

Cornering king



The Mercedes-Benz SLS AMG more than makes up for its steep price with a thrilling and exhilarating driving experience.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS RISHAD SAAM MEHTA



It was the long wait at Newark's Liberty International airport after a flight from Mumbai and the subsequent even longer flight to Mexico City followed by a two-hour bus ride to Puebla that disoriented me.

At 6.30am the next morning, after just a few hours of sleep, I was physically in the central courtyard of my hotel, but my mind was still somewhere over the Atlantic, whirling around in a merry-go-round of time zones.

The sun was where the moon should have been and I was sipping strong coffee, hoping it would dissolve this gloom of disorientation. Just then, a tremendous howl tore through the air. It was the aural signature of a pedigree V8 engine venting its joy at being fired up. That exhaust burble sorted me out. My mind was back in my head, my focus was pin-sharp and my eyes were bright and awake. The roar of the Mercedes-Benz SLS AMG and the knowledge that I'd soon be behind the wheel of this supercar had woken me up—swift and sharp.



CHILDHOOD WISH, RESURRECTED

My first sight of the SLS AMG took my breath away and brought on a sense of design déjà vu. Because besides being outstandingly attractive and conveying an immediate visual appeal of sleekness and speed, what drew me to it most was how much it looked like its celebrated predecessor.

As a child and a teenager, I had drooled over pictures of the iconic Mercedes-Benz 300 SL, a very revered sportscar of the fifties. When introduced in 1954, it gave Mercedes-Benz, which was associated with making superbly engineered but sober cars, a fresh new image as a manufacturer who could make brilliantly engineered cars that were also exhilarating to drive.

DESIGN FACTOR

The 300 SL had a gaping front grille dominated by the three-pointed star, a long bonnet under which resided the first-ever fuel-injected petrol engine for a car, an upright windscreen, a tapered rear and the characteristic doors that opened like wings of a gull.

If I'd ever freed a genie from a lamp during my teens I would have asked for a chance to drive that car. Today, the genie had delivered with the SLS AMG—the spiritual successor to the legendary 300 SL. That it carries the same genes is apparent from its strikingly similar design. This car has been developed like a race car and is the first-ever car to be completely engineered by AMG.

THE COMPETITION

So what are the other cars that will put you back by around Rs 2 crore?

PORSCHE PANAMERA

This car that we reviewed in February is Porsche's first 4-door, sedan or you could even call it a Grand Tourer and it does encourage you to do long distances, much like the SLS AMG. What the Porsche has is superb ride quality and handling. It's classy and comfortable and the Panamera Turbo is seriously quick. Its 4 seats give it the practicality edge.



LAMBORGHINI GALLARDO

The Gallardo (LP560-4) is the closest rival to the SLS. It boasts almost the same horsepower (559bhp), it is lighter than the SLS and is an all-wheel drive. But it really is a matter of the heart. The SLS has lovely retro lines, while the Lamborghini is razor-like in its looks. Nevertheless, both will turn heads and deliver unmatched thrills at the wheel.



Navigate

Based in Affalterbach, Germany, AMG is a Mercedes-Benz subsidiary that turns out thoroughbred sports versions of normal Mercedes-Benz models.

My plan for the day was to drive from Puebla to Oaxaca, a distance of 465km, on the Pan American highway. It wasn't just a random place chosen for a test drive. In fact, this route is quite symbolic because it was in Mexico, in 1952, that two prototypes of the 300 SL won the 3rd Carrera Panamericana—a demanding 3,100-km road race. The Puebla to Oaxaca route was a part of this race.

When I started out from the hotel, I was immediately ensnared in Puebla's morning rush hour traffic. But the SLS was quite happy to potter about slowly; its engine has a low hum and the seven-

speed double-declutch transmission happily shifted gears to match the low speed.

