



FIRST SPIN! 2005 Saleen S281



MUSTANG ENTHUSIAST GETS BEHIND THE WHEEL OF THE LATEST S281—COMES AWAY IMPRESSED WITH STEVE SALEEN AND CREW'S INTERPRETATION OF THE 2005 MUSTANG

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Even though the all-new 2005 Mustang has been on the market a scant three months, Saleen's NEWEST S281, the three-valve version, has already been loaded on transporters, heading from Irvine, California, to an authorized Saleen dealer near you. That's good news not only to Saleen enthusiasts who have been waiting for the Saleen treatment to America's favorite and newest ponycar, but to Saleen as well.

The Company has a lot riding on the new S281, having invested in an extensive retooling in the California production facility. Each year Ford delayed the introduction of the all-new Mustang put added pressure

on the Saleen organization, especially over the last two years. With a new-from-the-ground-up Mustang on the way, many were willing to wait for the '05 model. We can tell you that the wait was well

worth it.

With everything there is to love about the new 2005 Mustang GT, the 2005 Saleen S281 takes almost every aspect one better, combining incremental, yet significant, improvements to sharpen its edge that will more than justify the price premium over the mass-market version. Nowhere is this more apparent than up front, where the S281 has been treated to an improved lighting system—highlighted by a unique Saleen-designed headlamp assembly that incorporates the industry's first bi-functional Xenon/HID lamp. Using



moveable light shield technology to achieve both high and low beam functions in a single reflector with only one HID light source, they provide 40 percent more light in both low- and high-beam functions than conventional lamps.

Every Mustang aftermarket remanufactured car needs a unique front fascia to separate it from the factory-built examples, and the S281 is no exception. Inspired by the design of the Saleen S7 supercar, the S281 wears a set of aerodynamically styled clothes. From the new front fascia, with its new lower front grille

opening, the hood vents, the rocker panel side skirting, to the rear spoiler and the rear diffuser, if the new S281 looks good from any angle, it's from the rear, a part of the car that competitors will probably come to know intimately.

ENGINE AND TRANSMISSION

The S281 takes what is already a strong engine—the new three-valve 4.6-liter SOHC V-8—and improves it. The three-valve design features two intake valves and one exhaust valve, and imbues the engine with improved engine breathing,

specifically on the intake side. The engine is also fitted with an underdrive pulley system, reducing parasitic losses from the pulleys and water pump. Further enhancements come from the Saleen-designed PowerFlash performance computer that precisely measures fuel, air and spark requirements for every running condition. This engine demands premium fuel to maximize output while minimizing fuel consumption and engine detonation. Further improvements come with the addition of a Saleen free-flow air cleaner element.

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2005 Saleen S281 Specifications

» DIMENSIONS/CAPACITIES

Curb weight (est.).....	3,550 lbs.
Weight distribution (F/R).....	53/47
Fuel capacity.....	15.7 gal.
Wheelbase.....	107.1 in.
Track, F/R.....	63.9/62.8 in.
Width.....	74.0 in.
Length.....	189.1 in.
Height.....	56.0 in.
Trunk Space.....	12.3 cu. ft.

» ENGINE

Type.....	4.6L, 3V, SOHC V-8
Displacement.....	281 cu. in.
Bore/stroke.....	3.55 x 3.54 in.
Horsepower.....	325 bhp @ 5200 rpm
Torque.....	340 lb-ft @ 4500 rpm
Accessory Pulleys.....	Saleen underdrive pulleys
Exhaust.....	Saleen Stainless, 2.5 in. variable
Fuel.....	Premium Unleaded 91 Octane

» DRIVETRAIN

Saleen Quick Ratio 5-Speed Transmission (standard)
8.8-in. rearend / 3.55:1 gears
5-speed electronically controlled automatic (optional)
8.8-in. rearend / 3.31:1 gears
Saleen MaxGrip speed-sensitive limited-slip (optional)

» SUSPENSION FRONT

MacPherson strut with lower control arm
Saleen Racecraft system (N2 struts, linear-rate coil-over springs, 1.38-in. tubular stabilizer)

The result of these tweaks is an almost 10 percent increase in horsepower, from 300 to 325, along with an additional 15 lb-ft of torque, up to 340 lb-ft. The 2.5-inch aluminum exhaust system features an innovative variable design with two low restriction mufflers with vacuum-actuated valves that open above a specified backpressure. When these valves open, a portion of the exhaust gases is routed through a second set of tailpipes pointed at the ground. The sound is classic American V-8, yet is designed to meet mandated pass-by noise regulations in the

U.S., Canada and U.K.—a further indication that Saleen has plans to market the S281 beyond North America.

