

# ARIZONA DRIVER

THE ENTHUSIAST'S GUIDE TO LIFE BEHIND THE WHEEL

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## SL AMG

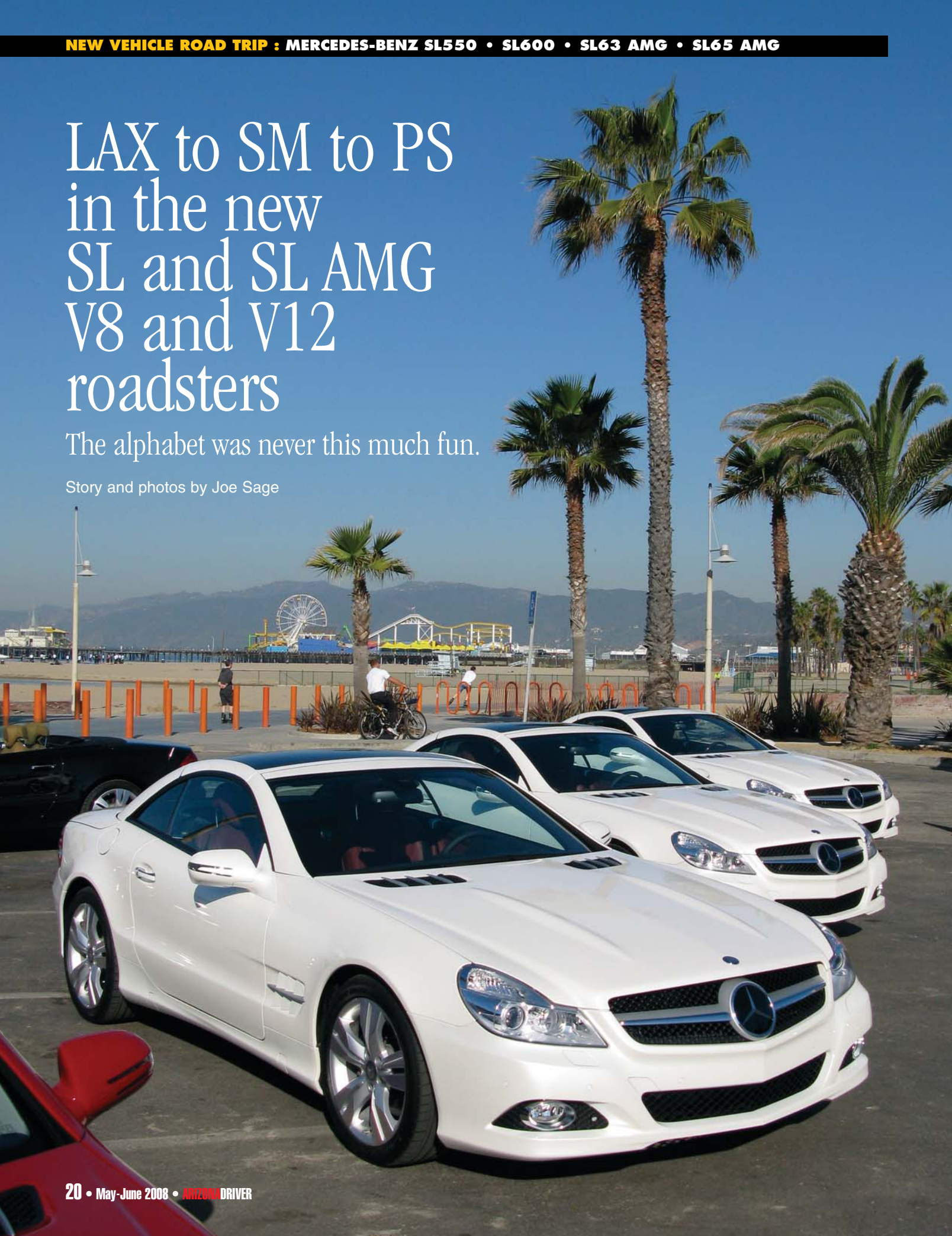
2009 MERCEDES-BENZ SL550 - SL600 - SL63 AMG - SL65 AMG - FIRST DRIVES IN US  
GREAT AMERICAN STOCKCAR SERIES - YOU CAN RACE  
DESTINATION: TUCSON OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES  
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WHY DRIVING SHOES MATTER... AND MORE



# LAX to SM to PS in the new SL and SL AMG V8 and V12 roadsters

The alphabet was never this much fun.

