



Slick.

StarFest, held every two years for members of the Mercedes-Benz Club of America (MBCA), is the largest Mercedes-Benz enthusiast event in the nation. The 2012 StarFest was held September 29 through October 3 on the lawn at the Arizona Biltmore in Phoenix. Besides the cocktail parties, banquets and socializing you might expect at the Biltmore, members also participated in track sessions at Firebird International Raceway, a road rally through metro Phoenix, tech sessions, seminars and clinics. An event for MBCA members, StarFest also let other Mercedes-Benz enthusiasts register for activities, and the general public was invited to a Mercedes-Benz Concours d'Elegance on Sunday. It was a convergence of anniversaries: not only did 2012 mark Arizona's statehood centennial, but also the golden anniversary, 50 years, since the founding of the Desert Stars section of MBCA in 1962. (It was also the

20th anniversary of StarFest 1992, which was also held in Phoenix and still holds the record as the StarFest with the largest attendance in MBCA history.) And it was yet another anniversary, as 2012 marks 60 years of the SL. Thus, on September 27, before StarFest got in full swing, Mercedes-Benz presented the sixth-generation 2013 SL to us at the Biltmore. The first SL was a race car, totally unlike its contemporaries in 1952, with a tubular space frame, teardrop-shaped and small-greenhouse aluminum body, gullwing doors and direct-injection engine. That 300 SL won both Le Mans and the famous Carrera Panamericana that year, shaking up the world of motorsports for the long term. Originally simply standing for "Super Light," the SL name has endured to become the best-recognized name in the Mercedes lineup. The production 300 SL gullwing arrived in 1954, with its public debut in the US—a first—in New

York City. A convertible SL followed in 1957. Mercedes-Benz continues its pattern of soft tops on all its lineup except the SL and SLK roadsters, and the 2013 SL has a redesigned version of its retractable hardtop. The new SL is about two inches longer and two inches wider, yet weighs over 200 pounds less than the previous model. Most body panels are also aluminum, while high-strength steel is used in the roof pillars. The new SL body is about 20 percent stiffer than the prior generation. There will be just one non-AMG version of the SL this time, an SL 550. (There will still be two AMG versions.) The SL 550 sports a new V8—with direct fuel injection, twin turbochargers and multi-spark ignition—boasting improved fuel economy and increased power. Based on the previous 5.5-liter, this new 4.6L V8 (that's 20 percent smaller displacement) generates 429 hp and 516 lb-ft of

torque, through the benefits of its twin turbochargers and an air-water intercooler. Fuel economy numbers are also improved by addition of an ECO stop-start system.

Mercedes-Benz technical systems abound in this roadster, as in the beefiest sedan, including Attention Assist, Distronic Plus with Pre-Safe Braking, Magic Vision Control, Parktronic with Active Parking Assist, Active Lane Keeping Assist, Active Blind Spot Assist, and the mbrace2 system, as well as LED daytime running lights and an electronic parking brake. The mbrace2 interface includes emergency calling, infotainment, personal assistance and vehicle care information. Services added to mbrace2 are compatible with both iPhone and Android, with hands-free access, and all software modules can be readily updated via cloud networks.

In addition to electronics, SL safety features include pop-up roll bars of incredible speed and strength, plus smart front airbags, knee bags, side air bags and head-thorax bags, seat belt tensioners and belt force limiters.

Standard Harman/Kardon Logic 7 digital surround sound features FrontBass, where bass speakers mounted in the front firewall have the two front frame members serve as large bass enclosures, an award-winning innovation that enhances low-end audio response and saves weight at the same time. The system has Dolby Surround 5.1 and two amplifiers, with a total of 600 watts powering 10 speakers. Each amplifier channel has individually tuned frequency response. All this comes in a two-seat roadster, and the system includes speed-dependent volume control.

Mercedes-Benz likes to present the SL less as a hard-top convertible and more as a coupe with a droptop trick up its sleeve. It's so strong and tight with the top up, we can see their point, although being a convertible is still its raison d'être. Nonetheless, with the top up, a standard panorama sunroof features a see-through polycarbonate roof panel with a manually-operated roller blind. And optional Magic Sky Control features a glass roof panel with tinting that can be controlled by the driver or passenger—a button above the rear-view mirror can change the panel from transparent to heavily tinted, using technology similar to automatic-dimming mirrors.

Here's another neat feature that seems obvious now that it's been invented: Magic Vision Control. Windshield wiper arms and blades in the new SL feature laser-cut passages along their entire length, which distribute washer fluid directly in front of the moving blades. An electronic control unit ensures that washer fluid changes its flow each time the wipers change direction, as well as when vehicle speed or outside temperature change. The volume of fluid is also reduced automatically when the top is down, so occupants shouldn't get sprayed.

The 429-horse SL 550 started arriving at dealers this summer, as did the SL63 AMG, which has a direct-injection 5.5-liter biturbo V8 producing 530 hp and 590 lb-ft of torque. Coming in November is the SL65 AMG, with a 621-hp, 738-lb-ft 6.0-liter V12.

Our presentation at the Biltmore was not a drive event. But the new SL is a beauty, and its new technologies include some very clever features. We look forward to some time behind the wheel. ■

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