The exhaust system weighs 75 pounds less than last year's S281, which, when combined with the longer wheelbase, improves weight distribution from a nose-heavy 57 percent down to a much near-ideal 53 percent—almost optimum for a front-engine/rear-drive performance machine. While a five-speed automatic is offered, we suspect that most S281 owners will opt for the standard five-speed manual transmission whose ratios are almost perfectly matched to the increased output of the Saleen-modified 4.6-liter V-8.

» CHASSIS + SUSPENSION

Saleen has taken the new Mustang's modified front MacPherson strut suspension and solid rear axle and improved them further, benchmarking a number of highly regarded cars in the process. The new Mustang's underlying body structure, 31 percent stiffer in torsion, 49 percent more resistant to bending, gives the Saleen team an excellent starting point.

From here special springs are combined with Saleen-designed shock absorbers and rollbars to give the S281 a new degree of crispness that has never before been attained in a Mustang. In the new S281 the coil spring is mounted on a perch about half way up the strut, in essence a "coil-over" configuration that results in an optimal 1:1 relationship between the movement of the wheel and the movement of the respective spring. The provides excellent feedback of wheel motion, inspiring added confidence when pushing the S281 deeper into corners, leaving the driver confident that the tire will maintain a better relationship



(anti-roll) bar, with urethane pivot bushings, specially calibrated suspension settings)

» SUSPENSION REAR

Live axle located by three links plus a Panhard rod, Saleen Racecraft system (direct-acting, linear-rate coil springs, N2 shocks, 0.79-in. stabilizer (anti-roll) bar, specially calibrated suspension settings)

» BRAKES

Power-assisted 4-wheel ABS
12.4-in. dual-piston vented disc (front)
11.8-in. disc (rear)
Saleen ABS 4-piston calipers

» WHEELS

Saleen 7-spoke alloy wheels
20x9-in. front (standard)

20x9-in. rear (standard)
20x10-in. rear (optional)

» TIRES

High-Performance Radials
P275/35ZR20 (front, standard)
P275/35ZR20 (rear, standard)
Ultra-High-Performance Pirelli P-Zero Rosso (optional)
P275/35ZR20 (front)
P275/40ZR20 (rear)

with the road surface, even in marginal traction situation such as wet conditions. The matching anti-roll (stabilizer) bar is tubular, thus reducing weight, and acts directly through the strut rather than the lower control arm, again maintaining the optimal 1:1 relationship between the wheel and the movement of the anti-rollbar.

The new lower control arm design now consists of two steel stampings welded together in the shape of an I-beam, weighing the same as a cast aluminum part but costing considerably less. This design minimizes the normal conflicts where a bushing must control ride and handling inputs. This results in excellent feedback, and the rack and pinion steering system better communicates how the car responds. Solidly mounted to the chassis, steering feedback is exceptional.

The three-link rear suspension features a lightweight tubular Panhard rod, providing precise control of the rear axle, minimizing axle hop—a legendary Mustang shortcoming. Four times stiffer than the previous design, combining this with the other suspension enhancements incorporated into the new S281 results in the suspension keeping the tire flat on the pavement for greater cornering control. At all four corners are shock absorbers that feature a proprietary Saleen design.

INTERIOR

On the inside the improvements are again subtle, but they clearly separate the Saleen from the Mustang GT. Staring you in the face are the unique Saleen gauge faces, simple white numbers and silver needles on a black background that can be personalized with over 125 different user-configurable settings using the Mustang's innovative MyColor™ illumination system (providing the current lawsuit over this feature results in its continued production). Saleen leather seats are power adjustable, provide ample support, and are wide enough to accommodate ever-widening bottoms that curse an increasing number



What a joy it was steer the car with our right foot. A guilty pleasure to be sure, but with the added enhancements provided by the Saleen tweaks to the engine and suspension, we felt at home with the "power in the hands of a few" that's become Saleen's stock-in-trade for the last two decades.



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of Americans. Whether driving long distance or strapped in tightly for a weekend autocross, these seats are first rate.

The excellent driving environment benefits from several improvements—high-grip racing-inspired pedals, a short-throw shifter for the five-speed transmission and a three-spoke steering wheel that offers rake adjustment. When combined with the six extra inches of wheelbase, the S281 will fit all but the most extreme drivers.

The interior accents are satin aluminum and give the interior an up-market look. Unfortunately, Saleen has been saddled with the ugly speaker grilles on each door; their low rent appearance spoil the S281's interior just as much as they do the standard Mustang's. Hopefully, when the interior comes in for its first refresh, Ford's interior design team will look to some of the better examples from the aftermarket to find an improved way to integrate the added performance of larger woofers into what is otherwise a world-class interior.