Story and photos by Joe Sage



Before a race, it's common to walk the track first, to familiarize drivers with the course. For the SL tour, Mercedes-Benz and AMG installed a complete room for journalists to study the route on a floor map, while reviewing giant-screen videos and receiving printed route books, along with presentations by project engineers.

The convertible hardtop necessarily gobbles up some trunk space, but leaves a fair amount, and a separator ensures convenient access and extra protection.

Our drive started in the streets of greater LA, heading through the Hollywood Hills to the spectacular winding two-lane highways of the San Gabriel Mountains.

First we'll clarify the lineup in fundamental form. The SL550 has a 382-hp 5.5-liter V8. The SL600 has a 510-hp V12 (also about 5.5-liter, though actually 5513cc against the SL550's 5461cc; and why is it called a 600? well, they rounded up). Their powertrains are basically unchanged for 2009, but they receive a significant facelift and a few other new features. The performance folks at AMG have worked way more than their usual magic to bring you the SL63 AMG, with a new naturally aspirated 518-hp 6.3-liter V8 and other breakthrough technologies (it's called 6.3-liter and "63" despite actual displacement of 6208cc for heritage and full-Mercedes-lineup continuity reasons that could escape many). And the SL65 AMG ups the ante with a 604-hp twin turbo 6.0-liter V12.

## TAKING IT TO THE STREETS

We were fortunate enough to be invited to the US launch of the 2009 SL lineup, more than a month before its press embargo was to be lifted, along with the engineering staffs of both Mercedes-Benz and AMG, as well as TV, print and online press from Europe, Asia and the US. Mercedes decided the best place for the launch would be near Hollywood, as that's where the original 300SL "gullwing" was launched in the 1950s.

Not a bad choice, either, as it afforded us a combination of urban, urbane, mountain, resort and desert driving that put the cars through their paces in fine style and brought us most of the way back to the Arizona line. We flew to LAX and were chauffeured to an oceanfront hotel in Santa Monica for orientation (and a chance to load a flash card with music from the company's online library for use on our road test, as they are very proud of the cars' audio systems). The SL550 and SL600 were ready to go in the morning, and the SL63 AMG and SL65 AMG awaited us in Palm Springs.

We started with the SL550, figuring the best move for the second half of the day would be "up," to the SL600. Applying a combination of the first night's orientation, including a full-suite floor map of the route, plus a detailed route book, plus the SL's navigation system, the first miles through metro Los Angeles' streets were clear enough to let us enjoy the operation of the retractable hardtop, the music of the SL's V-8, the scenery and aura of Hollywood, imagining then versus now, and even in car-culture Hollywood, plenty of admiring glances at the SL.

We spent very little time on area freeways, heading from the surface streets of the city straight to the San Gabriel Mountains and a challenging drive through the twisties and significant altitude changes, till we emerged near Palmdale, in California's military desert. Time to really open it up. Long straightaways combined with graded turns and Union Pacific grade crossings (where



KEEP RIGHT >>



The morning of the first day took the SL fleet through its original 1954 launch site of West Hollywood (also significant because Hollywood has the highest density of SL ownership in the US), through the Hollywood Hills, over the mountains to the valley near Palmdale, and across the open desert to Silverwood Lake State Recreation Area for lunch and a vehicle change.

The SL550, outside and in. Note the Airscarf headrest heating fans' vents.

