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MERCEDES BENZ

BORN IN THE CRUCIBLE OF COMPETITION

Can racing technology meet directly with high-performance cars for the street? Richard Webb track-tests Mercedes-Benz AMG's finest to find out.

WORDS RICHARD WEBB



AMG

, the performance division of Mercedes-Benz, has a special place in the hearts of many car enthusiasts, so Kyalami racetrack seemed a perfect place to assemble and thrash a decent selection of AMG's around the track under a blistering African sky.

ML63 AMG

Surely, the least sensible AMG on a racetrack is the **ML63 AMG**. The fact that it was at the track at all spoke volumes for the firms' confidence in the car. Easily as quick and better looking than Porsche's Cayenne Turbo S, it features a new naturally aspirated 6.2-litre 386kW V8 mated to a 7G-Tronic auto gearbox. It's absolute madness and makes no sense – and that is why it is so engaging. It handles as tenaciously as a wolverine descending onto its prey and holds its ratios beautifully through corners. The rear wheels receive 60 percent of the power, rather than the standard M-class's equal front/rear wheel drive power-split, so it handles more like a proper sports car than any SUV I have ever driven.

It became obvious that the ML63 AMG could have been the inspiration for Robert Louis Stevenson's Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, because of its 'split personality' condition. As perfect as it is for collecting groceries from Woolworths, it's equally good for the kind of acceleration that causes blood to flow away from the brain – 0-100km/h

arrives in 5.0 seconds, combined with in-gear acceleration so combustible in urgency that it simply defies physics. This is a car sure to have Porsche looking over their shoulder.

CLS63 AMG SHOOTING BRAKE

The **CLS63 AMG Shooting Brake** shares its twin-turbocharged 5.5-litre V8 petrol engine with its coupé sibling but allows for 590-litres of boot space. This is a proper estate car practicality with its very stylish, wide opening tailgate. It's quick, with 0-100km spooling up in just 4.3 seconds. Off the line, it streaks off like a dedicated racing car as it emits the deep low-pitched blare under heavy throttle.

Sublimely effortless at high speed cruising, its stability is peerless. Those automotive alchemists at AMG have engineered in considerable compliancy even with the optional 20-inch wheels.

Inside, it's a calm and tranquil place to be. The controls have a jewel-like quality about them and everything falls to hand rationally. Many who buy this car will care as much about being noticed as they will about performance, but this car offers much more than mere show and go.

SL63 AMG

Then the key for the **SL63 AMG** was pressed into my palm. The car is bright red and caddishly good looking – speaking more of the latest hidden technology than any overtly stylistic

A B O V E The SL63's engine is the clear focal point, and even with sound-sapping turbochargers, it emits a deep, melodic bellow – something that's further intensified with car's superbly engineered aluminium roof folded back

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C63 AMG BLACK SERIES

Black humor, which makes light of an otherwise solemn subject, is why Mercedes-Benz simply had to create the Mercedes-Benz C63 AMG Black Series. Black is the new AMG – a dark comedy – a comic work that employs every single sensory modality known to man, creating the best ever Black Series.

The C63 held up well to extended circuit use with the big, naturally aspirated 6.2-litre V8 engine lapping up the revs through the seven-speed auto gearbox right up to the 7200rpm limiter. It looks like a road going DTM-Car, with a flared and sculpted body to suck air into radiators half as big as the standard car. It also accommodates a much wider footprint for planted handling.

The cabin is utterly convincing, with all of the creature comforts you'd ever need, even though it's not quite suitable for a trip to the mall with the kids. There are no standard rear seats, but it does have the ability to record your track-day lap times!

It is a true performance heavyweight capable of slogging it out with Porsche's GT3. The C63 AMG Black Series is a technical masterpiece, yet it still offers a sensory driving experience.





A B O V E The SLS is the first Mercedes-Benz car designed in-house by AMG

OVER THE HORIZON AT MERCEDES-BENZ

Mercedes-Benz's intention of driving down their high average median age of their buyers is no secret. The brand's new A-Class leads its youthful charge, but you can expect a new range of even cheaper and smaller cars in the future, possibly through a partnership with Renault and Nissan. Mercedes-Benz knows that Nissan is intent on going up-market, so it may make sense. Could we see a 1.0-liter three-cylinder engine or a 1.5-liter four Mercedes-Benz X-Class within five years to rival BMW's MINI?

consideration. Power from its twin-turbocharged 5.5-litre V8 petrol has increased to 395kW, accessed by two driving modes via the button on the centre console marked 'Comfort', which was emphatically not used, and 'Sport', which sharpens steering and throttle response in concert with firmer spring and damper settings appropriate for track conditions.

A prod of the engine start button initiates a low-frequency bellow that builds as you keep the noise-peddle planted, treating you with a pop, sizzle and hiss of the over-run from the exhaust, a kaleidoscopic onomatopoeia sure to delight anyone with a pulse.

Acceleration is hammerhead in intensity, adhesion to the track is otherworldly and the carbon-ceramic brakes are so effective they re-arrange your internal organs under earnest braking. Undulating cambers and highly spirited cornering causes the front-end to bite the tarmac on turn in, and the locking diff enabled back end squats down as if connected to the track by some celestial Velcro.

MERCEDES-BENZ AMG SLS

The Mercedes-Benz **AMG SLS** is inspired by the iconic 1954 300SL but there is much more similarity than just those evocative gull-wing doors. Nostalgia clearly had a strong influence on AMG as they set to remaster the SLS for the now generation, with its massive bonnet and set back cabin.

Getting access to that delicious interior via those exquisite doors is part of a protocol, a ritual even. Unlock the car and finely crafted handles automatically whirl out from each door, retracting again when locked or driven off. The doors themselves are, thankfully, very light; a gas-filled strut assists with their fluid upwards movement. Entry involves stepping over a wide

sill and sliding down into the seat. Ladies, a word of caution here – choose your clothing carefully to help maintain your dignity, unless of course the loss of it is part of the ritual.

The SLS's cabin may be reminiscent of other Mercedes-Benz cars, but it takes only one corner at speed to realise that this beauty performs like no other. The steering is instantly responsive and razor-sharp, which combined with almost no flex from the chassis, can inspire huge confidence.

Make no mistake, however, this SLS is a genuine supercar and uses the same 6208cc V8 engine as the R1,4 million C63 AMG Black series. Given the SLS's is R2.7-million, it does beg the question: Is the pricing somewhat optimistic? Get it on a straight bit of the track and any missgivings are left behind as it accelerates from 0 to 100km/h in 3.8 seconds and on to an electronically limited 317km/h.

AMG has squeezed an extra 40kW from the V8, plus the SLS is 110kg lighter than the C63. It's insanely quick at 0-100km in 3.9sec, but it's also incredibly easy to drive well. Fuel economy is not a reason you'd buy this car, but the 99-litre tank gives it a proper touring GT range of 668km. It's perfect to claim your freedom on the twisty ribbons of tarmac sandwiched between majestic mountains and the Indian Ocean along the Garden Route.

In the future, AMG will move to All-Wheel-Drive, including the 2014 E63 AMG. Driven by the need for performance and cold weather traction, Mercedes believes it will also further enhance demand for AMG models in their traditional markets. So whilst AMG cars demand experienced drivers, they are equally at home on the road as they are on the track. This points to good news for the well-heeled consumer, and something to aim at for the rest of us. ■