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## MERCEDES-BENZ 300SL

The most treacherous race conditions of a bygone era. The Carrera Panamericana and the dominance of the 1952 Mercedes-Benz 300SL. The right sports car at the right time.



Designed around the W186 Mercedes-Benz 300, the sports version was an instant success with its 180hp engine, 870kg kerbweight and low coefficient of drag of 0.25. The 300SL in its gull wing guise continues to be one of the most loved cars by automotive enthusiasts the world over...



Edition 19 of a special series by

**APOLLO TYRES**



Smooth, flowing lines mark this beauty out as a classic. Back in the 1950s the 300SL was taking the world of motorsport by storm

WE LOVE ROAD RACES, BUT nothing even comes close to the La Carrera Panamericana – a race that runs over 3114km of Mexican tarmac that stretches south to north from Tuxla to Juarez. What makes it so special though? In the words of a certain Alfred Neubauer, the Carrera Panamericana is a combination of Tripoli's Grand Prix, the Italian Mille Miglia, the German Nurburgring and the Le Mans 24-hour race in a single package. And if there's anyone who knows about the Carrera Panamericana, it's got to be Herr Neubauer – after all, he led the Mercedes-Benz German teams to victory against a formidable English, French and Italian side for over 25 years!

Imagine a race where you start off in a tropical climate and then have to pass through an altitude of more than 3000 metres above sea level – a temperature variation from 34 degrees Celsius down to 2 degrees in just 72 hours. Add to that the treacherous driving conditions and roads made of volcanic ash that goes really hard on the tyres. In 1952, amidst all this hostility, Karl Kling and Herman Lang were storming their way to the top of the charts in their Mercedes-Benz 300SLs. While Kling complained of wandering cattle on the roads, Lang showed off eight strong steel bars in front of his windshield that were meant to prevent vultures from crashing into his face.

One of the huge birds did manage to crash through though, leaving almost half of Lang's front windscreen shattered while he was doing in excess of 160km/h. The bird finally made its way to the back seat, but not before leaving the driver with multiple injuries on several places. The



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Never wary of progress, never skeptical about success,  
Never scared of challenges, never tired of trying,  
Every step of the way we travel with our customers  
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two 300SLs went on to take the top two spots in the Carrera Panamericana that year to mark a major milestone in Mercedes-Benz' racing history books. The German partnership of Karl Kling and co-driver Hans Klenk took

the win, completing the course in a sensational time of 18 hours, 51 minutes and 19 seconds making for an average speed of 165km/h! Herman Lang and Erwin Grupp crossed the finished line 35 minutes after their jubilant



The gaping hole on the rightside of Herman Lang's 300SL was the result of a vulture crashing into the car at over 160km/h during the Carrera Panamericana

Mercedes counterparts.

It was a carefully orchestrated chain of events that finally led to the Mercedes victory in the Carrera Panamericana that started off with a decision by Mercedes-Benz supremos to build a brand new sports car in the summer of 1951. Only nine months after the decision was made, the first 300SL was ready for action on March 13, 1952 and by the Mille Miglia race in Italy, the sports car was at its best, taking second place overall.

All this was a rather nice twist of fate – although the lack of time and finances dictated that only the W186 saloon (the Mercedes-Benz 300) be used as a technical basis, the sports car was a runaway success. The letters "SL" were simply meant to stand for Sporty and Light but they've gone on to embody what Mercedes-Benz has been all about. The 300SL kept improving and eventually swept the first four spots at the Nurburgring in the August of 1952. Such great success prompted Mercedes-Benz to explore wider horizons with the Carrera Panamericana.

The 300SL was the perfect contender for the conditions at the Mexican road race with its 870kg kerbweight, 2.40metre wheelbase, 180hp engine, low bonnet line and technically advanced (for those times) drum brakes. With a coefficient of drag as low as 0.25 the 300SL could reach a top speed of 240km/h. As Rudolf Uhlenhaut, head of testing and a major influence behind the 300SLs conception later recalled, "We took the series-produced engine from the 300 and built a tubular frame with an aluminium body around it." This here was the right kind of sports car at the right time.