A gourmet lunch break at Silverwood Lake Park included a comprehensive presentation of every generation of SL ever produced, as well as technologies applied during the breed's history and many brand new SL features.

After lunch, we changed from the SL550 to the SL600 and drove high into the San Bernardino National Forest (passing through the aftermath of 2007's massive forest fires), then down to I-10 and into Palm Springs.

we could guess our SL just might outperform the mighty diesels).

As we passed on into the foothills of the San Bernardino Mountains, we changed the suspension settings to Sport. We would never change back. These settings reduce body roll, quicken shifts and plant the car solidly on the road through the most demanding curves. Our co-driver, Camilo Alfaro of [autoproyecto.com](http://autoproyecto.com) (linked at our website) attached a video camera to the car at this point, and it was time to hit those curves even harder. Despite being an over-two-ton car with an automatic transmission, the base SL, when set to Sport, was lacking nothing in performance.

**MIDDAY, MUSEUM, MEDIA, MORE POWER**

By midday, we'd easily arrived in time for lunch at Silverwood Lake State Recreation Area, where Mercedes had performed another amazing stunt: they'd created a complete museum in the park, near water's edge, including an elaborate covered and partially enclosed structure on a fully graded site, which of course was returned to pristine park conditions after the event. Here they displayed an example of every generation of SL ever made, along with engines, transmission, cutaway safety zones and a wealth of text and charts explaining the SL's heritage in great detail. On hand again were engineers and designers from Mercedes and AMG.

Camilo joined Kimatni Rawlins of [automotiverhythms.com](http://automotiverhythms.com) (also linked at our website) as they produced a video segment on the cars, first in English and then Spanish. Then, per our original plan, we changed to the SL600 for the balance of the day.

The SL550 features a seven-speed automatic transmission that improves acceleration and enhances fuel efficiency, while gear

changes are barely noticeable, especially in the higher gears. The seven-speed shortens 0-to-60 mph time and allows significantly quicker acceleration for highway passing. Using seven gears allows individual gears to be spaced closer together while providing a larger overall spread between the lowest and highest gear. The V12-powered SL600 uses a modified five-speed automatic transmission. The SL600, with its V12, also weighs 4429 pounds, against 4220 for the SL550. Nonetheless, the SL600 claims a 0-to-60 time of just 4.4 seconds, compared to 5.3 seconds for the SL550. Cool tech advantage: SL550. Raw performance advantage: SL600. Refined performance advantage: a complex series of trade-offs. Tie-breaker? That depends on your budget. SL pricing for 2009 is still a carefully guarded secret as we go to press, but 2008 base prices were about \$96k for the





The whole fleet of SL and SL AMG models was together in Palm Springs. For this last leg, we had to choose, so we went with the totally new SL63 AMG.

There were two AMG routes, one longer and one a bit shorter. Those of us with earlier flights took the truncated loop, but what a loop it was. Suffice it to say it's close enough to Arizona to warrant a trip over there sometime, with your wheels.

SL550 and about \$134k for the SL600.

As long as we're on the subject, last year's AMG models ran about \$130k and \$188k. As you can see, the upper SL and the lower SL AMG overlap slightly, creating a far more complex set of trade-offs.

#### FULL SL LINEUP ENHANCEMENTS

The 2009 SL features new styling, with fenders that incorporate totally restyled headlamps and modified gill-type air outlets behind the front wheels. A redesigned hood with twin power domes and a wider, single-bar grille emphasize width and make a visual connection to the famous 1954 300SL. Side mirrors are larger and have built-in turn signals. At the rear, the SL has a new air diffuser in the bumper and trapezoidal exhaust tips that again emphasize its width and hint at the car's power.

The cockpit features a new three-spoke steering wheel and restyled instrument cluster with red tach and speedo needles that swing to max then back to zero when the ignition is turned on.

The 2009 SL roadster is available with Airscarf, an innovative feature that can extend the top-down season into cooler months—a heating system built into both seats' headrests, acting as what Mercedes calls an invisible scarf around the head and neck, at the touch of a button.

