – among others with the legendary win of the long distance rally Spa-Sofia-Lüttich (27 to 31 August 1963) of Eugen Böhringer / Klaus Kaiser in a 230 SL

Mercedes-Benz SL from the R 107 model series (1971 to 1989)

- Further developed safety body
- Frame/Floor system with different sheet thicknesses and resulting carefully defined crumple behavior
- Roll-over protection: High-strength A-pillars and windscreen frame with bonded-in glass
- Tank in impact-protected area above rear axle
- Special air ducting on the doors ensures low soiling of the side windows and exterior mirrors
- Dirt-resistant broad-band rear lights
- First SL generation with a V8 engine (350 SL and 450 SL, 1971)
- Contactless transistorized ignition, Bosch K-Jetronic, hydraulic valve play compensation (1975)
- First SL with catalytic converter (1985)
- Evocative model designation 300 SL was revived (1985)
- Constructive basis for the SLC luxury class coupes of the C 107 model series
- Following the great rally successes of the SLC Coupes, a **235 kW/320 hp** rally car based on the 500 SL was built for the 1981 season, but was not used.

Mercedes-Benz SL from the R 129 model series (1989 to 2001)

- Fully automatic roll-over bar even with the hardtop in place (deployment time: 0.3 seconds)
- Highly stable integral seats with complete belt system and electrically powered adjustment functions
- Drag coefficient of 0.32 (with hardtop)
- Automatic electric-hydraulics for the folding soft top
- World premiere of the draught stop
- Adaptive Damping System ADS (optional)
- High torsional stiffness due to elaborate body construction
- First twelve-cylinder engine in an SL (1992)
- The SL 60 AMG (**280 kW/381 hp**) was the first AMG model in the SL tradition (1993)
- Electronic Stability Program ESP® (1995)
- Newly developed five-speed automatic with torque converter lockup clutch in the SL 500 and SL 600 (1995)
- Brake Assist BAS (1996)
- Cruise control down to 30 km/h (1996)
- Top-of-the-range SL 73 AMG 7.3-liter engine (**386 kW/525 hp**, 1999)

Mercedes-Benz SL from model series R 230 (2001 to 2012)

- Folding Vario roof with sophisticated articulation mechanism and a deployment time of only 16 seconds
- Design details reminiscent of the 300 SL of the 1950s
- Full functionality of the sensor-controlled roll-over bar even with the folding Vario roof closed
- Chassis with Active Body Control ABC
- New head-thorax airbags in the doors
- Drag coefficient of 0.29 (vehicle closed)
- Use of lightweight components for best fuel economy
- SL 65 AMG with V12 biturbo engine (**450 kW**/612 hp) was the world's most powerful series production roadster (2004)
- New front design as part of the facelift (2008)
- SL 63 AMG modified for the racetrack as the official Formula One Safety Car (2008 and 2009)

Mercedes-Benz SL from the R 231 model series (2012 to 2020)

- Body and other components made almost entirely of aluminum: While offering greater inside space, the car was up to 140 kilograms lighter than the predecessor model series
- Boot lid as a composite construction made of steel and plastic
- Improved side impact protection through solid external side members
- Body-in-white construction up to 110 kilograms lighter than predecessor, at the same time with 20 per cent higher torsional stiffness
- Engines up to 29 per cent more economical
- Folding Vario roof made of double-skin roof elements with magnesium frame and plastic paneling
- Available with optional glass roof and MAGIC SKY CONTROL – with adjustable tint and transparency
- Drag coefficient of 0.27 (vehicle closed)
- HANDS-FREE ACCESS: Hands-free and contactless opening of the boot lid via foot movement in front of a sensor in the bumper
- Electromechanical direct steering with speed-dependent steering power assistance and transmission ratio which was variable by adjusting the steering wheel angle
- Folding Vario roof with MAGIC SKY CONTROL (optional equipment): Glass roof with switch-controlled tint and transparency settings
- MAGIC VISION CONTROL: Adaptive windscreen washer system with direct washing function through the wiper blades
- Sun-reflective leather for the seats
- Sound system with front bass system
- SL 65 AMG: (V12 engine with **463 kW** (630 hp) and 1,000 newton meters (738 lb-ft)

Mercedes-Benz SL sports cars in the international press

Mercedes-Benz 300 SL (W 198)

“auto, motor und sport” noted in Issue 21/1955: “Amongst the sports cars of our time, the Mercedes-Benz 300 SL is both the most refined and the most fascinating – a dream of a motorcar.”

The British “Autosport” trade magazine praised it in its issue of 13 May 1955 after running road tests: “Truly, this car is indeed a projectile, and as our aircraft flew from Frankfurt to London, I carried with me a souvenir of its performance – stiff, cramped neck muscles, a physical memento of its tremendous acceleration.”

