

Having owned his 250SL for over four decades, Gary Jarvis decided it was due some restoration work. He now has a stunning prize winner, **David Sutherland** reports

IMAGES Richard Truesdell

# *Red light*



BELOW

The vertically placed minor dials strongly evoke Mercedes' 1960s style.

BOTTOM

The suspension is among the all new components on the car, and is spotless.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■  
*"The W113 was novel for being a sports car offered with an automatic transmission – a four-speed at that – and power assisted steering"*  
■ ■ ■ ■ ■





# A

little under 46 years ago, on December 30 1967, Gary Jarvis took delivery of his brand new Mercedes-Benz 250SL, the car pictured here and which he still owns. It was his first Mercedes, but it almost didn't happen.

"In order for me to be allowed to buy it, my second wife told me that she would have to be allowed to drive it too," recalls the retired defence engineer, who lives near San Diego in California. "So I drove it to work on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays – and she drove it to work on Tuesdays and Thursdays." That arrangement ran for seven years and seemed to work well. Although Jarvis is now on his third wife.

Since then, he has owned a further 16 Mercedes, most of them classics, including four 280SL Pagodas, a W198 300SL Roadster, and a 300SL Gullwing which he purchased in 1983 for \$53,000 and sold for \$555,000 in 2006, believing that the market could not go much higher. Gullwings new regularly fetch six-figure sums, but isn't hindsight a wonderful thing.

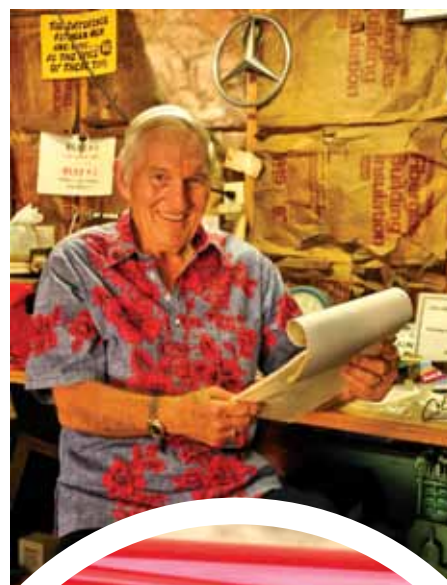
Aside from the 250SL, his current fleet comprises a 2003 SL500 and a matching

CL500 from the same year, sharing driveway space with that uniquely American institution, a full size SUV, in the form of a Chevrolet Suburban. However the Pagoda has outlasted all his cars. "It's the first one I bought, and that's why I'm keeping it – and it will be the last one," says the energetic 80-year old.

The W113 was unveiled over 50 years ago, at the Geneva Motor Show of 1963, and, apart from the same 2,400mm wheelbase, shared nothing with the W121 190SL it replaced, which had been built on the Ponton platform. The Pagoda was based around shortened Fintail underpinnings, along with that car's front torsion bar and rear swing-arm suspension. The W113 was novel for being a sports car offered with an automatic transmission option – a four-speeder at that – and power assisted steering.

**T**he 250SL is the middle child in the W113 SL family and as with many middle siblings its position is slightly awkward. The model series began with the 230SL using a 2.3-litre six-cylinder engine producing 148bhp and 145lb ft torque, and after three and a half years and 19,381 built, it was replaced by the 250SL.

The capacity of the engine, now with seven rather than four main bearings and equipped with an oil cooler, rose to 2.5 litres, although horsepower did not increase, and torque climbed a modest 10 per cent to 159lb ft, produced 200rpm lower at 4,000rpm. The front disc brakes were enlarged and the rear drum brakes gave way to discs, and fuel tank capacity increased. Apart from the different badging on the bootlid, there was virtually nothing to tell these successive models apart.



The 250SL was made for little more than a year, output totalling just 5,196.

## Specifications



### Mercedes-Benz 250SL (W113)

Engine M129 2,496cc, 6-cyl Power 148bhp@5,500rpm  
Torque 159lb ft@4,200rpm Transmission 4-speed manual  
Weight 1,360kg 0-62mph 10.0sec Top speed 122mph  
Fuel consumption 25.2mpg Years produced 1966-68  
Number built 5,196

All figures from Mercedes-Benz

**TOP TO BOTTOM**  
Gary Jarvis in his garage, a shrine to his love of Mercedes.

Even the 250SL's complex throttle linkages are clean.

