

CLASSIC DRIVER

Mercedes-Benz 300SL Roadster

Lead

To some extent, the 300SL Roadster lives in the shadow of its famous 'Gullwing' sibling. But in terms of the all-round driving experience, the convertible offers more than enough to set it apart from the earlier, race-bred coupé.

The 300SL story is one of market forces, principally in North America. Without America's booming post-War economy providing such promising export opportunities, both the original 300SL 'Gullwing' and the Roadster simply wouldn't have existed.

The car is derived from the successful W194-series racing car that dominated sports car racing in the early 50s. Wins at Le Mans and the Mexican Carrera Panamericana added to the second-place finish in the 1952 Mille Miglia.





It was US importer Max Hoffman – a hugely influential businessman bringing European cars into the US at the time – who suggested a road-going version of the hard-core racing car. The result was shown at the 1954 New York Motor Show, and the name ‘Gullwing’ entered the motoring dictionary.

As a ‘300SL’, ‘300’ represented the svelte coupé’s high-tech, fuel-injected displacement, while ‘SL’ stood for *Sport Leicht*, meaning ‘lightweight sports’.





In 1957 a Roadster version was introduced, as an additional, slightly more practical (the Gullwing doors took some getting used to) car in the range. It was equipped with the same 215bhp straight-six and offered 150mph+ performance. Although the coupé ceased production shortly after the introduction of the Roadster, the open car was in the catalogue until 1963, with later versions carrying alloy engine blocks and disc brakes.

Visually, both cars clearly have the same basic chassis and engineering layout, but the Roadster has all-new, vertical headlamps (a Mercedes trademark until the early 70s), vertical bumper overriders and deeper, more accessible doors courtesy of a redesigned tubular chassis.

The Gullwing's for-experts-only handling *in extremis* was improved for the Roadster, with a revised rear axle and suspension.





Always an expensive car and one that, at the time, was the equivalent of a Ferrari, Maserati or Aston Martin, both versions now command colossal prices on the worldwide collectors' market. Condition, colour and originality and, yes, 'fashion' govern whether a coupé or Roadster is the more valuable. The 'Holy Grail' of Roadsters nowadays is an unrestored car, complete with hardtop, tools, and alloy block and Rudge wheels.

Alternatively, for those looking for quite the most perfectly restored example (by Canadian expert Rudi & Company), there's the black-with-green-leather, 1960 300SL Roadster that will be offered by RM Auctions at its 10 March Amelia Island sale.





Estimated at \$850,000 to 1,100,000, the car comes with hard and soft tops, runs on Rudge wheels (with the original steel rims included) and looks quite sensational.

You can see further details of [this car in the Classic Driver Market](#).

Photos: Darin Schnabel ©2011 Courtesy of RM Auctions

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