

# SUPER ★ STAR



**Loved by the rich and famous, the Mercedes Pagoda SL is pure class. And a great investment if you buy right...**



**C**lassics don't come more timelessly elegant than the SL 'Pagoda' Mercedes, at home in any setting and capable of crossing continents without breaking into a sweat. Now much more valuable than the R107 SL that succeeded it, the SL (code-named W113 by Mercedes-Benz) still represents exceptional value for money and is a sure-fire investment if you buy well.

The SL was a car that the famous flocked to when new. John Lennon was a fan, along with Tina Turner and Audrey Hepburn, while that suave caddish actor Leslie Phillips has owned one since new, purchased way back in 1966. What a sensible bloke!

**History**

The first SL (SL is the term for Sport Light, not a trim level later used by Vauxhall!) was the mighty 300SL, an ultra-exclusive sports car built initially in futuristic gullwing coupé form. Launched in 1954, the car was fast and extremely costly; the roadster that superseded the closed car in 1957 was just as exclusive and is now just as highly prized.

After the 300SL came the 190SL; it looked much the same but was offered as a roadster only and packed nothing more exciting

than a 1897cc four-cylinder engine. It was from this point that the SL became a more mainstream model; still relatively costly and beautifully built, but far more attainable than the 300SL had ever been. While the 190SL is sought after, it's the Pagoda that followed in 1963 which is the SL that everyone wants.

Clean cut and built like a Mercedes should be, at first there was a 230SL only, fitted with a 2306cc straight-six: 19,831 were made in a production run that lasted until 1967. Beautifully crafted and engineered, it cost more than £3500 new. That's well over a grand more than a Jag E-type while performance from the 148bhp engine, even with standard fuel injection, was only satisfactory even back then.

Enter the 250SL. This was only ever intended as an interim model. The rarest of all the Pagodas, just 5196 were made, all but 19 of them in 1967. Each was fitted with disc brakes all round and a 2496cc straight-six for 170bhp plus usefully more torque while a five-speed manual gearbox became optional albeit rarely specified over the four-speed auto.

The final incarnation of the breed was launched in 1967. The 280SL is the most common, most sought after and also the most valuable of all the Pagodas. With softer suspension (which made for inferior handling), better seats and a stronger engine featuring seven main bearings, 23,885 examples of the 280SL rolled off the production lines to be replaced the equally excellent 107 series. When it ducked out, the price had risen to £4619, which would have got you a Porsche 911S or a nearly new Aston Martin DBS.

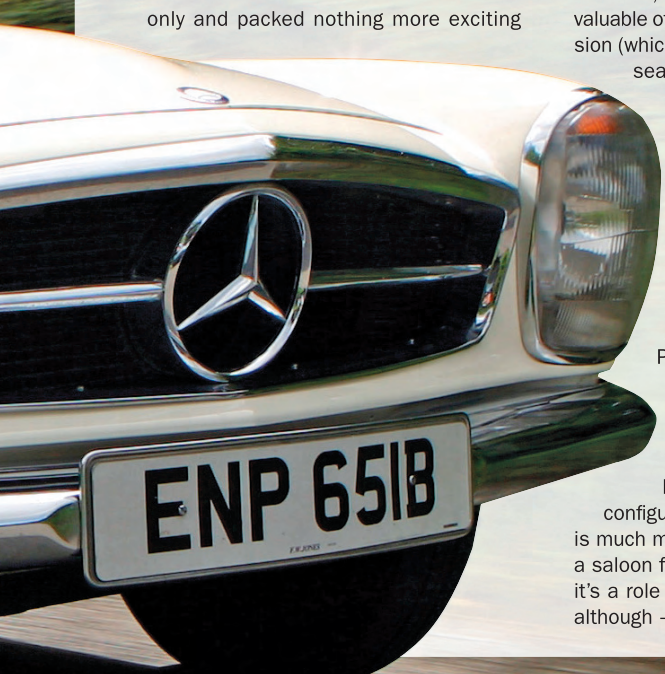
Although officially SLs, the term Pagoda became common parlance. Pagoda is a temple which has a dip in the roof and it referred to the SL's hardtop.

