



Getting into the spirit, owner Penny Akashi is the proud custodian of this 1955 classic.

Glamour and elegance

After inheriting this beautiful 300SL Gullwing from her late husband, this owner really got into the spirit of classic Mercedes-Benz ownership

WORDS & IMAGES RICHARD TRUESDELL

CELEBRITY 300SL GULLWING OWNERS INCLUDED ACTORS Clark Gable (whose example changed hands in January for \$1.85m, or about £1.18m), Glenn Ford, Yul Brynner and Tony Curtis, and musicians Skitch Henderson and Don Ricardo, a leader of the famous NBC Orchestra. But it wasn't just the men that had all the fun, women in the 1950s were also known to appreciate the styling and engineering of the 300SL, two of the most notable being actresses Sophia Loren and Zsa Zsa Gabor. In the case of Sophia Loren, Mercedes-Benz heavily publicised her connection to the flagship three-pointed star.

Move the clock forward more than 50 years after the last Gullwing rolled off the assembly line, and we find ourselves at the 2012 Gull Wing Group convention in Palm Springs, California. There, among all the perfectly restored cars and trailer queens, one Gullwing beckoned us, a silver 1955 model. It wasn't perfect – the paint showed signs of cracking in spots – but with the doors open the interior carried a patina that told us this car was driven by an enthusiastic owner. ▷

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JUST THE FACTS



Mercedes-Benz 300SL Gullwing (w198)

ENGINE M198 2,996cc 6-cyl

POWER 212bhp@5,800rpm

TORQUE 203lb ft@4,600rpm

TRANSMISSION 4-speed manual, RWD

WEIGHT 1,295kg

0-62MPH 10.0sec

TOP SPEED Up to 162mph

FUEL CONSUMPTION 29.7mpg

YEARS PRODUCED 1954-1957

OVERVIEW

When introduced, it was a landmark car, attracting the attention of the rich and famous – as it still does today

Figures for car as pictured; fuel consumption determined at ¾ of top speed (not more than 110km/h, 68mph) plus 10 per cent; top speed depends on the rear axle ratio



▷ As we were leaning over the sill and inspecting the odometer that registered more than 100,000 miles, its owner greeted us. “Friends came over to the pool and said that you wanted to talk to me about my car. I’m Penny Akashi.” Getting the introductions out the way, we talked about her history with this very lovely 300SL Gullwing.

“My husband purchased the car in the 1960s from a man in San Pedro, which was long before I knew him,” she explains. “I became more familiar with the Mercedes after we got married and it went into our garage in the early 1980s. The car pretty much stayed there for

most of the next 20 years. Every now and then my husband would just start the engine without taking the SL out.

“Eventually, he disconnected the battery, the tyres went flat and it was not driveable. He did make some minor attempts at restoring it and once had it towed to a local car show, however it just went back into the garage,” Akashi remembers. “Even though he was one of the very early members of the Gull Wing Group, the only activity I remember us participating in together was a trip to Don Ricardo’s house to see his collection of vintage cars. It was while we were there that I saw person after person

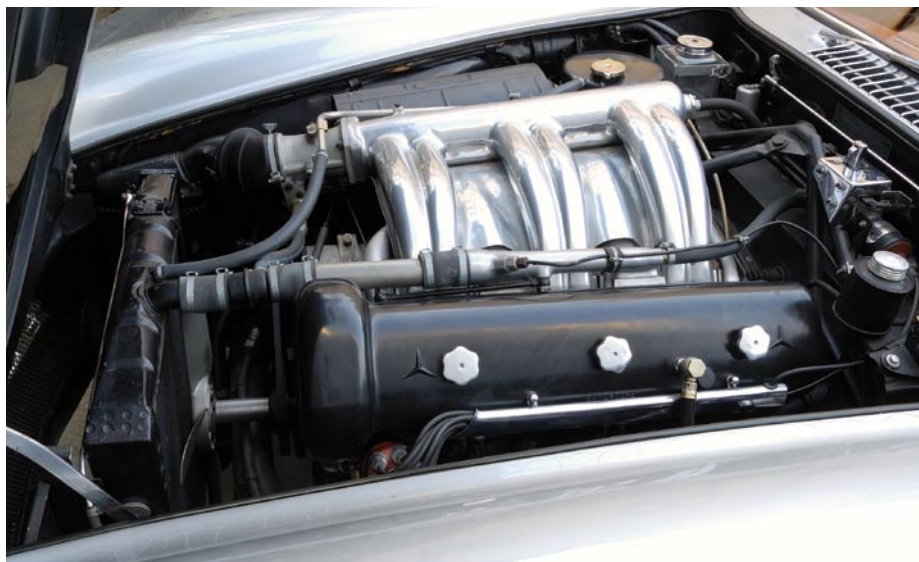
drive up in their 300SL Gullwings and realised there were people who actually drove their cars. I would ask why we had a car that we didn’t drive, but I never got an answer that made sense to me – but then again, it wasn’t my car,” she adds with a smile.

THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

“It was the winter of 2001 when he told me he was having the car towed to Tom Burniston’s in Long Beach, to be restored,” continues Akashi. “Over the course of three years, Tom painstakingly and meticulously restored the engine of the car and documented each step.



△ The vibrant, red leather shows gentle signs of its use.



△ This was the first Mercedes production car with a fuel injected engine, the three-litre straight-six developing 212bhp.



I would see a letter and bill from Tom occasionally, but I really didn't have anything to do with it. I was just happy to have an extra parking spot in the garage during that time." The work was finished in 2004, almost simultaneously with her husband's passing. That's when she became the owner and, with the help of her brother-in-law, went to pick it up.

After retrieving the SL, it mostly sat until 2008, except for once-a-month drives around the neighbourhood. That was

“It went into our garage in the early 1980s - it pretty much stayed there for the next 20 years”

when her good friend Pete Moyer asked, as a birthday present, if he could get a ride in the car. Akashi was happy to oblige, and with encouragement and support from Moyer, she started taking the Mercedes-Benz out for longer drives. Needless to say, she was soon hooked. At this point she connected with fellow Gull Wing Group member Steve Marx, who is well known in southern Californian Gullwing circles as the owner of Marx Mercedes Service in Costa

Mesa. “He encouraged me to get the engine checked out and serviced, and said we should start taking the car for ‘real’ drives,” Akashi tells us. “Freeways, the Pacific Coast Highway. Let it really go and get warmed up.”

After servicing the 300SL and giving it a clean bill of health mechanically, Marx mentioned that there was a Gull Wing Group convention coming up in Sonoma, California, up in the Bay Area east of San Francisco. “He said I should seriously think about driving up and that the members were a ‘nice bunch’. That first long trip that Pete and I took was one of the highlights of my life,” Akashi recalls ▶



△ Standing in the iconic pose, after years of inactivity, this now restored and often used classic Mercedes still turns heads.



△ The steering wheel moves to help the driver get in/out.



◀ The delicate, chrome script glistens on the two-tone dashboard.

◀ A decent boot and a spare are handy for the miles this SL enjoys.

▶ Akashi was soon hooked and this SL is now very well used.



▷ fondly. “I think the most exciting part was crossing the Golden Gate Bridge. I couldn’t believe that we were there in that car! Of course, the funny part was that it was getting dark and neither of us knew which knob on the dashboard was for the headlights. We must have tried them all – and one we shouldn’t have touched – before we found it!”

PERIOD FLAIR

Working with Gullwings is never anything but pure delight. But when the owner gets into the spirit of things and dresses in period for the photoshoot – right down to the politically

incorrect mink stole – it’s a real treat. We headed to the world famous Venice Beach. Now, a Mercedes-Benz 300SL Gullwing will

It was getting dark and neither of us knew which knob was for the headlights, we must have tried them all!

draw a crowd no matter what, but when what looks like a 1950s film star gracefully gets out from behind the wheel, well, a near riot ensued! As we continued, someone even asked us what

TV show Akashi was starring in, someone else wondering if this was a retro photoshoot for something like *Vogue*!

It was a magical experience with a remarkable owner and her iconic classic Mercedes-Benz. For just a few, all too brief hours, it was wonderful to recreate another era where glamour and elegance were the norm, not the exception. It’s great to have the opportunity to tell, in words and photographs, the story of one very special 300SL Gullwing and its enthusiastic driver who understands the true spirit of the car. Something tells us her husband would be very proud of her. 