

2013 Mercedes-Benz SL550

All-new SL550 gets back to its sporty, lightweight roots.

Overview

The Mercedes-Benz SL550 is a two-seat, rear-wheel-drive roadster with a convertible hardtop, and it's all-new for 2013. The SL-Class is redesigned for 2013 with new styling, and the models are lighter, thanks to a mostly aluminum structure. A reduction in weight is appropriate as SL initially meant "super light."

The 2013 SL550 debuts with a new more powerful engine. The 2013 SL550's new engine is a twin-turbocharged 4.6-liter V8 that makes more power and gets better fuel economy than the outgoing 5.5-liter V8. It's mated to a 7-speed automatic transmission.

A new SL63 AMG and SL65 AMG are scheduled to come later in the 2013 model year. The SL63 will feature a new twin-turbocharged 5.5-liter V8 and the SL65 will come with a twin-turbocharged 6.0-liter V12. The SL65 AMG gets a 7-speed automatic, while the SL63 will have a 7-speed automated manual transmission that Mercedes calls the AMG Speedshift MCT 7.

We have driven the 2013 SL550, and its new engine is a revelation. Its new twin-turbocharged 4.6-liter V8 has almost as much torque as the 5.5-liter twin-turbocharged V8 to come in the SL63 AMG. The SL550 is quick, makes great noise, and its improved fuel economy eliminates last year's gas guzzler tax. The 7-speed automatic transmission is smooth but not as lightning quick as the dual-clutch automated manuals offered by the competition. We'd like to see a manual transmission but aren't expecting that to happen.

The lighter weight improves handling, but the SL550 is still more of a grand tourer than a pure sports car. That's not necessarily a bad thing because its relaxed, refined character makes it easy to live with on a daily basis. The handling is agile with either of the car's two suspensions, the brakes are strong. The steering feels numb but it has a variable ratio that makes it quick when turned farther off center.

Inside, the SL-Class is model of modern luxury. The decor is classy, fit and finish is exemplary, and Mercedes makes plenty of features standard while offering several more. Its two seats are upholstered in leather, and they have a minimum of 12 adjustments, which should make anyone comfortable. Available massaging seats with active bolsters are practically indulgent.

A few special features make the convertible experience even more special. AirScarf heating blows warm air onto the necks of occupants to extend the top-down driving season. The top itself goes up or down in 20 seconds and, as a hardtop, is substantial enough to shut out the elements and keep the cabin quiet. Mercedes also adds its Magic Sky Control roof for 2013. A panoramic roof is standard with one level of tint (about 80 percent). Magic Sky Control adds a 95 percent tint option to keep the cabin cooler on sunny days.

A navigation system is standard, and so is a high-quality sound system with unique speakers located in the front footwells that use the chassis subframe as an echo chamber. The radio comes with a six-disc CD changer and a four-gigabyte hard drive to hold music files.

The trunk has a decent 10.2 cubic feet of storage space with the top up, and that shrinks to 7.2 cubic feet with the top down, but it should still be enough room for two seats of golf clubs.

Clearly not practical for a family, the new SL550 is fast and sporty though not as sharp-edged as a Porsche 911. It's more of a relaxed sports car that will be easy to live with every day.

Model Lineup

The 2013 Mercedes-Benz SL-Class debuts as one model, the SL550. The SL550 comes with a new twin-turbocharged V8 engine that makes 429 horsepower and 516 pound-feet of torque. The lone transmission is a 7-speed automatic with manual shift capability.

Standard features include leather upholstery, dual-zone automatic climate control, 12-way power-adjustable heated seats, power windscreen, power windows and locks, power heated mirrors, remote keyless entry, hard-drive-based navigation system with real-time traffic, USB port, 10-speaker harman/kardon surround sound audio system, HD radio, six-disc CD changer, satellite radio, Bluetooth connectivity, auto-dimming rearview and driver's side mirrors, power tilt/telescoping steering wheel, cruise control, universal garage door opener, and P255/40R18 front and P285/35R18 rear tires on alloy wheels.

Options are numerous. They start with three packages. Premium 1 Package (\$4,900) adds a rearview camera, ParkTronic with Active Parking Assist, active ventilated multi-contour seats, hands-free access, power trunk closer, and Keyless-Go. A Driver Assistance Package (\$2,500) gets Distronic Plus adaptive cruise control with Pre-Safe Brake, Active Blind Spot Assist, and Active Lane Keeping Assist. A Sport Wheel Package (\$2,000) comes with a Sport steering wheel, sport brakes, and 19-inch AMG five-spoke wheels.

