

By the Numbers



Modern machines in repose at a Mid-Century Modern home—America's and (arguably) Europe's top performance cars in front of some period architecture. Both look entirely at home in this Palm Springs location.

A pair of '61 models named 300 (Chrysler's G and Mercedes-Benz's SL) may secretly be more alike than they first seem

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF KOCH

Numbers are the foundation of all things," opined Greek philosopher Plato. He swiped this catchy slogan from Pythagoras, who believed that our world is an imitation of an eternal mathematical realm. As numbers go on our own earthly plane, 300 holds some historical and cultural weight. Three hundred is the sum of a pair of twin primes (a prime number two more or less than another)—in this case, 149 and 151. At the Battle of Thermopylae, fought long before Plato's passing, just 300 Spartans fought Xerxes I and the Persian army in their legendary last stand. Following ten frames and two bonus rolls, 300 is a perfect score in the noble and ancient game of bowling.

These machines with 300s in their name depicted on these pages—Mercedes-Benz 300 SL and Chrysler 300G—are inarguable classics and, by happenstance, both were built in 1961. But if these models' names are (more or less) shared, the execution is not. One is a fuel-injected six-cylinder, two-seat convertible from across the Atlantic; the other a twin-carburetted V-8, four-seat hardtop (or convertible) built Stateside. Yet we suggest that they've got more in common than a cursory reading of the specifications would reveal. To wit:

Engineers championed the creation of each car, whose names are derived from aspects of their engines. Chrysler's chief engineer Robert MacGregor Rodger, who helped engineer the original Chrysler hemi V-8, saw that the thunderous powerplant and Chrysler's funny image didn't tally. He had wrung a then-unheard-of 300 hp from a stock 331-cubic-inch Chrysler hemi, compliments of dual four-barrel carburetors, B-51 compres-

sion ratio, and a Briggs Cunningham-licensed solid-lifter cam. The original Chrysler C-300 launched in the fall of 1954.

Meanwhile, in Germany, Rosell Uhlenthat (the architect of Mercedes' pre-war Grand Prix racing domi[n]ance) ran Mercedes' postwar passenger (a 4 righteously he was behind the imposing 1951 six-cylinder "Adventurer" W186-class) 300 S luxury sedan. But as the compact or prepared to venture back into Formula 1 (as for 1954, it entered sports car racing for 1952 as a stopgap and called upon Uhlenthat's experience. The racer's engine was based on the 300 S' 2,996cc SOHC inline-six. Its near-183-cubic-inch displacement rounded to 3,000 cc—a figure that, in Mercedes tradition, would dictate its name.

EVOLVED ENGINES

Mopar's accountants put the original hemi to rest at the end of 1958, but the 407 name continued, using the 413-cu-in. "Calden Lion" B-block V-8 developed for a rest of Mother Mopar's divisions; the 386 retained a 280-hp rating for 1959. New for 1960 Ram Induction introduced in the 300F consisted of two separate intake manifolds, each a compilation of four 30-inch-long intake runners, studding Chrysler's big "Wedge" engine. Each bank of runners located the carburetors over the front wheels. The long runners forced the fuel-air mixture toward the cylinders, even when the intake valve was shut, forcing a denser air-fuel charge into the combustion chamber once opened. The result: five horsepower less than the previous year's (175 horses), but less more torque, from 450 lb-ft at 3,600 rpm to 495 lb-ft at a low 2,600 rpm. This engine carried over into the 1961 300C.

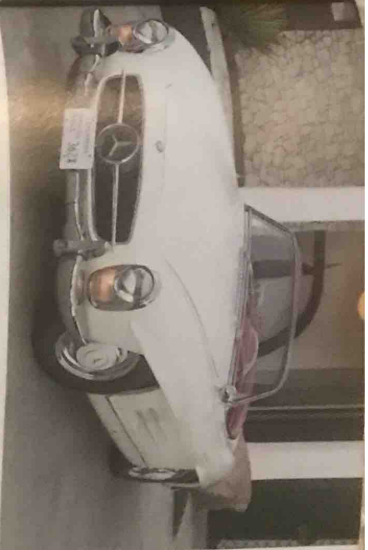
The SL started with the Adventurer's sprints all from 150-hp Opel six, based at



Four hundred and thirty-two cubic inches, 315 horsepower, 495 lb.-ft. or torque by 1961, Chrysler's 300 had only one name but its reputation remained.