Hopes of success in the US market were also pinned on the car: the magazine “Road & Track”, published in the United States, April 1955 Issue, enthused: “When enclosed comfort is combined with a remarkable ride, uncanny wheel adhesion, quick steering and performance equal to or better than almost any car you can name, the conclusion is inevitable. The sports car of the future is here today!”

The British magazine “Autocar” wrote on 25 March 1955: “For a passenger who has not travelled in the 300 SL before, the effect is electrifying. The occupant receives at first a mild pressing back into the seat and then, as the power comes in between 3,500 rpm and 4,000 rpm, he feels as though he is being rocketed through space.”

Mercedes-Benz 190 SL (W 121)

Shortly after the presentation of the Mercedes-Benz 190 SL at the International Motor Sports Show in New York, “auto motor und sport”, Germany, Issue 3/1954, wrote: “The Mercedes 190 SL is an elegant and fast touring sports car which can be used as a normal utility vehicle for everyday use, but also offers the possibility of being used with success at smaller-style sporting events. [...] As with the 300 SL, Mercedes has dispensed with the tradition-honored radiator for this new model. The very harmonious front section, however, shows that it is possible to achieve a distinguished, sophisticated line without neglecting the attributes of both fashion and practicality.”

In its October 1955 issue, the US magazine “Road & Track” wrote in a road test about the Mercedes-Benz 190 SL: “The outstanding achievement of the 190 SL is without doubt its quality in design and workmanship. But a close second is the general feeling of solidity which it immediately conveys. [...] The car is at its best at high speeds.”

The “Automobil Revue”, Switzerland, wrote in its issue of 14 November 1956: “Despite its high performance, the 190 SL is not really a sports car, but an uncomplicated, serious touring car with all four wheels firmly on the ground, as it were. Thanks to its exemplary handling characteristics, it is

one of the very few types of vehicle that allow one to reach the highest average speeds in complete safety without haste and with full consideration for other traffic.”

In 1960, “auto motor und sport”, Germany, Issue 15/1960, published a detailed test report on the Mercedes-Benz 190 SL: “The 190 SL owes its good reputation not only to its elegant appearance, but equally to its robustness and reliability and its precise handling characteristics. The quality craftsmanship of the body and roadster top are worthy of special mention.”

Mercedes-Benz 300 SL Roadster (W 198)

“Motor-Revue”, Germany, published a first driving report in its spring issue 21/1957. The test driver wrote: “When using the prescribed tires, the 300 SL Roadster can be accelerated with the front wheels turned in at critical cornering speeds without showing the slightest tendency to break away. These lamb-like characteristics of a – depending on the axle ratio – 235-250 km/h sports car with tremendous acceleration, basically due to soft suspension and excellent matching, make the new Roadster the most powerful and at the same time safest car I have ever met. Even with the soft top down, I find the complete absence of vibrations, droning and resonance inside the car very remarkable – which is also down to the careful matching of the roll cage, suspension and wheels, which has been perfectly achieved.”

Mercedes-Benz SL of the W 113 model series

The specialist magazine “auto motor und sport”, Germany, Issue 6/1963, characterized the Mercedes-Benz 230 SL: “A sports car that reaches 200 km/h, accelerates from 0 to 100 km/h in less than 10 seconds and has the smooth engine running and comfort of a touring car.”

A detailed test report in “auto motor und sport”, Germany, Issue 21/1963, added: “The conclusion is that the 230 SL is one of the most refined sports cars ever made. Nevertheless, it deserves to be counted amongst the genuinely sporty cars, because it not only achieves sporty performance, but is also as manageable and safe to drive as one would expect from a sports car. [...] And finally: you can drive the 230 SL very fast, but you can also use it to maintain the dawdling pace that road traffic so often forces upon you.”

“Road & Track” took a close look at the 280 SL in Issue 8/1968: “The ride, over all sorts of roads, is fantastic. The body is absolutely rigid and rattle-free, regardless of which top is installed, and the supple suspension just works away down there without disturbing the superb poise of the SL.”

Mercedes-Benz SL of the R 107 model series

In a first test of the Mercedes-Benz 350 SL, “auto motor und sport”, Germany, Issue 9/1971, wrote: “The main feature of the 350 SL proved to be the good suspension comfort, which can definitely be measured by limousine standards: at both slow and fast speeds, large bumps were managed well and small ones absorbed in such a way that they never become annoying, even on very bad roads.”

In 1986, “Road & Track”, USA, Issue 11/1986, compared the Mercedes-Benz 560 SL, already in its last production era, with the Cadillac Allante, and summed up: “Legendary quality is Mercedes’ primary stock in trade, but brilliant performance and outstanding ABS braking have freshened it this year. Against these attributes, Cadillac brings better handling and greater luxury to bear while failing to match Mercedes’ performance and quality.”