The standard COMAND system with 6.5-inch screen includes GPS navigation with a new multimedia interface and a 4GB hard drive, as well as integrated six-disc CD-DVD player and a Music Register for about 1,000 MP3 tracks. It's easy to connect an iPod, USB stick, memory card and other devices. Tracks display on the COMAND screen, as well as a smaller display in the center of the instrument cluster, and can also be selected by using buttons on the multi-function steering wheel. Bluetooth-enabled cell phones will work hands-free—even with your phone in a pocket or purse. Audio is automatically muted for calls in or out, and callers are heard over the audio system, and phone lists show on the COMAND system.

The SL's retractable hardtop can be fully opened or closed in just 16 seconds, transforming the car from a quiet, weather-tight coupe to a top-down, open-air convertible. Operation is controlled by a switch on the center console. Even with the top down, the SL offers 7.2 cubic feet of trunk space; with the top up, the trunk holds 10.2 cubic feet.

Since an open car can leave occupants vulnerable in a rollover, Mercedes engineers have created the world's first automatic roll bar. The padded, leather-covered bar pops up and locks in a third of a second if sensors detect an impending rollover. The driver can also raise and lower the bar by a switch on the console.

Stopping power for the SL is provided by large, four-wheel disc brakes enhanced with four-channel ABS anti-lock control. The SL550 is equipped with vented 13.8-inch front and solid 12.6-inch rear discs. Matched to its power and speed capability, the SL600 comes with even larger 14.2-inch vented rotors up front and 13.0-inch vented rotors at the rear, while the SL65 AMG boasts vented discs that are another 1.2 inches in diameter.

#### SUNDOWN, SUPPER, SLEEP, SATURDAY AND AN SL AMG

Those brakes brought us to a stop in Palm Springs on Friday evening, where we dined and stayed at one of the most classic hotels in town. In fact, we're told there are only a couple of hotels there; most of the action is in Rancho Mirage and Palm Desert. Of course, we 'Zonies all know Palm Springs best—the one with the In'n'Out Burger exit en route to LA (more significant when it was the closest one to Phoenix).

On Saturday morning, we had a choice between the two AMG models: the SL63 and the SL65. Sound about the same? They're not. Go with the bigger one? We already learned on the 550/600 drive that the V-12 offers great power, but more weight and a heavier nose. But that's only the tip of the iceberg in comparing the two AMG offerings. With the amazing new technologies we'd learned about in the SL63, that's the one we chose.

#### THE AMG TOUR DE FORCE

Perhaps the sportiest SL roadster ever, the new SL63 AMG is powered by a 6.3-liter, all-AMG V8 engine that's coupled to a newly developed MCT transmission. With an innovative start-up clutch replacing a conventional torque converter, a seven-speed multi-clutch technology (MCT) transmission combines the direct connection of a manual gearbox with the lightning-quick automatic gear shifts of a Formula 1 race car. The seven-speed MCT with AMG Speedshift is an all-new design, available only in the new SL63 AMG. With low rotational mass, its start-up clutch helps the transmission respond instantly and dynamically with no slip.

Fitted with four drive modes: C (Comfort), S (Sport), S+ (Sport plus) and M (Manual), the transmission provides customized shift control and does so with no interruption of power. In Comfort mode, shifts coupled with "soft" accelerator response are set up for smooth power transfer. In Sport, upshifts and downshifts take place at higher engine speed, and shifts are around 20 percent faster than in C mode. Switching to S+ cuts another 20 percent off shift times, while the sportiest mode, Manual, reduces shift times by another 10 percent—a total reduction of 50 percent. In M, shifts take just 100 milliseconds. We had a shorter drive in the AMG, just a few hours, so we didn't both get intimate with all four settings, but we'd guess the farther we went away from C and toward M, the happier we'd be.