Tilted 45 degrees in the engine bay for clearance, the fuel-injected 240-horse inline six allowed straight-line performance equal with the big Chrysler (see spec box).



a 45-degree angle to clear the hood and positioned behind the front fender to improve chassis balance. A new aluminum intake, allowing for larger valves, was developed. While race versions (more anon) used Sphaer carburetors, production models used a Bosch direct-pump mechanical fuel-injection system. Injectors mounted where a standard 300 sedan's spark plugs would be; these were relocated to the side of the cylinder head. A compression boost to 8.5:1 allowed a 215-horsepower rating, well over the one-horsepower-per-cube mark. When the heavier roadster started production in 1957, Mercedes made the 300 SL coupe's optional competition cam standard—and power jumped to 240 hp.)

ADVANCED CHASSIS

Chrysler arguably had Detroit's most advanced underpinnings in its day, making for the best-handling American car this side of a Corvette. Torson-bar front suspension—standard-issue launched in 1957—combine ladder handling with improved ride comfort. Unit-body construction, which arrived for the 1960 models, was intended to improve solidity, handling road noise, and interior room. The 300G sported a 165 lb/in ride rate at the front wheels thanks to 1.08-inch-thick torson bars, with a 190 lb/in rate at the rear and ran 15-inch tires for the first time.

In Germany, Herr Uhlendorf and construction engineer Joseph Muller developed a frame strong enough to accommodate 35- and 36-in but light enough to work in a 1950s chassis weighed just 154 pounds for a 200-hp, securing 166 inches long. Its rigid, all-aluminum approach meant there was initially no room for conventional doors on the solid-roof car, so roof-hinged doors that swung up rather than out left high sills that would accommodate the stiff frame. (The coupe's "gullwing" name came organically.) Recticulating-ball steering and four-wheel-independent suspension (wishbones in front, swing arms joined at the differential in back) were attached. Rear suspension was located only by the coil springs and a trio of rubber mounts, with the differential triangulated in the chassis.

allowing relative comfort and higher performance. When customers later groused about wheel sills, lousy headroom, no room for altcases, and poor ventilation, Mercedes re-engineered the W198-chassis SL as a drop-top that arrived in 1957. Axing the roof and adding horizontally opening, conventional doors forced 200 pounds of extra structural reinforcement: new low pivot-point rear control arms and a central compensating spring improved handling, and the spare tire and fuel tank were relocated to allow more trunk space.

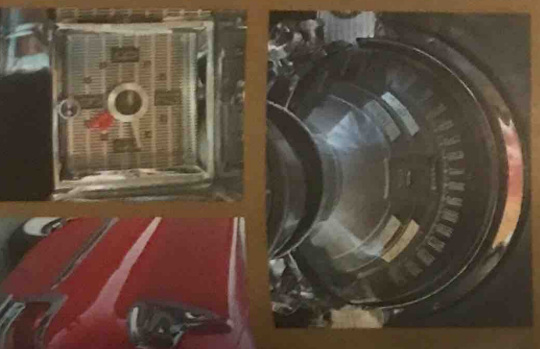
RACING PEDIGREE

Early iterations of the Chrysler and Mercedes-Benz cars would rack up racing victories that would burnish their parent reputations—as well as the cars that were built in their wake.

The W194-chassis 300 SLs debuted at the 1952 Mille Miglia, where they placed second and fourth; this was followed by sweeping the podium of the Grand Prix de Berne. At Le Mans, a pair of 300 SLs finished 1-2 overall, and then drove back to the factory. The Eifelrennen sports car race at the Nurburgring also saw an SL on top. A victory in the grueling Carrera Panamericana capped its legend in the space of a year. Mercedes launched a car, won nearly everything it competed in, and drove away as resurces were diverted toward F1.

