

MERCEDES-BENZ 300SL CLASSIC TOUR



By Kevin Caulfield



The classic car world is chockablock with adventures and activities, and 2018 proved to be no exception. While at the Rennsport Reunion—a spectacular Porsche affair—a friend asked if I had heard of the 300SL Classic Tour in Arizona coming up that November. While I couldn't claim that I had, the few words contained in his question seemed to already cover all the necessary elements required for a fun experience, so upon his official invitation, I promptly accepted and subsequently learned more about the particulars.

It turned out the tour was the first of its kind and was limited to only 50 participating 300SLs. Crews would check in Sunday at Boulders in Scottsdale, and the drive would commence Monday, spanning four days and covering approximately 1,000 miles through some of the most magnificent high desert country in the West. This was an interesting idea with great merit. From a practical standpoint, support issues would be straightforward enough with essentially all the same cars participating. On the flip side, the 300SL had two variants: the gullwing—which to this day provides a distinct presence—and the subsequent roadster. The reasoning behind the car's evolution from gullwing to roadster is one some might find hilarious; more on that later.

First, a primer on the Mercedes-Benz 300SL. The concept for the 300SL was first introduced in 1952, then called the W194. Immediately, she was a winner. The victories secured included the big ones that drove automotive sales then as they continue to do today. Among them are the 24 Hours of Le Mans—an event that continues to thrive—and the Carrera Panamericana. The latter event was a road race through Mexico that was both dangerous and lethal; following the 1954 running, the race was discontinued indefinitely just five years after its introduction.

From the W194 concept came the W198, otherwise known as the 300SL. Introduced as a production vehicle in 1954, the 300SL had two variants as previously mentioned. The first, known as the gullwing, shared a more notable similarity to the original W194. The 300SL is considered a grand-touring automobile, and the engine is a straight-6. However, it is special, as it is laid down on its side for better aerodynamics and a lower center of gravity. The single-overhead-cam engine utilizes a dry-sump lubrication system along with direct fuel injection, both sophisticated features in their day, especially for a street car.

In 1957, the 300SL roadster variant was introduced, and in this configuration, the model was undeniably a grand-touring automobile. Lore has it that spouses and sweethearts were not totally thrilled about the ingress and egress afforded by the gullwing version and its unique doors, and the Mercedes-Benz top brass received the word, resulting in the much more refined 300SL roadster with its welcomed conventional doors. The subsequent approval from the public was apparent in sales of the roadster into 1963. Unsurprisingly, gullwing production terminated in 1957. While the cars shared the same driveline, the roadster boasted a number of refinements both mechanically and aesthetically. The biggest improvement from a handling perspective was a re-engineered rear axle that significantly reduced oversteering while creating a lower polar moment of inertia. Cosmetically, the car received conventional doors with roll-up windows. Needless to say, both of these configurations continue to underscore the timelessness of the model's beautiful design. Now, back to the story.

Having grown up with a magnificent original silver Mercedes-Benz 300D Adenauer Cabriolet, I have always had a certain soft spot for the Mercedes. In fact, my parents took me and my brother camping in the Colorado Rocky Mountains in the 300D. Dad chauffeuring us through the Rockies with the top tucked away and postcard blue skies above resulted in a memory that still leaves me smiling. So when my good friend and tour partner Ron Fiamma of the tour-sponsoring AIG mentioned to me that Mercedes-Benz was outfitting us with a brand-new Mercedes to pilot on the tour, that was cause for pause.

It was first suggested to Ron that perhaps the new Mercedes could be exchanged through the Mercedes-Benz Classic Center for a proper vintage 300SL, or, maybe a company client had an example in need of exercise—it is all about service after all. Likewise, I volunteered to assist in finding a suitable machine for the tour. As luck would have it, I soon found myself catching up with dear family friend Dana Mecum, and the 300SL Tour became a part of the conversation. One thing led to another, and shortly thereafter, I informed Ron that he could call off his search for a 300SL.

