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Title: Tai-tais beware



Take your pick... if you dare: The line-up of SLK55 AMGs at Sepang was enough to make even grown men go weak in the knees.

MERCEDES-BENZ
SLK55 AMG
(RACE VERSION)

Price: Not for sale
Engine: 5,439cc V8
Gearbox: Five-speed auto with quick shift
Power: 360bhp at 5,750rpm
Torque: 510Nm at 4,000rpm
Top speed: 250kmh (electronically limited)
0-100kmh: 4.5 seconds (est)
Fuel consumption: You must be kidding!
Agent: Cycle & Carriage

Tai-tais beware

Mercedes' SLK roadster may be a fashion drive, but once it becomes a race version SLK55 AMG, it's a totally different creature

David Khoo

WE OFTEN pigeonhole people by the cars they drive. For some reason, compact roadsters always seem to be synonymous with fashionistas and tai-tais.

Well, you will probably need beefy arms and un-manicured hands to wrestle the muscle-bound SLK55 AMG to the tarmac.

Only the basic shape stays true to the garden variety SLK. Upon closer inspection, you will probably have a fit, as the drop-top mechanism and roof have been disabled. Well, not so much disabled as completely removed to shed 25kg.

The car has a gorgeous matte carbon-fibre fixed roof boasting outstanding weave quality with a Perspex rear window in place of glass.

Multi-spoke AMG forged alloys shod in 19-inch rubber (235/35 in front, 265/30 at the back) help save weight over the regular cast rims.

A peek through the letterbox opening between the spokes of the rims reveals six-pot brake callipers in front and four-pot callipers at the back.

Other motorsports-inspired cues include the quick-fill fuel cap and ominous emergency toggles on the bonnet for use in the event of a crash.

And don't even think about chucking your shopping

bags in the boot. That is where the enlarged 80-litre racing fuel tank lurks.

From behind, tailpipes bristle belligerently from underneath the rear skirting. On the move, these bellow a thunderous roar.

In addition to the rims, the suspension and braking system are based on the 2004/2005 official Formula 1 safety-car, which means firmer spring/damper settings and harder torque strut bearings at the front axle.

Climbing into the AMG fixed bucket seats and manoeuvring around the roll-cage intrusion may take some practice if you are generously proportioned.

A six-point racing harness bolts you down with no allowance for even the slightest twitch while the Alcantara three-spoke steering wheel offers excellent grip for the sweatiest of palms, and there are shift paddles behind it.

Prod the car to life and it settles into a grumbling idle. Manoeuvre the car into position and even the most jaded driver will be satisfied with the weighty steering.

A complete lack of sound insulation means you savour every discordant note of the rumbling V8, which quickly transforms into a glorious multi-dimensional overture under full-bore acceleration.

Brake late as you approach a corner and the binders react violently to retard the car's speed. The brakes prove to be fade-resistant even after repeated poundings. Turn-in is go-kart incisive and the chassis is very communicative. The engine always has enough reserve for the driver to engage in mid-corner tail-wagging.

Tossing it about the Sepang track, the SLK's agile and nimble handling comes to the fore. Driving the thing is like having one of Tchaikovsky's more aggressive overtures blasting in your head.

You do not really know what hit you, but it feels darn good.