STAVING POWER

And so, with those original versions racing and selling in the mid-Fifties, neither car seen here was strictly breaking, new or groundbreaking. In 1949, that time, Chrysler's big four-seater had evolved beyond its name, although its mission



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remained largely unchanged. The roadster was sufficiently ahead of its time that few, if any, other sports cars had caught up. Despite this, both models remained at the top of their respective marques'—and their nations'—automotive food chains. They were state-of-the-art machines that, even years after their respective debuts, no other automobile manufacturer was approaching.

In a Mercedes catalog full of solid-yet-stolid saloons, the sporting 300 SL was a high-tech marvel. In Germany, what came near a 300 SL? Opel, VW, Porsche, Borgward, NSU... only BMW's 507 could come close to the SL, and it went away in 1959. In a Chrysler showroom littered

with softly suspended sedans, the 300G series not only offered power, but handling that belied its size. The few American cars that matched or approached the Chrysler's power were largely designed for the quarter mile, with chassis tuned for a very different mission.

As is often the case with machines possessing such lofty abilities, the cost of entry was high (\$5,413 for the 300G, \$10,950 for the 300 SL), and production was commensurately low. Mercedes' W198-chassis roadster saw 1,858 built over the course of seven model years, with 256 built for 1961. Chrysler's 300G production numbered 1,280 coupes and 337 convertibles; that's 1,617 for the year. (A total of 16,857 300 letter cars were built from 1955-'65.)

PROVE OF OWNERSHIP

Scott King, of New York City, has owned this 1961 300 SL for fifteen years. He and his family have owned other Mercedes over time, this is his first. It is original beyond paint, mechanical fettling, and maintenance, and is regularly driven on road rallies around the country. Factory options include a Becker radio and fitted luggage.

The 300G is owned by Scott King and Sandy Edelstein of Palm Springs, California; painted Mardi Gras Red, it features the optional Golden Tone radio with power antenna, tinted glass, and rear-window defogger. A 300G has been a bucket-list car for them for many years, and so they jumped when this example became available in 2022.



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The Mercedes feels all of a piece; its solidity is reassuring and gives driver on ever faster. One drive and you discover why people are paying seven figures for these roadsters.

SPECIFICATIONS

1961 Mercedes-Benz 300SL

1961 Chevrolet

Engine type	OHV inline-six, iron block and aluminum head	OHV V-8, iron block, cast-iron heads
Displacement	183 cubic inches (2,996cc)	375 @ 5,000 rpm
Horsepower	240 @ 4,100 rpm	490 @ 2,800 rpm
Torque	217 @ 4,800 rpm	Three-speed Chrysler TorqueFlite
Transmissions	Four-speed manual, all synchromesh	3,231
Differential	3.54:1	Unit-body, torsion-bar independent front suspension, leaf-spring rear axle
Chassis	Tubular space frame, all-independent suspension	126 inches
Wheelbase	94.5 inches	

PERFORMANCE

0-60 mph: 8.2 seconds
1/4-mile: 16.0 seconds @ 69 mph

*From Road & Track's test of a 1961 300 SL coupe (with the optional performance cam) printed October 1968.
**From Motor Life's test of a 1961 Chrysler 300C, printed April 1961.

It would be foolish to claim that these feel the same while driving though the parallels have to end somewhere, folks! But there are broad similarities. While bogging around town is not an issue—ample off-idle torque in the G-ford objection preventing heading up in the SL—this pair clearly years for the open road. Each feels so far beyond its contemporaries—in facility, in ability—that you begin to understand their reputations.

At idle, the G sounds deep, resonant, and confident, with a thrumly rattle. Press a button to select drive and feel the engine strain against the 1.2-inch drums. Get going, and Super Stock-type noises fill the cabin; the TorqueFlite heats through first gear like it's not even there and practically sprays into third so it can eat up highway miles. And if you have an impression of what ride quality is from a car of this era, forget it: no waltz, no wander, no stop, just reassuring communication that you are indeed on the road and not floating above it—although the steering could stand to be quicker.

