

It's gotta be the car

If you're talking about life in the fast lane, chances are you're talking Mercedes

Before a young man's fancy turned to supermodels, there were supercars. Exotic Ferraris with sensuous bodies tinted russo rubino. Luscious Lamborghinis flaunting smoldering orange paint jobs. The sports car was the stuff of pre-adolescent dreams – before Christie Brinkley and Claudia Schiffer.

You always knew you were going to get one. Maybe when you made partner. Or senior VP. Or when the company finally floated that IPO.

Well, it's time. Enter the Mercedes-Benz SLK350, aka the "Coupe Roadster." At around \$50,000, the 350 – complete with a fold-down top – is



priced within reason for a reasonable adult. And for the money, you get a gorgeous two-seater that looks like a \$200,000 SLR McLaren and rides like a bat out of Buckhead.

Check out these features. Want to drive around in cooler temperatures with the top down? No problem. The 350 offers an optional AIRSCARF neck-level heating system, which

circulates warm air around your head and automatically compensates for air temperature and speed changes, keeping you comfortable on cold days.

You want space? Even with the lid lowered, there's 6.5 cubic feet of trunk space (and an acceptable 9.8 cubic feet with the top up).

Can you say sporty?

SLK in the Mercedes nomenclature means "*sportlich*" (sporty), "*licht*" (light) and "*kompact*" (short). And the model line started out in distant third place to Porsche's Boxster and BMW's Z-class roadsters. Underpowered and shackled with uncertain steering and a less than nimble suspension – not to mention being burdened with a lackluster interior and a bland exterior – the SLK never was accepted as a genuine sports car.

The folks at DaimlerChrysler must have flinched at the criticism and with true Teutonic efficiency went

to work on the SLK and produced a winner in the 350. The 24-valve, six-cylinder power planted in the 350 has plenty of low-end oomph.

With 268 horses and a similar number of feet and pounds of torque in the very usable 2000 to 5000 RPM range, you blast out of the GA 400 tollgate ahead of everyone. Zero to 60 is listed as 5.4 seconds.

But with the traction control turned off and with a bit of gear jockeying, you might be able to shave that to under five seconds. The exhaust note is powerful music evocative of the wail of a Formula One car. Some might even prefer it to the radio.

Speaking of gears, the optional seven-speed automatic is about as smooth – and aggressive – as an autostick can be. You can choose to shift for yourself or allow the car to do the work. Try as I might, I could not outperform the self-shifting program. The suspension improvements have turned the SLK into a true sports car.

The car feels stable and corners flat and without drama up to nine-tenths of the limit. If you dare to turn off the traction control and go closer to the limit, the progressive oversteer is predictable, manageable and controllable up to the inevitable power slide. In English: It's a blast to drive.

The interior feels like a much larger car, with ample leg, hip and shoulder room in a layout not much larger than a Mazda Miata. The design is simple and classic, with large black dials rimmed in chrome. The radio and climate controls are simple and intuitive. And the heated seats were delightful on a crisp spring morning.

Should you buy it? Only if you would like to resolve your adolescent dreams with mature reality. And have the most fun an adult can have. Um well, sitting down. **BtoB**