

CLASSIC DRIVER

Getting Schooled in Tom Cruise's V8-powered Brabus SLK65

Lead

In 1998, Brabus took the small-car-massive-engine concept to the extreme with the supremely rare, V8-powered Mercedes SLK65. Once used as a set runabout by Tom Cruise, we took this pocket rocket back to school.



The United States of America may be the home of the muscle car, but I would argue the recipe was never truly perfected until Germany — in all its engineering might — took a liking to the genre. It's a simple concept: take a car, any car really, and fit it with an engine that is entirely too large to be considered sane (or safe). It's something AMG are renowned for, but if Affalterbach's meanest rides still aren't up to scratch, then there's only one tuning firm for the job: [Brabus](#).



A few months ago, this SLK cropped up on our Instagram feed, and after one look at those fabulous Brabus rims and its aggressive stance, I knew I had to experience the car for myself. So after a few messages back and forth with the owner ([@40collection on Instagram](#)), we decided there was no better place to get schooled on this mysterious Merc than at one of the oldest schools in the world.



That's how I found myself surrounded by tailcoats-toting teenagers in the heart of Eton College, worrying that I might be sent to detention for inviting such an automotive delinquent into the school. However, before any teachers got a chance to tell me off, around the corner rolled the hero of our story: a one-of-one right hand drive 1998 Brabus SLK65.



Now, the original R170 SLK is a fantastic piece of design, there's no denying it, but that attractive image was marred somewhat in-period by the incessant cries of "It's a hairdresser's car!" It's an insult I've never really understood — hairdressing as a profession requires an innate sense of style — but even the biggest of troglodytes wouldn't dare question this SLK's masculinity. In part, that's because of the hulking 6.5-litre V8 under the bonnet, but also because Brabus upgraded so much of the car during the conversion that they needed to be certified as a manufacturer under German law.



After transplanting the original 2.3-litre four banger from the engine bay into the nearest skip, Brabus got to work fitting the behemoth of a V8. Starting with an M119 Mercedes V8, the tuning house bored out the engine to 6.5-litres and fitted uprated crankshafts and pistons to make this little car even more overpowered. To avoid any manslaughter charges, they upgraded the wheels and tyres alongside stiffer suspension and, most importantly, the biggest brakes they could find. Inside, 22km of stitching was dedicated to the carpets alone while the rest of the interior was trimmed in luxurious leather. As a finishing touch, Brabus replaced the handbrake lever with a solid aluminium item, which would appear more at home on a machine gun than a drop top Merc.



The result? A near 450hp monster capable of reaching a frankly terrifying top speed of 178mph. Not much imagination is required to realise any would-be driver of this Brabus must be extremely brave, but even Jeremy Clarkson described it as "The scariest car I've ever driven," and followed it up with "Westminster council are going to have to ban it." Wisely, Brabus only ever built 5 of these V8 nutcases, each retailing at a whopping 120,000 pounds when new; 20,000 pounds more expensive than a Ferrari F355. Three of the five were built in LHD configuration — one of which was allegedly purchased by Bill Gates — while two featured steering wheels on the right. You'll remember I wrote that this was a one-of-one, and that's because this SLK65's sister car was sadly written-off in Hong Kong some years ago, making this the sole surviving example.



Naturally, such a rare and exclusive piece of kit must have an equally impressive ownership history, and this car's first custodian was none other than movie star Tom Cruise, who used it as his runabout during the filming for 'Eyes Wide Shut' in the UK, notably the last film directed by the legendary Stanley Kubrick. Originally, Mr. Cruise was content driving this SLK as a Brabus lookalike, but thankfully he was persuaded to convert it into the genuine article when it had done just 5,000 miles.



On paper, the SLK65 isn't short of appeal, and in person this thing is overflowing with old-school charm. Despite being under 4 metres long, this SLK has as much road presence as just about anything on four wheels, while its machine gun rattle V8 exhaust note is up there with the all-time greats. The idea of a tiny, V8-powered two seater that drinks petrol as fast as it breaks the speed limit is as antiquated as Eton College itself, but it's one that only seems to appeal more as we creep towards an electric-only future. When the internal combustion engine has revved its last, the Brabus SLK65 will serve as a reminder that there truly is no replacement for displacement.

Photos by Mikey Snelgar

Gallery

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