“auto motor und sport”, Germany, wrote about the Mercedes-Benz 300 SL in Issue 5/1986: “Even in bends, the SL [modified with a new engine] exhibits behavior that does not fit in at all with the way it is generally perceived. With its precise power steering, very high potential lateral accelerations and now only slight load alteration effects, this sedate-looking car with a long bonnet offers pretty much exactly what one expects from a thoroughbred Gran Turismo.”

Mercedes-Benz SL of the R 129 model series

Shortly after the premiere of the Mercedes-Benz SL 500, “auto motor und sport”, Germany, Issue 16/1989, wrote: “In general, the new SL is unsurpassed by any sports car in terms of passive safety. Apart from the sophisticated body construction and the optional airbags for driver and front passenger, the automatically deployed roll-over bar also takes away the fear of roll-overs. A little residual fear must have remained, because auto motor und sport did not attempt to put the function to the test.”

The American trade magazine “Road & Track”, Issue 3/1993, test-drove the twelve-cylinder Mercedes-Benz 600 SL: “Drive the 600 SL, however, and the change is dramatic. Although the 500 SL provides everything we expect from a Mercedes (a 0-60-mph time of 6.4 seconds, fine handling and safety), the V-12 just adds another dimension to this luxury sports car. Some of that is pure power. Time to 60 mph – by our watch – drops another 0.4 sec., but what impresses most is all that torque lying in wait when you kick the 4-speed down a gear or two. Add the matter of smoothness – the smoothness of power that builds strongly rather than erupts, and the aural smoothness of the engine’s hum in the background, even at full throttle.”

In a test report, “auto motor und sport”, Germany, Issue 16/1998, wrote about the Mercedes-Benz SL 500: “For nine years, the Mercedes SL 500 has embodied a highly cultivated blend of

performance, safety and comfort. This philosophy includes the standard automatic transmission as well as the perfected juxtaposition of two roofs.”

Mercedes-Benz SL of the R 230 model series

In a test report on the Mercedes-Benz SL R 230 model series, “auto motor und sport”, Germany, Issue 12/2004, noted the following about the SL 500: “Plenty of comfort, plenty of safety, the dignified design, a touch of sportiness, horsepower à la carte, plenty of fresh air and, most recently, a hardtop in the boot – this rare mixture secures the two-seater a special position that makes it almost unrivalled”.

The stages of open-top driving in a Mercedes-Benz SL 350 were described by “autorevue”, Austria, Issue 7/2008: “Climate stages as the cool dusk falls: first you raise the front and rear side windows, then you ask the passenger to open the draught stop [...]. Then you might switch off the seat ventilation and switch on the heated seats. The climate control fans out basic warmth. Next comes the Airscarf in three heat settings, that seductive warm-air neck blower (which you will then miss on your settee in the sitting room). Finally, there is the grand roof finale in all its glory, and all is well.”

Shortly after the debut of the Mercedes-Benz SL 65 AMG Black Series, “Road & Track”, USA, Issue 1/2009, enthused: “Will anyone buy an SL 65 AMG Black Series for street use? Probably not. But for those few who might, the car is quite civilized on the road. The ride is firm, but not overly so. To truly appreciate the incredible prowess of the SL Black Series, take the car to the track. Its sheer power and speed, together with confidence-inspiring handling, make it one of the most satisfying supercars in the world.”

Mercedes-Benz SL of the R 231 model series

“autorevue”, Austria, judged the Mercedes-Benz SL 500 like this in Issue 6/2012: “The build quality, feel and functionality are simply superb, even if you apply the very highest standards. The SL remains the most compact way to drive a luxury saloon, even if it has noticeably increased in dimensions both inside and out.”

“sport auto”, Germany, wrote in its test report on the SL 63 AMG with performance package in Issue 9/2012: “The 564 hp SL 63 AMG is adept at bringing its elemental power to bear on the asphalt. The traction offered by the rear-axle limited-slip differential deserves praise.”

“Auto Zeitung”, Germany, in Issue 11/2016 about the Mercedes-Benz SL 400: “For decades, Mercedes has set the standard for luxurious, open two-seaters par excellence with the SL. [...] But this new one will appeal not only to SL traditionalists and aesthetes. Technical improvements include roof actuation up to 40 km/h after starting, the new standard LED Intelligent Light System as well as

the partly optional arsenal of updated assistance systems from crash avoidance to lane keeping and lane change aids to the friendly parking butler that finds parking spaces and takes over the steering work.”

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About Mercedes-Benz USA

Mercedes-Benz USA (MBUSA), headquartered in Atlanta, is responsible for the distribution, marketing and customer service for all Mercedes-Benz products in the United States. MBUSA offers drivers the most diverse lineup in the luxury segment with 15 model lines ranging from the sporty A- Class Sedan to the flagship S-Class and the Mercedes-AMG GT Black Series.

MBUSA is also responsible for Mercedes-Benz Vans in the U.S. More information on MBUSA and its products can be found at www.mbusa.com and www.mbvans.com.

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