CLASSIC DRIVER

The sky's the limit for the Cushway Mercedes-Benz 300SL

Lead
Renowned SL expert, Martin Cushway, has decided to part with his beloved Mercedes-Benz 300SL which has been owned by his family since it was bought new before he was even born. Ahead of RM Sotheby's special, sealed bid auction in October, Martin recounts some of his fondest memories with the car.

Mercedes-Benz 300SL roadsters that have belonged to the same family since new are few and far between. But there is surely only one that transported its owner to the hospital in which he was born. Here, renowned 300SL expert Martin Cushway tells Simon de Burton about the car that has been a constant in his life since the day he arrived in the world almost 60 years ago...

"Back in 1958 my father, Ron Cushway, bought a second-hand 300SL Roadster which he and my mother, Trudy, often drove to her native Germany on rallies with the Mercedes-Benz club. She came from just outside Stuttgart, and in 1962 there was a club trip to the factory during which my old man learned that production of the 300SL Roadster was coming to an end as it was being replaced by the Pagoda model. Realising the 300SL was something special, he ordered one of the final examples there and then – it turned out to be the 17th from last car produced – but couldn't take delivery until early 1963.

They flew from Heathrow back to Stuttgart and collected the car from the factory on January 16, about three weeks before the last 300SL came off the production line. Because the model was being replaced any extras were being offered at a significant discount, so my father bought a radio, an extra set of wheels and a few other things before he and my mother set-off to drive around the local area for five days in order to bed the car in.

They clocked-up around 800 miles, and then took it back to Mercedes-Benz Service Centre Number One at the works for its first oil change before heading back home to the UK. From then on, the Roadster became an everyday car, which is why my mother ended up being driven to hospital in it on November 11 of the same year in order to give birth to me. It has been a significant part of my life ever since.

My parents ran an engineering business that made spot-welding machines for the automotive industry. They worked extremely hard, but whenever they could take time off they liked to travel abroad with the SL. A favourite destination was Portugal where we used to go for a week or 10 days each May in order to get some sun. It was a 27-hour trip through France and Spain without a single motorway - a journey my father always did virtually non-stop with the help of some ‘funny pills’ supplied by a doctor friend.

Because the car is only a two-seater, I would have to lie down in the space meant for the folding roof and, to maximise luggage capacity, dad would shove military duffle bags into the voids in the wings behind the headlamps. We used to get some odd looks when he started removing the lights outside hotels in order to extract my clothes! There is cine film shot in northern Portugal during the late ‘60s that shows my feet poking out from beneath the folded-down roof, the tops of my mother’s knees, my father’s hands on the steering wheel – and the speedometer registering 140 mph. In fact, I still have all his old, red driving licence booklets recording the fact that, when he first got the car, he was fined for speeding almost once a week.

It currently has 380,000 miles on the clock, much of which is the result of the numerous rallies that my parents used to go on after I took over running the business in the 1980s. Before every trip, dad would prepare the car meticulously in our workshop and he would always carry an extensive toolkit that, if necessary, would contain sufficient equipment to virtually rebuild the engine at the side of the road. But nothing significant ever went wrong, it has always been superbly reliable.

On one occasion, in 1984, they drove it to Berlin with the club, me following behind with everyone's luggage crammed into a 300TD estate car. The city was still divided by the Wall back then, but because the rallies were sponsored by Mercedes-Benz, the firm supplied service vehicles to escort the cars in groups of 10 into and out of the east, always under the watchful eye of the East German police.

The car has also been driven to Greece three or four times, trips that, in around 1979 or ’80, eventually led to the need for a re-trim and repaint – both to original specification - because the intense sun had cracked the interior leather and faded the paintwork. The car has also had its engine rebuilt three times, twice at the factory and, in 2002, by Kienle in Germany, which is the big daddy of Mercedes-Benz restorers.

It was around that time that my parents died, leading me to sell the engineering business. Because I had spent my whole life with the 300SL, I decided to call a few other owners who had become friends and offer to maintain their cars. 20 years later, I now look after 45 SLs that are based in the UK and a couple of others from Belgium and Austria.

My own car, meanwhile, left me with a dilemma for several years. I realised that I had carried on using it on a daily basis, just as my father had from the beginning. It was never treated as a ‘classic’, just as a car that we all loved using. But now its value and the cost of replacement parts has made me realise that I should no longer park it in the street at night or use it to go to the supermarket. It has taken me around five years to sort of wean myself off it, something I did by taking it to Germany and leaving it in storage with Kienle.

It got me used to the idea of not being able to see it and drive it every day and that’s helped me come to terms with the idea of selling it. I can’t say the decision has been easy, though. I’ll certainly never have another car that holds 60 years of my best memories."

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RM Sotheby’s will offer Martin Cushway’s remarkable Mercedes-Benz 300SL in a special, sealed bid auction taking place on October 7th. Mr Cushway has offered to continue maintaining the car for the new owner.

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