Other options consist of the Magic Sky Control roof (\$2,500), Active Body Control hydraulic suspension (\$4,090), an analog clock (\$250), illuminated door sills (\$350), a Bang & Olufsen BeoSound sound system (\$6,400), a wood/leather steering wheel (\$590), and 19-inch twin five-spoke wheels (\$500).

Safety features that come standard include Attention Assist, Pre-Safe Braking, active head restraints, bi-xenon headlights with active curve illumination, tire-pressure monitor, front airbags, side airbags, driver and passenger knee airbags, anti-lock brakes with brake assist, traction control, electronic stability control, automatic pop-up roll bars, and Magic Vision Control wipers with the squirters in the blades.

Walkaround

The Mercedes-Benz SL-Class is completely redesigned for 2013 with a new body structure made almost entirely (89 percent) from aluminum. The new body is 242 pounds lighter and 20 percent more rigid. The top cuts another 13 pounds through the use of a magnesium structure. The car is two inches longer than the outgoing model and the rear track is three inches wider, but weight is down 275 pounds overall.

Stylistically, the look is bolder this year, with more noticeable creases. The grille is taller and more pronounced, almost too much so. The car's shape features a long hood, an attractive coupe-like hardtop, and a fairly short rear deck that is actually longer than that of most sports cars.

Exterior details include a large Mercedes pointed star in the grille flanked by aluminum wings (this detail looks like an airplane viewed from the front), a pair of air intakes on the hood, and corresponding intakes on the front fenders. Each of the air intakes is detailed with a pair of aluminum fins. LED fog lights are found at the front corners of the car, and they are placed to bisect the side air intakes. The rear of the car is fairly nondescript. Highlights include LED taillights and dual exhaust outlets.

The retractable hardtop is operated at the push of a button, opening or closing in 20 seconds when the car is stationary. The top comes standard with a tinted panorama roof. Magic Sky Control is an option that employs a tinted film with particles that respond to an electrical charge. When charged, the particles stand up to let in more light, creating an 80-percent tint that matches the tint of the standard panoramic roof. When uncharged, the particles lie flat, resulting in a 95 percent tint, which shuts out more sun and keep the interior cooler. Magic Sky Control costs \$2500, a price that seems awfully expensive for minimal gain.

Interior Features

The SL550 cockpit is a model of modern luxury and refinement, with high quality, attractive materials and exemplary fit and finish. It comes with lots of standard equipment, too, but it should for the \$105,500 starting price. Among the standard features are leather upholstery with 12-way power adjustable heated seats, a navigation system, a 600-watt harman/kardon audio system, HD and satellite radio, and Bluetooth connectivity. Mercedes also offers ventilated, massaging, active seats that inflate the bolsters to keep occupants in place through turns.

The SL550 seats are quite comfortable and have plenty of bolstering to keep occupants from sliding around during aggressive cornering. The active bolsters, which inflate on the side opposite the direction of the turn. They also have a massaging function with four settings. The massaging function and active bolsters work well, but these seats are almost too indulgent.

The navigation system comes with a 40-gigabyte hard drive to hold map data information and music files. The audio system also features Mercedes' new FrontBass system, which mounts bass speakers in the front firewall to use the front subframes as echo chambers. The base system, as well as the optional 900-watt Bang & Olufsen BeoSound Surround Sound system, sound quite good, but they don't have the distinct surround qualities some high-end systems.

The driver faces a leather-wrapped steering wheel and an attractive instrument cluster featuring a tach and 160-mph speedometer flanking a digital information center. The gauges have a watchlike quality with aluminum trim and gray numbers on white faces.

The Mercedes-Benz COMAND system is standard, and it is the central controller for most of the communications, navigation and entertainment functions. It uses a rotating knob on the center console, as well as six buttons on the center stack to help choose various functions quicker. Drivers scroll through the various functions on the seven-inch dashboard screen. The system takes some getting used to, and it can be a bit frustrating when you don't know how it works, but drivers should get used to it after a few weeks.

The center stack also has some separate audio controls and a phone-like set of numbers that can be used to input phone numbers when a phone is connected via Bluetooth.

