

Mercedes-Benz 190SL - the 300 SL's "little brother"

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The new Mercedes-Benz SLK is on its way to the customers. The small roadster continues the tradition of the 190 SL, first produced fifty years ago - a car that likewise catered to the tastes of many a customer.

At the "International Motor Sports Show" staged in New York from February 6 to 14, 1954, the 300 SL sportscar was very much in the limelight at the Mercedes-Benz stand. Nevertheless, it by no means overshadowed the 190 SL roadster also presented there, nicknamed the gullwing's "little brother": This car, manufactured from 1955 onwards, was also given an overwhelmingly positive reception. By February 1963, no less than 25,881 units were built, most of which were dispatched to the USA. The 190 SL established the post-war tradition of compact roadsters from Mercedes-Benz; this is now being continued with great success by the SLK roadsters, already in their second model series.

The 190 SL (W 121) and the 300 SL (W 198) hail back to the initiative of the American Mercedes importer Maximilian ("Maxi") E. Hoffman, who saw great potential on his market for both models - and he was proved right. The 190 SL was developed on the basis of the "Ponton" Mercedes from the 120 series and was designed as a roadster right from the start. Unlike the gullwing, however, it was not a thoroughbred sportscar, but a sporty, elegant two-seater touring and utility car. These characteristics made it a popular choice among the ladies. Three versions were produced: a roadster with fabric top (price in February 1955: 16,500 deutschmarks) and a coupe with removable hard top, available either with or without a fabric top (price in September 1955: 17,650 / 17,100 deutschmarks). By comparison, the 300 SL cost 29,000 deutschmarks and the 180 model was listed at 9,450 deutschmarks.

The body of the 190 SL, designed by Karl Wilfert and Walter Häcker, bore strong allusions to the 300 SL. The car shown in February 1954 in New York was a prototype that was neither tested in engineering terms nor stylistically matured; the 190 SL was then painstakingly reworked on both counts, and Mercedes-Benz presented the definitive version at the Geneva Motor Show in March 1955. It differed from the prototype in significant points: The stylized intake scoop on the hood had been discarded and the front edge of the hood displaced to the rear; the rear wheel cutouts also featured lancets; and the bumpers, turn indicators and taillamps were modified. The Sindelfingen plant had already been manufacturing the pre-series models since January 1955, and the main series production start-up took place in May.

The motoring journalists praised the 190 SL for its stalwart driving characteristics – a result for example of the single-joint swing axle with lowered pivot point, already familiar from the 220a model. The front suspension, including the front axle carrier concept, was adopted from the 180, from which the floor assembly was also derived, although in shortened form.

A new development was the 1.9-liter gasoline engine. This four-cylinder unit with an overhead camshaft is regarded as the founding father of a whole family of engines. On board the 190 SL it developed an output of 105 hp at 5,700 rpm, which accelerated the roadster to 100 km/h in 14.5 seconds. Its top speed was a respectable 170 km/h – more than adequate for the roads of the fifties and sixties. Its fuel consumption was listed at a quite moderate 8.6 liters per 100 km, and the 65-liter tank made for a suitable operating range.

The 190 SL underwent numerous improvements over the course of its production period. Clearly recognizable are the wide chrome strips on the top of the doors (introduced March 1956) and enlarged taillamps (June 1956; also used for the 220a, 219 and 220 S models). In July 1957 the rear license plate illumination was integrated into the horns of the bumper, to allow installation of the newly introduced wider plates. The bumper horns thus acquired the status of a standard feature at the rear, while they were available at additional cost at the front; in the USA versions they had been standard at both front and rear right from the start. As of October 1959, a new hardtop featuring an enlarged rear window considerably improved visibility in the coupes. The latch of the trunk lid was modified in August 1960, and at the same time a recessed handle replaced the grab handle previously fitted. The last of the 25,881 units of the 190 SL to be made finally left the assembly line in 1963.

The first sales brochures depicted a sports variant of the 190 SL: With doors of light alloy, a small Plexiglas racing windscreen and the omission of soft top, bumpers, heat exchanger and insulating material it weighed in at only around 1,000 kilograms, about 10 percent less than the series roadster. In engineering terms, the light-design 190 SL showed only slight modifications: The major alterations included some fine tuning on the four-cylinder unit, a lowered chassis, sports shock absorbers and modified springs. The production volume is not documented; only a few sports versions reached the customers. The sports 190 SL enjoyed its finest hour in 1956 at the Macao Sportscar Grand Prix, an event initiated by the Daimler-Benz importer from Hong Kong. The RHD version roadster came first, ahead of a Ferrari Mondial and diverse Jaguars and Austin Healeys. At the Casablanca Grand Prix held later that year, the Mercedes general importer for Morocco scored a victory in the category (GTs up to 2 liters displacement). However, the motorsport regulations soon put paid to the idea of the sports 190 SL: With the described modifications, this vehicle would have been classed as a series-production sportscar at many races and thus would not have stood a chance. Furthermore, a resolution by the racing authority FIA (Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile) precluded its classification as a GT vehicle, according to which a Gran Turismo must be able to be closed completely – a condition that the modified 190 SL could not fulfill.

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