US spec cars have separate covers for the headlamps.

Sunny California and Pagoda SLs go very well together.




  
*The 250SL has  
 the official  
 Mercedes-Benz  
 matching three-  
 piece luggage set,  
 an accessory  
 added in 1977*
  




## W113 family

### The 280SL is the most powerful Pagoda, but it is the best?

In eight years of W113 production there were three different models offered, the 230SL, 250SL and 280SL. The final 280SL topped the production chart, accounting for 23,885 of the 48,912 built, and it being the latest and most powerful version, has long been the most sought after.

But is it actually better

than the 230SL and 250SL? In reality there is very little difference between the three cars. The 280SL engine, having only 19bhp over the other two versions, does not deliver noticeable extra performance, and with very few other engineering and visual changes made for the 280SL, you would be hard pressed to tell which model you

are driving if there wasn't a badge present.

As with all classic cars, it is best to buy on condition, not the model, as a top condition 230SL will be better to drive than a mediocre 280SL. However, some people will always want the most powerful model in the range – and they will happily to pay top price to secure it.

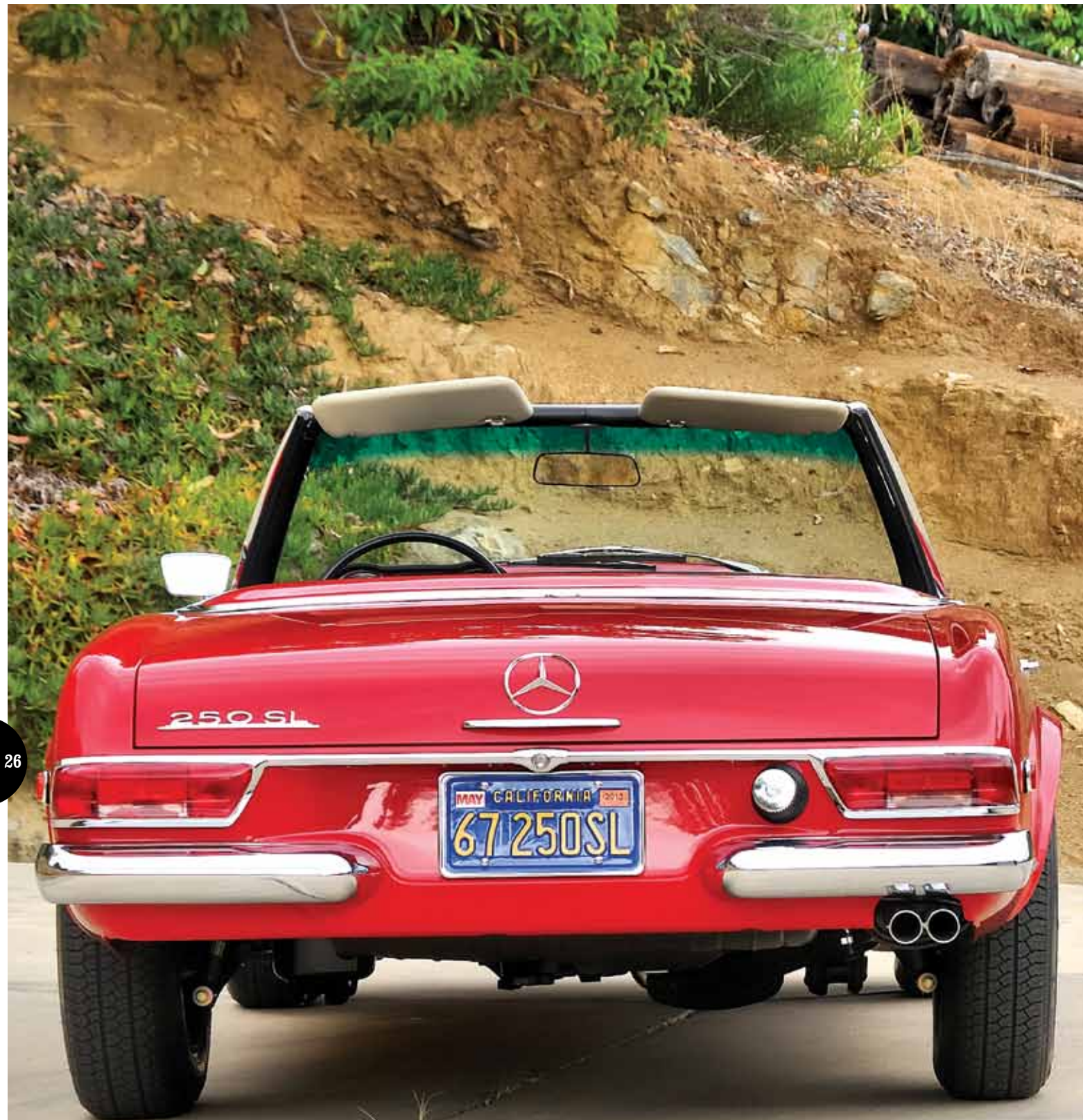


Not really much difference in the three different W113s that were built.



Not that you'd know it, but this is a 280SL, the most expensive one to buy.





⇒ With the 230SL such a groundbreaking roadster, with its super modern looks, its safety innovations including a strengthened passenger cell, as well as its combination of sports car performance and cruising comfort, it may well have been a case of don't fix what is not broken. Nonetheless, the 250SL was kept in production for only a year and 5,196 cars, after which the 280SL, with its 2.8-litre, 167bhp/177lb ft torque engine took over, completing the W113 life cycle in early 1971.

This 250SL, recognisably a North American specification car with its amber indicator repeaters on the front and rear wings, but its four-speed manual gearbox rather than

automatic transmission unusual for that market, was used as everyday transport up until 1974, when another driver reversed into the back of it. At this point Jarvis semi retired the roadster and bought a Volkswagen Beetle.

