

# CLASSIC DRIVER

## First Drive: Mercedes SLS AMG



**With the new SLS AMG, Mercedes has built exactly the sort of sports cars you might expect from BMW. Never has a Mercedes felt better to drive; never has it been sportier. Rejoicing in Stuttgart means tears in Munich.**

The yellow sun shines from the southwest, lighting up the shallow rock formations of the Santa Lucia mountain range in California. The curving road seems to have no end, as we sit behind the wheel of the glorious silver SLS. The car feels light as we fly along the coastal road, past the Henry Miller Library where a wooden sign proclaims that the writer spent time here in the 1950s. It can't be much further to Big Sur. It would be easy to switch the multi-function screen into navigation mode but we prefer to simply absorb the car and landscape, travelling the legendary coastal road from Los Angeles to San Francisco.





At one of the viewing points, an old Mercedes W126 is parked next to four hippie types sitting on a wall with bottles in their hands. When the eight-cylinder engine of our SLS AMG roars through the exit of the corner, they turn their heads and give us the thumbs-up. On the approach to Big Sur we come across a small gas station and a waiting hitchhiker... but he is out of luck. Mercedes claims fuel economy of 13.2 litres per 100km for its sportscar and, on these long coastal roads, we can indeed achieve something like that figure.







There hasn't been a Mercedes like this supersports car for a long time. It has some minor faults – such as the overly short seat squabs, some blemishes in the interior detailing and the disappointing fact that the doors have to be pushed up manually, rather than being electrically powered – but the handling is simply magnificent. The radiator grille marks it as a natural descendant of the Gullwings of old. While Bavarian engineers dream about such offspring for the BMW M1, the Mercedes SLS AMG is a reality. In April, it will be available from dealers for around 180,000 euros. No elitist small series, this, but a vehicle of which some 15,000 per year will be made. By 2012 we will see a Roadster version and it can only be a matter of time before a Black Series edition is born.



After years of abstention, the house of Mercedes has created a genuine supersports car once more. Gullwing doors, aluminium spaceframe body, front-mid-mounted engine and mindblowing performance on the road. Not since the 1950s has Mercedes produced such a spectacular child. At that time, the 300SL Gullwings were a sensation, and this new one is hardly less so.



The powerful V8 engine weighs 204kg, the body 241kg and each door 18kg – and the SLS comes to a total weight of more than 1.7 tons. The torque 6.3 litres of the eight-cylinder unit offers 650Nm – and a magnificent sound. Frequent downshifting is an aural pleasure. The 563bhp power figure is a threatening gesture towards Audi and BMW, as is the 0-62mph time of 3.8 seconds. The top speed is electronically limited to 317km/h. Why that speed, exactly? Because the car's main rival, the Audi R8 5.2 FSI V10, posts a top speed of 316km/h. Simple.



## VIDEO:

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While Highway One is a dream route for the SLS AMG, there are more delights to come: a few laps of Laguna Seca, an American racetrack steeped in history. A gentle but powerful cruiser on the road, the Gullwing now thunders to almost 200km/h on the hill up to the race circuit's Corkscrew curve. In the downhill left-right combination, the SLS obeys every slightest input, the steering uncommonly precise and the handling neutral, the car benefiting from a weight distribution of 47:53 in favour of the rear axle.



The SLS can be placed perfectly in the slippery curve after the start, and then pushed hard under full acceleration. While traditionalists might feel that a manual gearbox will provide the ultimate sporting experience, the seven-speed dual-clutch transmission acquits itself admirably. After a few fast laps, it is time to head north to San Francisco. It is still at least another two hours away – fortunately.

















Text: [Stefan Grundhoff](#)  
Video, Photos: Mercedes-Benz

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