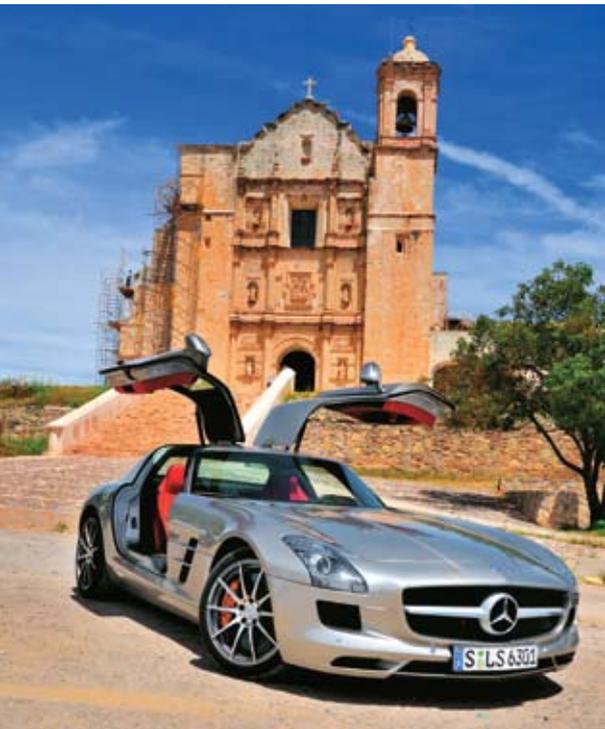
SPECS

It was outside the city, on the double-laned expressway, that the car showed its muscle. A firm tap on the throttle and the 571 horsepower in the crankcase burst into a gallop. The SLS will go from standstill to a 100kph in 3.8 seconds and its naturally aspirated V8, 6208cc engine will further propel it to an electronically limited top speed of 317kph.

The first 100 km of the route was over the expressway that did not have an impeccable surface and, since this car's suspension is stiffly set up, a few jarring thuds did filter through into the cabin and a few were quite pronounced at the steering wheel. But it was on the well-surfaced and twisty hill roads that followed, where the SLS showed that besides brawn it also has brains.

There are 4 modes in which the SLS can be driven. C, S, S+ and M (Controlled-efficiency, Sports, Sports+ and Manual). For highway cruising, the C mode is best, with gear changes optimised for best fuel consumption and soft throttle characteristics. The engine is softly aural and music can be enjoyed. Turn the dial to S and the transmission remains in each gear to a higher speed, downshifts are faster and gearshifts are performed around 20 per cent more rapidly than in C mode. But I found the most exhilaration in the S+ mode, which shortened the gearshifts by a further 20 per cent. In this mode, and with me blipping the paddle shifts as and when I wanted, the SLS was sinuous around sweeping bends and taut around tight corners. The

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harmonious weight distribution (47 per cent to 53 per cent, front to rear) makes the SLS a joyful weapon with which to attack winding roads. By now the engine is so raucous and the driving so involving that music doesn't matter, the car itself is singing.

The steering has a precise and direct feel and helps in inspiring confidence, though I would like it to stiffen up a little more as speeds go higher. The entire package that is the SLS AMG encouraged me to carry more speed into a corner than I normally would and then it boosted my confidence by using its brains (read ESP and dynamics) to keep things tidy around the bend even at blistering speeds. There is so much joy to be derived from this car that rather than take the straight, wide and short *supercarretera* (expressway) from Tehuacan to Oaxaca, I chose to take the serpentine mountain road via Asuncion, involving a long detour. It was a scenic drive through cactus-populated Mexican countryside and old Spanish churches.

My test car also featured the optional Carbon Ceramic discs for the brakes and their bite was again confidence-inspiring.

AMG has drawn on 40 years of racing experience to develop an engine specifically for the SLS AMG. It is based on the engine in the Mercedes-Benz



E 63 AMG, but modifications were made to the intake and exhaust systems, the oil supply and the crankshaft drive. A total of more than 120 parts and components were redesigned.

Even the car's sound signature is a result of a finely-tuned exhaust system optimised for that perfect aural note and performance.

Inside the car it feels more like a cockpit, thanks to the gull-wing doors, the flat-bottomed steering wheel and the joystick-like gear selector lever. The doors have to be pulled shut manually. AMG opted against installing an automatic door closer since it would have added a whopping 40kgs to the weight of the car. To further trim the fat, the seat backs are made of magnesium. The seats themselves are hugely adjustable to get that perfect driving posture and I could also store my seat position in memory so that I could get it perfect again if it was disturbed.

VERDICT

All controls can be accessed through the multifunctional steering wheel and in manual mode there is a bank of LEDs that indicate when to change a gear. But the car's exhaust note is a good enough guide too.

The boot will easily take two cabin bags or three medium-sized backpacks, but be warned that there is absolutely no space in the cabin for anything besides cellphones and two water bottles. All luggage, including laptop and camera bags will have to go into the boot. The cabin is perfectly sized for two large human beings, nothing more.

The SLS AMG can be ordered from Mercedes-Benz India for a base price of Rs 2 crore and a down-payment of Rs 20 lakh.

Why would you buy this car that will not tolerate broken road shoulders or high speed-breakers? For the sheer thrill and exhilaration it delivers at the wheel. And it does this gracefully and compliantly.

In a nutshell, it is a car that epitomises the pleasure of just motoring.