

The Mercedes SL55 AMG offers an unequalled blend of performance and style

Grace Under Fire

BY GARY WOLLENHAUPT



On a misty morning, I slipped into the passenger seat of a silver SL55 AMG for an introductory lap around the exquisite Road America racetrack in Elkhart Lake, Wis.

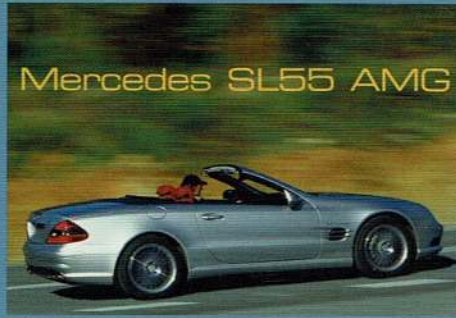
Behind the wheel was Jim Resnick, Mercedes' East Coast PR manager and a former professional race driver, whose task it was to familiarize me with the car. On the first lap, Jim showcased the car's capabilities on the twisting asphalt of one of the country's premier road courses. Road America's long straights and sweeping turns played to the SL55 AMG's strengths as a grand touring car, and we hit 130 mph on the back straight. Of course I had every confidence in Jim's driving abilities and the car's capabilities. As impressive as the car's acceleration was, the demonstration of the car's ability to shed speed was, quite literally, jaw dropping. The torquey 5.5-liter supercharged V-8 burbled like a boulevard cruiser as we idled in the pit lane to change drivers.

Now, it's my turn. After sitting in the right seat for a hot lap, I appreciate the serious side bolsters that grip you in the leather seat and offer a subtle indication of the car's capabilities, in case you missed the "Kompressor" badging above the side vents or the chrome-tipped dual exhausts on both sides of a lower diffuser with a black mesh grille.

Settling in the driver's seat, I see the instruments with silver faces and red needles provide clear information, and the SpeedShift buttons for the six-speed automatic transmission dominate the steering wheel. Jim gives the nod, and it's time to see if this car lives up to its publicity.

The car leaps off the line, the burble transforming into a throaty growl, as we accelerate toward the first turn, a sharp right hander. I flip through the first four gears of the six-speed automatic transmission using the steering-wheel-mounted shift buttons. The Optimum Gear Selection mode knows when to shift for maximum acceleration and has the good sense not to upshift in the middle of a corner.

As we round turn Number one, the stability control and active suspension does its job, keeping us out of the gravel runoff. The Active Body Control suspension system virtually eliminates body roll in cornering, acceleration, and braking by electronically controlling the suspension components. The Sport setting stiffens the ride considerably, effectively reducing body roll by 95 percent, compared to a vehicle with a conventional suspension.



Jim coaches me through the turns, calling out braking points and helping me find visual references for just the right line through the corners. On Road America's Carousel section, a large half-oval that approximates a very high-speed freeway on-ramp, the electronic aids come into play. We charge through the turn like a slot car, tracking at a constant angle and adding speed without hesitation, the car sensing the need for imperceptible intervention from the brakes and throttle.

In a sharper corner, we go in slow and out fast, as I floor the pedal. The SL55 will accelerate to 60 mph in just 4.5 seconds, driven by 493 hp, on the way to an electronically limited top speed of 155 mph. Fortunately, the stopping power is more than equal to the motive power, with racing-derived braking featuring immense (14.2 in. front, 13.0 rear) vented discs. It's all linked by a revolutionary electronically controlled system that can vary brake pressure at each wheel for shorter stopping distances.

On this foggy morning, a patch of wet asphalt lurks in a turn under a bridge, waiting for its first victim. The riding-on-rails feel gives way, for a fraction of a second, to a disconcerting slide, as the rear wheels lose traction. I start to correct, but Jim tells me to stay on the gas as the electronic stability control system corrects the yawing motion, applying the right amount of pressure to the wheels to halt any hint of a spin.

All along, we were cruising at triple digit speeds with the top down, and we could converse in normal tones. In a worst-case scenario, the active rollover protection bar shoots out of its lair in only three-tenths of a second, with the top up or down. The hardtop roof opens and closes in only 16 seconds, quick enough to keep the seats dry if you're caught in a downpour or to feel the sunshine when the rain stops.

The car quickly regains its composure for the rest of the lap, and I, reluctantly, pull into the pit lane for a driver change. It's hard to find fault with the SL 55 AMG. It has supercar performance, wrapped in a balanced, elegant package. It makes all the right sounds and has the machined-from-a-block-of-steel feel that inspires confidence, regardless of your individual driving competence. At a price that would net you about two Corvettes, you expect more for your money. The SL55 AMG doesn't disappoint.

Base Price: \$117,000
 Engine: 5.5 liter supercharged V-8
 0-60 in 4.5 seconds

