

CLASSIC DRIVER

The Mercedes SLK 55 AMG on Route 66: Road of Hope



Aptly given the alias 'The Mother of All Roads', the legendary Route 66 from Chicago to Los Angeles was the road to the promised land in the 30s and 40s. A trip in the new Mercedes SLK55 AMG shows that not much has changed.

There are some roads that one should aim to drive at least once in a lifetime. Unquestionably topping most people's lists is Route 66: the iconic road which joined the industrial area of Michigan, Illinois, to the promised land of California, where milk and honey flowed. It was replaced in the 60s and 70s by a network of highways, in the style of the German autobahns, preventing increasing traffic levels from straining the existing single-lane highway - but unfortunately also eradicating the livelihoods of the hundreds of residents of the small villages along Route 66. In recent years, Route 66's legend has been honoured by 'Historic Route 66': a 2,500-mile dream street which spans eight states, three time zones and countless weather regions. A must-drive; and not just for car enthusiasts.





Choosing a chariot for the journey must be done with care – a low-capacity turbo engine or even a hybrid would be regarded as an insult to the large-displacement ancestors that once travelled on Route 66. With this in mind we chose an SLK55 AMG, which combines a heavy-duty V8 engine with modern interpretations of traditional design cues, hence making it ideal. Its 416bhp motor is brawny yet comparatively frugal, and is also naturally aspirated, unlike the twin-turbocharged powerplants in the larger AMG-63 series models that produce up to 563bhp. The SLK55's unit has a less demanding character than its bigger brethren, due in part to the innovative cylinder shutdown system which transforms the V8 roadster into a four-cylinder fuel-sipper. A combined consumption of 33.6mpg is boasted by the Stuttgart manufacturer, and we're more than willing to put this figure under the microscope during our 2,500-mile road trip.





While a price tag of around 73,000 euros may seem a little steep for a small, 2-seater roadster, at least we have the opportunity to preserve our funds along the journey. In most cities, fuel costs the equivalent of roughly 55p per litre, and motel rooms are far from expensive – some along Route 66 charge just \$20 (£12.60) a night per person. The route itself leads into the heart of America, and even those who have previously visited the popular tourist destinations such as New York, Florida and California will discover a completely different side of America by taking the 66. The first leg of our journey takes us through St Louis, Missouri, and through the near-200-metre tall Gateway Arch that dominates the city's silhouette. Continuing west, the landscape transforms into the dustbowl reverently referred to as the Midwest by the locals, while further on we see the deserts of New Mexico given colour by cereal crops and livestock. Particularly interesting is to see how the small villages dotted along Route 66 have gradually been fading away for the last 50 years, but might be about to undergo a change in fortunes thanks to the increased popularity of tourism along the historic route. The beginning of the end began in 1953, when a new Interstate network opened between Tulsa and Oklahoma, allowing speeds of up to 85mph – a speed that Route 66 users could only dream of.





But small towns such as Galena or Baxter Springs are slowly - very slowly - getting back on their feet. "You can tell from what's happened over the last few years that the old Route 66 will be busy again," says 62-year-old Maggie from the 'Angels of Route 66' deli. "More people are coming back. But before that the region was bled dry. Those looking for a job moved away - mainly toward Joplin. In Missouri, there is more work and the school system is better." Shortly before the State line in Missouri, many tourists visit the popular 66 Drive-In Theatre in Carthage or the recently restored '4 Woman of Route 66' gas station in Kansas - attention that a place like Baxter Springs can only dream about. But we pick up a freshly made sandwich there and discover that hope is the last thing to die.

This powerful Mercedes SLK can play to its strengths on Route 66: it's not entirely perfect in this environment, but its sporty suspension shines despite some areas of poor road surfacing. Although 416bhp under the right foot often proves irresistible, once self-restraint is rediscovered and load on the engine is eased back, the V8's cylinder deactivation takes place and allows respectable economy levels to become attainable once again. The dashboard display confirms that large parts of the journey take place in four-cylinder Eco mode, and average consumption is consistently above the 30mpg mark - the open roof and occasional enthusiastic overtaking manoeuvre hardly registering any variation.





Fuel is major feature of a trip along Route 66. This is not because cities such as Oklahoma City, Tulsa, or Santa Fe have depended on oil for decades, but that the gas stations along the way give the legendary road its character, as do the numerous motels. The revival of Route 66 has brought about the return of these family-owned businesses, and is personified by the '4 Women of Route 66' gas station in Gadena or the Tower Conoco of Shamrock; both recently refurbished to reflect their former glory. Others can offer no more than faded Route 66 memorabilia and pricing signs (which show a gallon of fuel for less than 40 cents, and the obvious lack of diesel) which brings a tear to the eyes of many Americans. But there are countless photo opportunities, such as the Cadillacs rammed into the ground at Exit 60 near Amarillo, or the Route 66 museums in Elk City or Clinton.



The countless motels spread along the route are also prime photography material, their faded lettering and peeling paintwork creating a ghostly reminder of yesteryear. Some – such as the Palomino, Blue Swallow, Roadrunner and Wigwam – have been refurbished in recent years, with the newly installed wireless internet connections and televisions showing that the present has well and truly arrived. Kevin and Nancy, owners of the Blue Swan, moved from Michigan to New Mexico last year to fulfil their dreams of owning an authentic Route 66 motel. “My husband had lost his job in the oil industry,” Nancy says in a melancholy tone, “so we decided to leave Michigan and realise our dreams of owning a motel on Route 66. We want to bring Route 66 back to life; every month, more and more people are coming on the tour – and to us.” The Blue Swallow motel was originally built in 1939, and was one of the most popular motels right through until the 1960s.





On the second half of the route itself, the SLK55 AMG competes for attention against the colourfully painted freight trains on the Santa Fe line, which snake past every 15 minutes before embarking on their epic journey through the sweltering Mojave Desert. But despite its comparatively petite stature, the burbling Mercedes makes light work of stealing the limelight as it powers us through the winding switchbacks. The rest of the route to San Bernardino Valley is vast, mountainous and warm - perfect conditions to pilot a powerful roadster. After an effective travel time of almost 47 hours we reach the terminus of Route 66 on a floodlit Santa Monica pier, with the on-board computer showing an average consumption of 32mpg. Despite some rapid, open-roofed driving and temperature ranges of -3.5 to 33 degrees Celsius, the Mercedes SLK 55 AMG has truly made a strong case for itself, along with the cylinder deactivation technology that Mercedes is so keen to promote: around 60 per cent of the near-2,500 miles have been completed in four-cylinder mode. Our only criticisms of the SLK55: the sports seats prove a little uncomfortable on a journey as demanding as this,

and the electric folding roof could respond more rapidly. But nothing that would stop us turning the car round, and retracing our route all the way back to Chicago.

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