

# Mercedes-Benz 190SL



This is a classic that's all about style. Motivated above all by dollars, Mercedes designed the 190SL of 1955-'63 as a cut-price cousin to the legendary 300SL, and sold 25 times as many of them. Beyond appearances, driving aspects of the four-cylinder 190SL can't compare with the six-cylinder 300SL – the fastest production car of its day – but this junior Mercedes nevertheless brims with honest virtues. It may lack pep, but the 190SL is a relaxed cruiser that, even today, can still take two people and plenty of luggage on trans-continental touring holidays. If peerless quality and irresistible beauty matter more than 0-60mph figures, Mark Hughes explains how to buy wisely.

PHOTOGRAPHY:  
JAMES MANN

Few problems with parts availability, though brightwork very expensive

## Owners' views

"I like all sorts of cars, but there's something permanent and dependable about the 190SL," says Cardiff-based Brian Gunney, whose life with these cars has evolved from enthusiastic owner to professional specialist. "A 190SL is no road-burner, but it's pleasant and comfortable to drive, and cruises well on motorways. A lot of old cars can become hard work after you've travelled for an hour or so, but not the Mercedes." Brian, who has been a committed user of older cars for three decades, says that his tastes derive from a formative job in the '60s when he worked for a dealership handling Alfas, Mercedes, Lancias, BMWs and Porsches.



Occasionally he encountered 190SLs, and liked them. Many years later, when Brian had moved on to running his own servicing business, a customer asked him if he could put together an old 190SL that was in pieces. When the car was finished, Brian did a few hundred miles as a shakedown and enjoyed the experience, even though the 190SL was very different from the Porsche 356 he was then running as his everyday car. In 1989, when temporarily without a classic car, he compiled a wish-list. The top three were German convertibles (356, 190SL and BMW 2002 Cabrio), but the choice became 190SL only after one of his sons produced an advert offering two wrecks for sale. Brian initially expected to combine the best bits into one restored car for himself, but ended up restoring both and selling one: "Trying to get information as I went along, I found that virtually no one in the UK knew anything about 190SLs. By the time I'd started on the second car, people were asking me for advice, word having got 'round through the club. Then someone else asked me to restore one for him – and so it snowballed!" The car in our pictures is one that Brian restored for his own use, but recently a customer enticed him to sell it. Although he's now temporarily bereft of a drivable 190SL, Brian loves the cars so much that his next restoration project will be another one for himself.

Building contractor John Williams proves that 190SL restoration isn't beyond the first-timer. Having bought his wife a 280SL in 1984, serious hours in the garage only started six years ago after a 190SL-owning friend tempted him into buying a stripped bodyshell and crates containing all the components. Fortunately nothing significant was missing when it came to sifting through, but the shell proved to be a disappointment after shotblasting – all steel outer panels were pinholed and had to be replaced. John's main frustrations with the project were the time spent deciphering the wiring loom and working out how to fit a seemingly over-sized hardtop rear window into its aperture – which defeated him for three months but a glass specialist did the job in three hours. John's record at Mercedes-Benz Club events proves that he owns one of the UK's best 190SLs (see p104), but two trips to Germany show that he appreciates the car on the long journeys for which it was designed.



## BEST BOOKS

There are loads of general books about Mercedes-Benz in which the 190SL gets passing coverage, but few English-language offerings describe it in detail. **Original Mercedes SL** by Laurence Meredith (Bay View Books, £19.95) is the most useful, with all-colour photography, detailed specifications and production data.

Other titles that tend towards historical narrative – but still cover other SL models – are **Mercedes SL Series: The Complete Story** by Brian Laban (Crowood, £19.95), **Essential Mercedes SL** by Laurence Meredith (Bay View Books, £9.95) and **Mercedes-Benz SL Sports Car Color History** by John Heilig (MBI, £15.95). There are also two £8.95 collections of road-test reprints, from Brooklands Books and Unique Motor Books.

## THE CLUBS

UK owners enjoy strong support from the **Mercedes-Benz Club**, whose body of advisors includes, for the SL models, well-known restorer Roger Edwards. Members receive a high-quality bi-monthly magazine (*Gazette*), and the social side is busy too, topped by a National Day every July.

For membership (£25 a year plus £5 joining fee), visit the website ([www.mercedes-benzownersclub.co.uk](http://www.mercedes-benzownersclub.co.uk)), phone 07071 818868, or write to Vic Harris, 18 Viga Road, Winchmore Hill, London N21 1HJ.

In the country where most 190SLs were sold, the **Mercedes-Benz Club of America** is an enormous organisation offering a similar range of services, including an award-winning bi-monthly magazine (*The Mercedes-Benz Star*).

You can join (for \$35 a year) at the website ([www.mbca.org](http://www.mbca.org)), by phoning 800 637 2360 (toll-free in the US), or by writing to 1907 Lelaray St, Colorado Springs, CO 80909-287.