It heats during even moderate cornering, a fact of life with tall rubber and a torsion-bar spring front suspension, but it is still degrees flatter than other contemporaries we have driven. Today, beyond its footprint, this 300C is a car you can pilot and not feel like you must compensate or adjust for anything because it's an old car. The 300G is a light, taut, evolved, optimized version of the American sedan. That no one else even tried to compete is beyond belief.

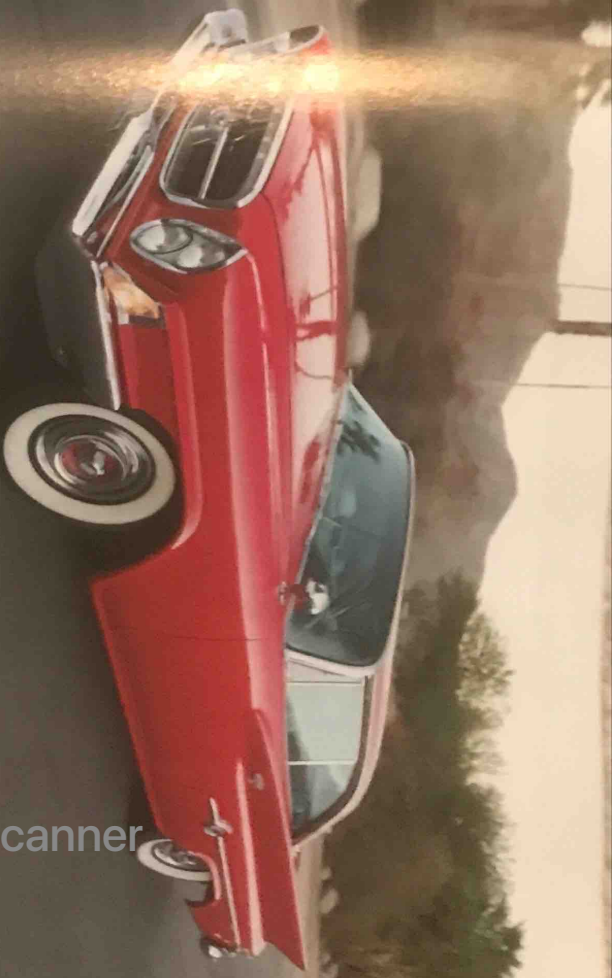
AGING GRACEFULLY

The 100 SL, meanwhile, practically redefined its genre. Consider the typical

sports cars of the mid-fifties: compact, frantically appointed, small-engined and low-powered, working hard at around-town speeds despite its low weight—a minimalist street car that could also be enjoyed on track. There's nothing minimalist about the Mercedes; it's larger than many other sports cars of the era, robustly assembled, filled with high-end trimmings, with a big high-tech six and a curb weight well north of a ton and a half. Instead of a trackable street car, this full-blown championship-winning open-road race machine had been tamed, slightly, for road use. (Indeed, the 240-horse roadster bettered the 175-horse race models that cemented the legend.) It expanded the possibilities of what a sports car could be, in virtually every direction.

Today, it has this in common with the Chrysler: there is no need to compensate for its age; it feels plenty modern, somehow. The bucket seats are a little low but wrap around your torso. Idle is a steady, staccato, sewing-machine purr, audible but smooth. Acceleration is smooth and linear. Think about where you want to put it and the steering practically reads your intentions. And the ride is the best compromise: the road makes it into the cabin via wheel and seat to tell you what's happening, but it's not constantly jiggling at your sleeve and demanding you do something. Yeah, the steering wheel is unfashionably solid—so much so you can't quite believe that it was engineered in the Fifties. It feels as if it were carved from an ingot of billet—very much all-of-a-piece.

Seat time in either of these helps you understand why they're valued by enthusiasts; they were among the most awe-inspiring automobiles of their era, classics in their own time whose reputations have not diminished over decades. They also add to the already-considerable cultural weight of the number 300. Because, as you might have heard, numbers are the foundation of all things. Even driving pleasure. 🏁



Effortless torque defines the Chrysler's movement; you'd expect a car this big to wallow and roll, but it's the sharpest-looking American '61 this side of a Corvette.

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