**H**aving joined the Mercedes-Benz Club of America in 1969, he had already discovered car shows and had entered the Pagoda in some events, his best result a third place. That was during the era of, 'if it doesn't move, chrome it', hence Jarvis chromed items such as the bonnet stay, the battery clamps and the top of the dipstick. However decorative chroming was

– thankfully, some say – short-lived. "I used to polish the life out of that chrome, but by 1971 it was out of fashion so I took it all off again," he recalls.

The 250SL has the official Mercedes-Benz matching three-piece luggage set, an accessory added in 1977. Today, these leather suitcases would be hard to find and expensive to buy, but it was a different matter when, 36 years ago, Jarvis spotted them in the Mercedes dealer in Sacramento.

"The parts were hanging on a wall and covered in dust, so I asked the parts guy if they would fit my car. He looked through his books and said they would fit a couple of





Few other sports cars of the same era had such a wonderful cabin design.



The manual transmission of this 250SL is rare in the US.



The optional side facing seat is common on W113s but not terribly practical.

## 250SL Coupe



The Coupe came with a rear seat, and a hardtop but not a hood.

### A special version of the W113 was built for the US west coast

California's warm, dry and sunny climate has prompted manufacturers to design cars especially for it, most notably Porsche, which in the 1950s introduced the Speedster version of the 356 convertible. Its minimal, token hood was intended to be kept folded down most of the time.

Mercedes-Benz, whose roadsters have always thrived in the US market also reckoned it would be worth making something for the sun drenched state, and in March 1967 announced what has become known as the 250SL Coupe. Normally, the W113 SL roadster came with a folding canvas roof and usually the metal hard top too (its concave design gave rise to the 'Pagoda' nickname), with the space behind the driver and passenger seats either a glorified parcel shelf or featuring an optional side facing rear seat, as seen in Jarvis's 250SL.

However if a customer took up the 'Code 417' option, the car would be supplied with a hardtop but minus the hood, with the rear cabin extended to the end of where the compartment containing the folded hood would have been. The extra space was occupied by a conventional folding seat, although it could not be sat in other than possibly by small children, so owners would generally leave it folded flat.