A retractable hardtop adds to the refinement of the SL-Class. When up, the top keeps the cabin almost as quiet and isolated as a coupe. Unlike most convertibles, top up visibility is quite good, as the rear pillars are rather thin. The optional AirScarf system features a blower motor and heating element in each seat to blow warm air onto the necks of occupants and keep them warm on colder days. The idea is to extend the top-down driving season, and AirScarf does that but it won't make 40 degrees feel like 70. The car also comes with a pop-up wind blocker behind the seats that redirects air over the car to make the cockpit quieter with the top down.

The trunk is fairly spacious for a convertible. With the top up, it has 10.2 cubic feet of space, which is as much as some coupes. Put the top down, however, and space shrinks to 7.2 cubic feet, which is limited but still enough for a couple of sets of golf clubs.

Driving Impressions

In addition to the slightly larger footprint and 20 percent greater rigidity, the 2013 gets two new engines and one high-end carryover engine. The first model to be released, and the only model we've driven, is the SL550, which is powered by a new twin-turbocharged 4.6-liter V8 that makes 429 horsepower and 516 pound-feet of torque. This engine replaces a 382 horsepower 5.5-liter V8, and it makes the car quicker and more fuel efficient. EPA fuel economy ratings are up from 14 mpg city/21 highway to 16/24, which eliminates last year's the \$1300 gas guzzler tax. A standard start/stop feature contributes to the fuel economy improvement.

Mercedes said a 530-horsepower SL63 AMG will follow in late summer 2012 and then a 621-horsepower twin turbocharged V12 will arrive late in 2012.

The SL550's 4.6-liter V8 is a major improvement over the very capable engine it replaces. It offers almost as much torque as the 5.5-liter twin-turbo V8 Mercedes uses in its AMG products. This twin-turbocharged engine launches the car hard, without any appreciable turbo lag, and emits a refined growl when pushed. Zero to 60 mph arrives in just 4.5 seconds, almost a second quicker than the outgoing model. Though very powerful, the SL550 is docile in traffic, and the start/stop feature works almost transparently, though the starting sound is noticeable with the top down.

The lone transmission is a 7-speed automatic that isn't as sporty as some of the dual-clutch automated manuals offered by the competition, especially Porsche's PDK. It has Manual, Sport, and Eco modes and can be shifted manually via a pair of steering wheel paddles in any mode. (Eco replaces the previous Comfort mode.) Eco shifts earlier to improve fuel economy and provide a relaxed feel in traffic. Sport holds gears longer and is better for performance driving. In any mode, the shifts are smooth, and the engine is strong enough to make power ready to tap at any speed.

Like the powertrain, handling is improved for 2013, thanks mostly to the lower weight and wider track. Not a pure sports car, the SL550 combines sportiness with comfort, and drivers can choose their preferred levels of each. The SL550 offers two suspensions, both with Comfort and Sport modes. The base Agility Control suspension has electrically controlled dampers, while the optional Active Body Control (ABC) uses hydraulics.

Choose the Sport mode for either suspension and the SL550 is an excellent choice for a Sunday drive through the canyon roads. It attacks corners with verve, staying flat, gripping the road confidently, and gathering its weight nicely to turn back in the other direction. The ABC suspension keeps the car even flatter in corners as the hydraulics work to counteract the affects of physics.

The brakes are predictable and offer strong stopping response. They also dissipate heat well enough to withstand hours of hard driving without fading or pulsing. The steering is a mixed bag. It offers little feel and isn't very sharp, but this direct steer system has variable gearing that gets quicker as the steering wheel is turned farther off center. This makes the car quite reactive in sharp turns and switchbacks, but the steering can be a little hard to modulate when it gets quicker mid-turn. We like this effect, but we would prefer more feel in the steering as well.

Despite the SL550's overall capability, it is no match for the sharper and sportier Porsche 911. The Mercedes is a grand touring car, while the Porsche is a true sports car. However, the SL550's more relaxed demeanor makes it easier to live with day to day. The ride is much smoother than the Porsche's, and the duller steering and less aggressive transmission make the SL550 docile in traffic whereas the Porsche feels more high strung. Enthusiasts will like the Porsche better, while the SL550 will appeal to buyers who want a sporty convertible to drive on a regular basis.

Summary

The 2013 Mercedes-Benz SL-Class redesign improves the car in several ways. The SL550 is more powerful and efficient, and the lighter weight makes it sportier. The SL550 isn't a full-on sports car, though. It's a more relaxed grand tourer that offers very capable handling, but is also tame in traffic. A convertible hardtop, it's almost as quiet as a coupe.

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