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# BACK IN BLACK

CONTINUING THE ART OF CUSTOM CRAFTSMANSHIP, CARLSSON  
TAILORS THE FLAGSHIP MERCEDES-BENZ.



Photos & Text: Richard Owen Model: Jocelyn

**T**here's a certain negative stigma attached to tuning the world's best cars, but when done right, the result can be remarkably seamless, exciting and memorable. Such is the case with Carlsson's bespoke CL 600. Their comprehensive package upgrades all of the fundamental characteristics that make this luxury coupe so desirable.

The black-over-black show car, shown here, is fitted with both styling and performance packages that enhance the CL 600's already spectacular presence. These are the kinds of hedonistic upgrades and one-upmanship that prove you not only have more cour-

age than your neighbor, but also more class.

In beginning to understand the production CL 600, we have to turn back and admire the car's rich heritage. The history of Mercedes-Benz and their coupes stretches back to the dawn of the automobile. Karl Benz and Gottlieb Daimler created the first motor cars with gasoline powered internal combustion engines in 1886 and fifty years later, after Karl Benz acquired Daimler's company, their dedicated coupe arrived as the Type 300. It later evolved into the famous 300 SC and 300 SL models. Since then, Mercedes has kept a top-of-the-range coupe in their line-up.



From the 300 forward, the virtues of fast travel, refined elegance, comfortable appointments and modern engineering set the standard for seven more coupe series to follow. Along the way, the design picked up innovative technologies such as fuel injection (1956), disc brakes (1961), airbags (1981), adaptive damping (1992), V12 engines (1992) Active Body Control (1999) and twin turbos (2002). After making luxury coupes for 50 years and selling over 46,800 models, Mercedes launched the new CL 600 in Sep 2006. Since then, the car has been receiving accolades; Jeremy Clarkson of Top Gear fame called it the "King of the Road."

Priced above the V8 AMG model, the CL 600 is a statement on wheels and in the bankbook. It borrows S-Class underpinnings, yet conceals the massive chassis with sleek lines and pillarless windows. Inside, there are enough opulent interior appointments to outclass a Bentley. Features such as keyless start, active seat bolsters, night vision, active cruise control and ample room for four make driving it a joy. Underneath the hood, there is a twin turbo V12 that produces too much torque for the new 7-Speed gearbox, so the 5-speed is used instead. The whole package has an MSRP of \$146,900, making it one of the most expensive widely available cars in America.



For almost 20 years, Carlsson has been tuning cars like the CL 600 in Germany. Carlsson Autotechnik GmbH was founded by brothers Rolf and Andreas Hartge to offer a range of individual upgrades for the Mercedes-Benz line. They named the company in honor of Swedish rally driver Ingvar Carlsson, who raced with the Hartge brothers in the World Rally Champi-

onship. Ingvar later assisted them, helping to start Carlsson in 1989.

Carlsson's first garage was setup in Merzig, a small German town situated two miles from the French border. By 1995, the company was prosperous enough to purchase an impressive 19th century mansion called Gut Wiesenhof and subsequently restored it into a state of the art production facility. Since then, this facility has been churning out some of the most exciting Mercedes-Benzenes and racing them with fervor.

In America, Carlsson USA is making a huge push and will be opening a new facility in California. Having already converted over 100 cars stateside, Carlsson considers the United States to be their fastest growing market. This means that they will have an ever increasing presence at shows like SEMA. One of the company's newest kits is the CK60 for the CL 600. Improving a car like the CL 600 is almost megalomaniacal, but Carlsson instantly went to work on Mercedes' flagship coupe after it debuted at the Paris Motor Show.

The first step was to install their patented C-Tronic lowering module. Working in concert with the central computer, C-Tronic is elegantly positioned in between the CPU and wiring harness with no cuts or soldering. Once installed, the car's overall height is lowered by 1.2 inches, yet the tires do not rub the undercarriage—even with the largest wheels fitted in extreme driving conditions. This is possible because the dampers are actively monitored, and can raise the ride height in poor driving conditions to ensure that the suspension



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functions safely.

One challenge facing Carlsson was the acquisition of the correct connectors for the C-Tronic lowering module. These had to be bought wholesale in ridiculous numbers, but the company's investment paid off. C-Tronic is now Carlsson's number one upgrade. The lowering module, however, is just the beginning, as Carlsson creates complete vehicle upgrades that add a unique touch to every aspect of a Mercedes vehicle.

Carlsson's main competition comes from both AMG and Brabus, so the challenge is offering something unique from the rest. Styling helps greatly in this regard, so Carlsson has a functional package that works in harmony with the CL's lines. The biggest change is a new front apron, with integrated driving lights, a wire mesh grille and twin chin splitters. The transformation is extended to the sides with small accents on the trailing edges of the sill. There is a new apron in the rear with room for a new exhaust and tidy diffuser-like accents. Compared to a normal car, which is just made



“ Only the quad exhaust and small Carlsson script hint at what lies beneath the surface of this CL ”



to transport people, the CL's presence attracts everyone. Onlookers are often intrigued by the synthesis of Mercedes' styling and Carlsson's flair. If this is any indication, then Carlsson is doing something right.

Only the quad exhaust and small Carlsson script hint at what lies beneath the surface of this CL. Contributing to V12's performance pedigree is a CK60 upgrade (\$6,800) that musters up an additional 100 horsepower. Most of the power comes from an exhaust upgrade that gives the somewhat silent CL 600 a truly menacing tone. It has new stainless manifolds that feed into sport catalytic converters and center silencers, which then exit through the rear mufflers via four oval tailpipes. Combined with a sport air filter and a reprogrammed computer chip, this setup puts the CL 600 in a league where very few cars belong. Top speed is purposely restricted to a respectable 200 mph—as much as the Dunlop SP Sport Maxxs will allow. Acceleration is remarkable for

a car of this size and weight; the 4800 pound Carlsson has a zero-to-sixty time of 4.4 seconds!

Adding to Carlsson's street credentials are some of the largest wheels and tires available for a Mercedes-Benz. A main criticism of such a setup is the resulting harsh ride from the lack of tire sidewall, but the adaptive damping and immense weight of the car curb these concerns. Carlsson sources their wheels from Aluminum Precision Products who also make products for Pagani, Lamborghini and Ferrari. They use a 6061 T6 alloy in a forged process to make the wheels lightweight, yet rigid enough to deal with the CL and the larger S-Class Mercedes. Our show car was fitted with dedicated 11-Spoke, 3-piece wheels known as the CR3. Measuring 21 inches, they match the car's purposeful stance and potent performance.

After the wheels, engine and body are dealt with, only the interior remains. Built to customer specification, a

range of Alcantara and leather is available for almost every surface. Carlsson has even developed a deal with Etienne Aigner to develop a redesigned interior with new quilted surfaces and color-matched designs.

Our show car, with top of the line forged wheels, a full body kit with driving lights and the 600 bhp CK60 engine upgrade was priced at an MSRP of \$174,540. Carlsson soon hopes that a car like this will be offered straight from Mercedes-Benz dealers across America.

Once completely finished by Carlsson, the CL 600 is transformed into a somewhat different machine. Unlike the standard model—aimed at the more demure like diplomats, bankers and businessmen—Carlsson's version adds a distinct edge. In a sense, it is a revolt against originality and the clinical nature of every car being the same. Carlsson pride themselves in offering the same exclusivity and custom appointments that made the first 300 series coupes so desirable.