Fast forward to Sunday, November 4. Our trusty mount, the 1957 300SL roadster, was waiting for us shined to the nines and looking quite smart in black. We checked in and immediately started to admire the variety, beauty and most notably, the passionate fervor shared for these wonderful machines. The crews as a whole were enthusiastic and welcoming toward one other. What was surprising were the number of people we already knew. In fact, I kept repeating myself saying, I did not know you had a 300SL, and, what is the attraction?

Sunday evening's dinner was delightful and highlighted by the beginning of new friendships and the rekindling of those already forged. Participants and organizers shared several idiosyncrasies common to most 300SLs and how to combat them, such as vapor lock, not allowing the fuel tank to drop below half full, and that power and the cam are not visceral until somewhere around 3,800 RPM. This information proved to be helpful.

Monday brought blue skies, balmy temperatures and ideal weather to drop the top and experience fresh-air motoring. Our destination for the evening was Winslow, Arizona. The day's drive was leisurely, beautiful and relaxing, which was really the result of a number of variables—some manageable and others beyond one's control. The obvious is the preparation of the car itself. We were outfitted with an example that does both Mercedes-Benz as well as its owner proud. The idea of taking a vintage automobile on a 1,000-mile adventure is not to be taken lightly. These cars require both the driver and navigator to be engaged and active participants; it's a total team effort.



Kevin Caulfield (right) and Ron Fiamma beside the 1957 300SL roadster generously provided to them for the tour by Dana and Patti Mecum.

The evening in Winslow saw all vehicular participants but one arrive safe and sound—again, a testament to the owners, Mercedes-Benz and the event organizers for stressing car preparation prior to the event rather than during. What was fascinating were the onlookers who showed up to admire the 300SLs in the parking lot at La Posada, our hotel. All were respectful of the cars while being innately curious of what they were seeing.

The pace notes/route book for the day worked beautifully, as they did throughout the event's duration. The books were well prepared making the tour all the more enjoyable. These are highly underrated elements of these tours relative to the time required to thoroughly prepare them. In addition, they are never given a second thought until an incorrect direction change appears. Kudos to the event organizers, as there may have been only one miscue on directions that covered 1,000-plus miles of motoring.

Tuesday we awoke to yet another magnificent day of motoring with rich blue skies and temperatures that made you want to stow the top immediately before departure to Sedona. The 254 miles breezed by, though, the best was saved for last: Arizona route 89A starting in Flagstaff and 27 miles later entering the north end of Sedona. The change in altitude, the setting sun off the red rock and a wonderfully twisty road provided the perfect tonic to end the day's drive at the Enchantment Resort.

Wednesday's drive was essentially a great big loop departing the Enchantment Resort with the reciprocal of AZ-89A. It is as fun driving up AZ-89A as it is driving down. Our lunch stop was The Grand Canyon, considered one of the Seven Wonders of the World. It continues to be all that if not more. Even if a person has already seen the Grand Canyon, it still inspires the imagination with its grandeur.

Thursday was our final day of the tour. Once again, we could not have asked for nicer weather for top-down cruising. The first memorable town we passed through was Jerome, courtesy of AZ-89A south. What a thrill to drive that road; it was the road, the scenery, the color and, of course, the 300SL roadster that all combined to provide an unbeatably visceral experience.

All too soon we arrived back where we started at the Boulders. That evening consisted of both a silent auction as well as a live auction. The proceeds were designated to benefit Laureus, a philanthropic organization aimed at helping at-risk youth and unlocking each individual's potential via sport. This was accompanied by several Olympic gold medalists describing how they achieved great success through sports.

The 300SL Classic Tour was a success on multiple levels. With the exception of one, all of the 300SLs finished safe and sound, and the Laureus organization was well supported. But most importantly, the 300SL Classic Tour served as the catalyst to provide friendships for miles ahead, and that's what this hobby is really all about. ■



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