The SL63 AMG is powered by an AMG 6.3-liter V8 engine that features four valves per cylinder, variable valve timing, bucket tappets (rather than rocker arms) and a variable intake manifold. Sharing no parts with Mercedes-Benz V8 engines, the 6.3-liter engine was a completely autonomous development at AMG. Built almost completely from high-strength silicon-aluminum alloy, the cylinder bores make use of a twin-wire-arc-sprayed (TWAS) coating, a process that results in very low friction and running surfaces that are twice as hard as conventional cast-iron cylinders.

The engine block boasts an especially rigid bedplate acting as the overall support of the main bearings, cast-in steel reinforcements and a sturdy closed-deck layout in the cylinder head area. The high-flow intake and exhaust ports form a vertical straight line, helping the 6.3 engine rev freely to more than 7,000 rpm, yet the highly flexible AMG engine still produces nearly 90 percent of its peak torque at just 2,000 rpm.

A finely balanced crankshaft with six counterweights spins in five main bearings. Counterweights feature heavy metal plugs—

usually found only in racing engines—so they can be significantly smaller, increasing power by reducing rotational inertia and oil drag. Each forged connecting rod is precisely "cracked" by a laser beam, with an irregular fracture contributing to strength when the two halves are clamped around the crankshaft. Connecting rods and lightweight pistons are matched for extremely close weight tolerances that contribute to smooth running at high speeds. Small nozzles in the engine block spray cooling oil onto the underside of each piston crown.

Twin overhead cams open 32 valves via bucket-type followers. Instead of rocker arms, the cam lobes sweep across the flat top of the followers, directly on top of the valve stems. This space-saving design provides a very stiff valve train for large valve openings and dependable high-speed operation, for maximum horsepower and torque. A hydraulic lifter automatically maintains valve clearance, for long service intervals and low costs.

Variable intake and exhaust valve timing maximizes efficiency and torque over a wide RPM range. Valve timing can be automatically adjusted within a range of 40 degrees using electro-hydraulic vane-type adjusters on each camshaft.

#### STYLIN'

The SL63 comes with a noticeably different AMG hood, a front apron with a pronounced wedge shape, larger cooling air intakes, and a black grille. Bi-xenon headlights with black surrounds and large round fog lights ringed in chrome and set to the side emphasize the vehicle's width. Hot engine air exits through fender outlets and from "gills" behind the front wheels. Trim panels finished in matte silver with "6.3 AMG" lettering catch the eye, as do new outside mirrors with arrow-shaped LED turn indicators.

SL63 AMG body styling also includes deeper AMG side sill panels, a beefy rear apron with a large black air diffuser, two pairs of chrome tailpipes and a functional AMG rear lip spoiler.

Finished in nappa leather and genuine carbon fiber, the interior features AMG sport seats, an AMG three-spoke steering wheel and a sport instrument cluster with red tach and speedo needles that swing to the max and back when the ignition is turned on.

An optional Performance Package is available for the SL63 AMG, with larger brakes, 19" wheels and larger tires, enhanced suspension and a smaller AMG sport steering wheel with a flattened underside and silver-aluminum shift paddles.

#### DRIVE ALL FOUR, BUY ONE OF EACH

So this is where we answer the which-of-four-models question to the mutual satisfaction of most of the automotive writers and TV people on this event: once you get into the financial stratum of the SL600, go for the SL63 AMG. There are enough advantages in the smaller engine and lighter weight to, well, weigh against the V-12. But there are enough advantages in the AMG setup to weigh against the base models, if indeed you are in that price range. If you're not in that price range, you can get all the style and plenty of performance from the SL550. If you need the balls-to-the-wall model—and you know who you are!—then only the V12 SL65 AMG will do. That leaves the SL600. Clearly, if V12 balance, panache and bragging rights suit your tastes, but you want to save \$50k or more, this is your car. Budget aside, we'd go for the SL63 AMG. We think. But then again, recreating this test drive might give us one more chance to make absolutely sure. ■