This model was also known for obvious reasons as the 'California', although it was available in other markets including Britain. However, with its all but unusable rear seat and no hood, it amounted to the worst of both worlds, which partly explains its rarity, even in its intended market.



Rear seat was little use, and best folded to increase load space.

*The car was trailered to the classic restoration specialist Hjeltness in Escondido, for a \$250,000 ground up, nut and bolt rebuild*

Mercedes sedans and also mine. I asked how much the set would be, and he said '\$100, and get it outta here – I've been trying to get rid of that for years!'"

**A**fter winning Best in Class at an event in Las Vegas in 1971, this 250SL took a Best of Show in 1978. It then went into hibernation because another car that Jarvis purchased the following year was taking up his attention – his W198 300SL Roadster, which he drove for the next seven years. Incredible as it sounds now, he paid just \$21,000 for it – \$16,000 for the car, plus an extra \$5,000 for the hardtop.

By 2010 Jarvis had trimmed back his collection, at which point his enthusiasm for the 250SL was rekindled. He felt that despite the prizes it had won in the past, the best was still to come, so the car, its odometer having completed a full revolution to show 1,100 miles, was trailered 40 miles north to the classic restoration specialist Hjeltness Restoration in Escondido for what ended up being a \$250,000 ground up, nut and bolt rebuild, funded by the sale of the 300SL Roadster in 2006.

The car, with Hjeltness for three and a half years (including a 17-month sojourn during which Jarvis was trying to decide between a ➔





If you are looking for the perfect Pagoda, then the search surely ends here.



Almost half a century after buying it brand new, Jarvis still loves his red 250SL.



These are the three other finalists it beat at the 2013 Legends of the Autobahn.

⇒ cosmetic tidy up and the full restoration it would undergo), had been back with him for just 10 days when we visited. Hjeltness produced a car that looks as good as it did the day it came off the production line, the vibrant red paintwork lustrous, the contrasting black leather equally perfect. The car's underside is immaculate too, with all componentry looking shiny and new, while breakfast could be eaten off the engine – the alloy rocker cover is pristine, and all the pipework and the Pagoda's famously complex throttle linkages are spotless. In the cabin, the red painted dash contrasts delightfully with the chrome trim of the instruments and switches.

**J**arvis keeps his 250SL in a spacious garage 250 feet below his house, which is built into the top of a cliff. The Gullwing he sold 10 years ago is actually still there too, as he stores it for the new owner who prefers, for various reasons, to spread his classic collection out rather than keep it in one place. The garage also accommodates half a century of wonderful car memorabilia, even including all the chromed bits that were on his Pagoda in 1970

and 1971. A full car space is devoted to many of the still serviceable items that were replaced during the 250SL's lengthy restoration, plus lots of other parts collected down the years, which Jarvis is in the process of selling, to offset some of the cost.

Following such an expensive rebuild, Jarvis's car has inevitably become something


of a 'trailer queen', and when a few drops of California's sparse rainfall appeared, we feared our photography session might be curtailed. However when it matters, this zestful octogenarian is probably as game as he ever was to get a job done, and happily drove to the freeway and dived out into the traffic so that we could do our action photography.

Our visit took place shortly before two key west coast classic car events, Legends of the

Autobahn and the most prestigious of all, the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance, a time when much of California's restoration business is working flat out to prepare cars for show, or for entry to one of the associated classic auctions. And we're pleased to say Jarvis was part of that, entering his 250SL in Legends of the Autobahn and not only

winning Best of Marque, but beating the Audi, BMW and Porsche marque winners to take Best of Show.

**T**o have owned the same car this long, even if it is a pretty SL Pagoda, shows exceptional

enthusiasm. But Jarvis, constantly with a wise crack or a joke, and with the kind of infectious nature that gives senior citizens a good name, is clearly as much in love with his first Mercedes-Benz as he is with life. Long may the partnership continue, we say. 

**■ ■ ■**  
*"Breakfast could be eaten off the engine – the rocker cover is pristine, and the pipework and throttle linkages spotless"*  
**■ ■ ■**



Scrubbed up engine is a beautiful contrast to the perfect red paintwork.



it may be a 'trailer queen' but its owner still loves taking it out for a drive.