**Driving**

Despite its two-seater convertible configuration, the SL is no sports car – this is much more of a cruiser, as it's based upon a saloon floor pan and running gear. However, it's a role that the Pagoda rises to admirably, although – as in the best Mercedes tradition

**WHAT TO LOOK FOR**

- The SL's monocoque can corrode badly and it's common to find a car with a rusty structure that looks presentable. The bulkhead normally survives intact, but the complex sill structures don't – and properly repairing these can cost £2500 per side. What's initially visible is a screw-on cover that hides the structure itself, and because you're unlikely to get the opportunity to remove this, you need to make the most thorough checks you can from inside the car – which isn't easy.
- You also need to get underneath the car to inspect the floorpans as well as the chassis members at the rear; they extend the length of each side of the boot floor. Also take a look at the chassis legs at the front of the car, along with the bumper mountings. These may be accident damaged or rusty, but replacement is cheap and easy at £200-£300. You must also ensure that you remove the floorpan covers behind the rear seats, to allow you to see inside the chassis legs.
- It's not just structural corrosion that you need to watch out for; more cosmetic areas that can also be affected include the front wings around the headlights as well as the wheelarches – original wings will feature a flute either side of the chrome headlamp trim.
- Many of the outer panels are aluminium, so rust isn't an issue but corrosion might be, along with micro-blistering of the paint. The bonnet, boot lid and door skins are all aluminium, as is the hood stowage cover and even the door casings. Each was cut to fit when the car was new, with the chassis number usually stamped onto the bonnet and hood panel; if it's still there, the panels now fitted are the originals.
- All W113s feature a straight-six, which tends to be noisier than you'd expect even in good condition. Most of these cars are used relatively infrequently while also being generally well looked after, so major powerplant issues aren't common.
- The cast-iron bottom end is extremely strong and unlikely to give trouble, but it's not the same for the aluminium alloy cylinder head. As with all alloy heads, it's essential that the right level of anti-freeze is maintained, if internal corrosion isn't to occur. To make sure all is well, make sure the engine gets up to temperature reasonably quickly; if it doesn't, the chances are the thermostat has been removed to mask an overheating problem. Also let the engine idle for a few minutes and keep an eye on the temperature gauge; if things get hot it's probably because the coolant flow is restricted, because the radiator has got clogged with cylinder head debris – although the engine's waterways could also have got clogged up too. A re-cored radiator will usually put everything right; expect to pay £200 for an exchange unit – or you could splash out at your local Mercedes dealer and buy a new one, for a hefty £1000 or so.
- Predictably, the key to long engine life is 3000-mile oil changes, using a decent quality 20/50 lubricant; it helps reduce bottom-end wear while also minimising the likelihood of the camshaft wearing quickly. Dirty oil will also lead to the fuel injection pump failing prematurely – with a rebuild costing over £1000. There can also be fuel injection problems on infrequently used cars, caused by condensation leading to corrosion in the injection pipes – but this is rare.



**FAST FACTS**

<b>Best model</b>	<b>280SL</b>
<b>Worst model</b>	<b>Manual cars</b>
<b>Budget buy</b>	<b>230SL</b>
<b>OK for unleaded?</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<b>Will it fit your garage (mm)?</b>	<b>L4288 x W1778</b>
<b>Spares situation</b>	<b>Very good</b>
<b>DIY ease?</b>	<b>Generally no problem</b>
<b>Club support</b>	<b>Excellent</b>
<b>Appreciating asset?</b>	<b>Steadily</b>
<b>Good buy or good-bye?</b>	<b>Good buy</b>

**PROS & CONS**

- Image, build quality, driving experience, stylish lines
- Costly to buy and restore, lots of rubbish about
- £18,000-100,000





Thanks to Sam Bailey at the SL Shop ([www.theslshop.com](http://www.theslshop.com))

Clean cut shape has lasted well and parts still available from M-B



Body coloured hubcaps, nicer than alloys, etc



Chromework is dear to restore but longlasting



Reversed gear selector, otherwise auto is fine

**THREE OF A KIND**



**Alfa Romeo Spider**

Whereas the Merc is a cruiser, this is a car for those who love to drive, thanks to its brilliant chassis, sweet engine and light controls. It's a beautiful car too, as long as you don't buy one of the hideous later cars with colour-coded bumpers. But be very wary of tarted-up cars, which are rife.



**BMW 2002 cabriolet**

You're going to have to search very hard to find one of these; even if you go to Europe and settle for a left-hand drive example, you'll have your work cut out tracking one down. While they're stylish, classy and rare, these drophead BMWs are far cheaper to buy than any worthwhile Pagoda.



**Jaguar E-type**

A car that needs no introduction, the E-type was more of a sports car in six-cylinder form, but by the time the V12 came out the Jag had become more of a cruiser. Hugely sought after, stunning to look at and great to drive with a few sympathetic upgrades, be careful as many E-types are tarted up.

– to do the job properly it's best to have an automatic gearbox fitted, whichever engine is installed. The rather odd 'back to front' floor selector gait needs some familiarising with but the 'box is pretty responsive and smooth. There are those who like the manual transmission though, so it's worth trying one before you go the obvious route, as these cars can represent the bargain end of Pagoda ownership (if there is such a thing) even if the ratios were judged ill matched at the time.