Speaking of the woofers, in our S281 they are powered by 500 watts, courtesy of the standard Ford-supplied Shaker 500 AM/FM/in-dash six-disc CD changer with a wide variety of settings to tailor the sound to your own listening preferences. What is noteworthy is that it will play MP3-encoded CD-R discs, retaining the original folder/file structure—something that's not a given, especially with factory-installed

systems. The sound is better than average for an OEM system, but this is an area where Saleen might offer its customers a higher performance alternative working with a top tier aftermarket supplier, as it does with the ultra performance S7.

DRIVING THE S281

What a joy it was steer the car with our right foot. A guilty pleasure to be sure, but with the added enhancements provided by the Saleen tweaks to the engine and suspension, we felt at home with the "power in the hands of a few" that's become Saleen's stock-in-trade for the last two decades. Power without control means nothing, but with the S281 we could immediately feel a subtle yet noticeable difference over the stock GT on which it is based. On a winding, bumpy road the suspension is taut, yet

never uncomfortable—a by-product of the unique Saleen-designed shock absorbers. In spite of the much maligned solid rear axle, the S281 seems to have a lot more in common with well-regarded European sports sedans like the BMW M3 than the 40 years of solid axle Mustangs that have preceded it.

Our limited time behind the wheel still gave us the opportunity to evaluate the S281 over a wide variety of road surfaces. On Southern California's pothole-strewn freeways, victims themselves of recent torrential rains of almost biblical proportions, the suppleness of the Saleen-tuned suspension on our S281 was able to soak up whatever we encountered. Even equipped with the unique Saleen designed 20-inch wheels and ultra low-profile Pirelli tires, never was the ride too harsh, even driving over the expansion



joints and the lane bots. Where we had some real fun was when we found a large parking lot that was totally unoccupied.

While our drifting technique leaves something to be desired, it took a great deal of intentional effort to get the S281 sideways; a combination of gravel and the S281's tendency, like the Mustang it's based upon, of oversteer when approaching the limits of adhesion would get the back end to break loose. We could avoid this result



with the countermeasure application of more throttle, utilizing each of the 325 horsepower available.

On twisty roads, the modifications applied by Saleen's engineering team pay big dividends. While the new Mustang is vastly improved over its predecessors, the S281 takes these improvements to the next level as body roll is reduced and with it, control, especially at higher speeds, is greatly enhanced. While we had no opportunity to get our S281 up to our favorite track, Willow Springs north of Los Angeles, we spoiled ourselves, feasting on the tight secondary roads in Orange County. Even this short evaluation proved to us that this was among the best handling Mustangs ever.

Given that the stock, 300-horsepower Mustang GT will run 0 to 60 in 5.2 seconds, we suspect that with the extra horsepower, an S281 might nose under the five-second benchmark and improve on the Mustang GT's announced 150 mph top speed. As it's expected that the new Mustang will be sold in Europe (grey market Mustang GTs are arriving in the U.K. as we write this) any Mustang that can approach the 156 mph limits imposed on all but a few of Europe's highest powered sedans ensures that the S281 will give no quarter to the home teams on the Autobahns of Germany with their sections of unrestricted asphalt.

A few minor quibbles aside, the S281 is as much an improvement over the current Mustang GT as it is over its Fox platform forerunner. When the newness of the new Mustang wears off, the limited production S281, S281 SC and S281 E will retain a degree of exclusivity for its owners. With an MSRP of \$39,043, just slightly higher than

the 2004 S281, it represents an excellent value in today's hyper-competitive performance car marketplace. It offers an exclusive feature set to differentiate it from the Mustang GT, which is the car that it will be most often compared to.

Other cars that the normally aspirated S281 will logically be compared to include the new Pontiac GTO, which this year gets a horsepower boost of its own, and the SRT-8 versions of the Chrysler 300C and Dodge Magnum. While all are in the same general price class, like the S281 coming in right around the \$40,000 mark, each has a different set of priorities, with the 400-horsepower GTO being the S281's closest competitor. Here, the S281's lighter weight partially compensates for the 75-horsepower disadvantage, while its finer tuned suspension and better overall balance tip the scale

in its favor—and that's not taking into consideration just how much better the S281 looks in the flesh, although that is always a subjective judgment.

Finally if you're tempted to roll your own Mustang, when you compare the upgrades that comprise the S281, you would be hard pressed to build a comparable pony, using aftermarket components, for less money. And even then you would not enjoy the advantages of a factory-built and certified car backed by Saleen's increasing number of authorized dealers behind its comprehensive 36-month/36,000 mile warranty.

If you're seeking a new Mustang that will set you apart from the crowd, then you owe it to yourself to test drive the 2005 S281. We hardly think you'll be disappointed. ■