Deeply impressive is how *Autocar* summed up the SL overall in a road test, so well honed was this machine, straight line pace excepted. Make no mistake, these Mercs are no road burners. Predictably, the bigger the engine the more performance there is and the better the car is to drive, thanks to steadily increasing power and torque levels although road tests throughout the 1960s only saw the car hit 60 in no better than ten seconds. Still, speed isn't everything and if this car wooed a certain J Clarkson then it can't be that sedate!





**Robust straight six lasts as does fuel injection**



**Fuel injection for all, only 2.8 has real pace**



**Functional cockpit lacks fuss, but highly durable**

The 280SL also received a retuned suspension; Merc's boffins softened things to improve the ride at the expense of handling. However, most buyers would agree that this is the version with the best balance, proving that the SL is a car for cruising in, rather than for thrashing along twisty back roads – something that's hardly unexpected given that the car was designed almost 50 years ago. What remains sky high is the feel good factor driving one, watching the frantic world fly by.

## Prices

You'll need at least £18,000 to secure a Pagoda that isn't a liability; that nets a 230SL with a manual gearbox. The cheapest worthwhile 250SL is £22,000, while a good 280SL costs from £25,000. These prices are for usable cars only though; if you want something special or concours you'll need to pay more – and potentially a lot more. A really special 280SL will now fetch £65-75,000, while recently a perfect example just breached the £100,000 barrier.

Interior and exterior colour schemes can make quite a difference to Pagoda values; silver with red leather will always be popular, but cars with a dark paint scheme and dark interior trim aren't seen as especially desirable. Cars with a manual gearbox are also less sought after; such a transmission can knock 10 per cent off a Pagoda's value.

## Improvements

The SL is one of those cars that doesn't benefit from mechanical upgrades; it was so well engineered that improving on the standard product is very difficult. Indeed, be suspicious of cars that have been modified, as the suspension and braking systems are excellent in standard form and so are the engines and transmissions. Also be very wary of SLs with non-standard wheels and tyres, as these can easily upset the car's dynamics. The only upgrade worth incorporating is the fitment of a wind deflector to reduce buffeting, although stereo and security improvements are worthwhile, as long as they're done discreetly.

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- The W113's auto is tough, and lasts forever unless truly neglected. Leaks aren't unusual, and if the fluid level is allowed to drop, the gearbox could be badly damaged. If a rebuild is needed, expect to pay £1000 for an exchange unit.
- The rest of the transmission is strong, but the propshaft's couplings fail eventually, as will the universal joints; both are easily fixed. The latter is given away by clonking as drive is taken up, but this could also be worn diff mounts, which typically costs up to £1000 to repair. Beware whining from a worn diff; rebuilds are £1500-£2000.
- Power steering was an option on all W113s; most autos have it and so do some manuals. It's worth having, as the steering is more direct with it, and it's also a reliable system.
- The suspension is long-lived as long as the kingpins and trunnions have been greased every 3000 miles. Wear here is given away by raising the front of the car and feeling for play by rocking the wheel top and bottom – if in doubt, put it through an MoT. Fresh dampers (£60 a piece) usually transform a Pagoda; most owners don't notice the gradual deterioration over time.
- Get used to the car's brakes before really trying them out, as the front hoses can fail internally, leading to poor braking and pulling to one side.
- Callipers also stick if the car isn't used regularly, so drive slowly on a level piece of ground then take your foot off the accelerator; if the car comes to a halt the brakes are sticking. Again, an easy fix at around £70 each for exchange callipers.
- All electrical bits are available, but replacing some items is a nightmare. For example, the wiper spindles sit behind the dashboard, which is a part of the car's structure so it can't be removed. It's the same for the capillary tube temperature gauge and heater controls – if these all need replacing expect a bill of £600-800 to sort out.
- Check that all four of the functions controlled by the single stalk column are working okay; they sometimes don't and it's a dear inconvenience.
- Check the state of the loom, which may have gone brittle by now – this is especially important if you're looking at a sun-baked ex-US car.
- The leather-like MB-Tex material used to trim the cabin is durable, and although seats can sag, restuffing them is simple and cheap. The wood trim on the dash top can rot; a fresh set is £450.
- Make sure the hood and its frame are intact, because replacing either is costly; a replacement hood is £850-1000 while a new frame is £7500 new or £2000-£2500 for a used one.
- Analyse the hard top, and make sure all its chrome trim is present and good; replacing the whole lot costs £2500+. It's a similar story where the grille and bumpers are concerned – replacing all the brightwork costs £5000+.

## VERDICT

During an eight-year production run, just 48,912 W113s were built. Although the survival rate is high, these cars are rarer than you think, so it's unsurprising that this is one of those surefire classics which you can't really lose on, if you buy with your eyes open. There's also more performance on offer than you'd think while parts supply isn't an issue – even main dealers have 'em – although some bits are ludicrously costly. As ever, you must always buy the best you can afford; finding a good example will prove in the long term, and it'll also be far more rewarding to own. A real (three-pointed) star, in fact.