Falling in love for the second time:
Mercedes-Benz CLK 240 (C209)

by Christian Wimmer, European Photography Editor

It all began when my father’s 500SL was due for a check-up because the roof mechanism had been giving him trouble.

Thank God for Fridays, because the Mercedes technicians thought that they might require a few days to fix the problem. People want to go home on a Friday, and even Germans work until just noon on Saturdays!

Thus, Mercedes-Benz offered us a brand new CLK240 test car. Parked all by itself, it was a darkish blue color with smoke silver interior.

At first sight, I did not think too highly of it. It had just come out, and replaced the previous-generation CLK which I loved so much. So, to be honest, I wasn't much in love with the new car.

I was, however, curious as to how it drove and what it felt like. On the drive home, I found out. Opening the driver’s door, what first amazed me was how easily it moved with very little effort on my part.

The driver’s seat was very comfortable, I thought, as I sat down. Not too hard, and not soft: the perfect blend. The doors also closed with a soft thud, loud enough to be heard but soft enough to not be an annoyance.

The interior was a big improvement over the old C208 CLK. This new C209 CLK had plush leather and higher quality materials on the dashboard and the interior surroundings. Even I, a die-hard C208 CLK fanatic, found myself wondering why I liked the C208 more than this newer (and likely more capable) C209 CLK.

Even though I had loved C208, I had always thought the interior a little cheap and that perhaps that it did not deserve its Mercedes-Benz badge. Yet, I had told myself, I could live with that: it was the shape of the previous generation CLK that had so enticed me.

Wow! I was already amazed and something told me this car would have more to offer.

So, the C209's interior had me halfway converted. What's more, as I opened the door and got in, the seatbelts were brought to me by an extending mechanism. This function permits the driver to make a conscious decision to either accept or decline the seat belt. Being in Germany, it is the law, so I accepted. It was a neat feature, and it sparked my interest further still.

Starting the engine, I was impressed with its smoothness. I knew from the start that the CLK240 had a V6 engine under the hood, but I did not know that it had been bored out to 2.6-liters (contrary to the 240 badging at the rear, which would usually denote an engine capacity of 2.4-liters), and upped in power and
torque. The engine sprang to life with a smooth, lightly hissing V6 sound, and quickly settled back into a light sleep: it was silent.

I put the gear selector in 'D,' and eased out of the parking lot. My father, who was seated in the front passenger seat next to me, told me to take a detour and go for a little driving trip.

I knew what was coming: this was the fun part. Of course, I agreed, as the CLK240 had by now captured my complete and full attention.

Driving on those little country roads, I promptly found that the handling of the CLK240 was excellent. It felt easier to drive and control than my father's 500SL. Purists may argue that Ferraris and Porsches are the benchmark for handling but, in real world driving, the CLK240's moves were more than adequate, and the steering was very responsive.

Lately, the handling of Mercedes' cars has improved so much that BMW should feel threatened!

The roads on which I took the CLK for a spin were curvy and hilly, and required alertness. The way the CLK drove made it easy.

I really explored the car in every way possible. I loved the engine response of the 170-horsepower strong 2.6-liter V6 engine. It never once felt tired or underpowered. 0-62 mph took around 9 seconds, quite adequate for my driving style. Kick-downs resulted in nothing brutal, but the car was clearly not slow and accelerated eagerly, never feeling underpowered.

Critics bash even the CLK320 for being "slow;" I have to say, complete rubbish! The CLK320 is too much for me and, living in Germany, I would have to pay more expensive taxes for larger bigger engine capacity and power output.

No, the CLK240 suits me just fine. A top speed of 236 km/h (147.5 mph) is already pushing it, even with the infamous Autobahn in the vicinity. 240 Nm (177 lb/ft) of torque from that 2.6-liter V6 engine may not be awe inspiring, but it gets the job done with remarkable efficiency.

What you need to know about the CLK is that each and every one of them (even the CLK500 and CLK55 AMG) is a cruising car and not a race car. Most people immediately look at the 0-60 factor and if the car doesn't do it in under 8 seconds, it is not worthy of further consideration.

Wrong: driving the CLK is all about enjoying yourself. And that is exactly what I did.

The five-speed automatic transmission worked in the background: it could not be felt, and always seemed to be in the correct gear. The CLK240 comes standard with a six-speed gas-sipping manual transmission, which I would never take. For a Mercedes, I honestly believe that the best transmission is an automatic.
Comfort was very good. The suspension absorbed bumps and road unevenness with ease, while also providing that sporty feel to it. Overall, I was immediately very impressed with the way this CLK240 handled, and with its comfort. The seats provided excellent side grip and hold, and were very comfortable.

Even my father was quite impressed, although he kept saying that he would take an E-Class over the CLK because it offers more rear space. Obviously, the CLK is not meant as a family hauler, but as a car for people who love to drive and who have not a family, but perhaps a significant other, sans kids. I am even tempted to say it is a “geezer” car; albeit one with classic lines and personality. Either way, this is the perfect car for me (Christian notes no plans for marriage, despite a considerable fan club –Ed)

Later, as Dad and I pulled up to some Wirtshaus (traditional Bavarian pub) to have a drink in the Beergarden, we picked a seat that allowed us a view of the CLK240 parked all by itself under a tree. Now I was able to appreciate the C209’s exterior beauty. This being a hot summer day, we had all the windows down (even the ‘rear’ ones), and those lines flowed and matched so beautifully, further gracing the pillarless design when the windows were down. The rest of the car was nothing radical, but not bland, either: the perfect mix.

Oh, how I began to long for this car after a few minutes of driving it! I wanted her and I wanted her badly.

At this point, I was thinking to myself “Forget the old CLK, this is it... this is it!” I was basically converted after a few minutes of driving this car. Indeed, the CLK240 drove like a dream. It was smooth, refined, and offered superb comfort (even better than my 300SE, I might add), while retaining a plush, quality interior that also did a great job of silencing exterior noise. It took those curvy and hilly roads with ease, and had enough power and torque for quick overtaking.

The weekend was spent drooling over the car. My father needed it for Saturday for a trip to the Alps with some friends, but when he came back on Sunday, I was all over it. I drove my entire family to a little place called Au am Inn, and the CLK240 did not disappoint. Even with four adults on board, it offered amazing performance through the hills for a car of this engine class. Manual shifting on the 5-speed automatic transmission with integrated semi-automatic functions were a breeze, and downshifting and sporty driving brought gnarly sporty sounds which assured me that the engine had the necessary power, should it be needed.

In all honesty, this was the car for me. I know it. I can feel it. At this point, I had made up my mind. I want an ‘Alabaster White’ CLK240 with AMG rims, and an AMG body kit, with a five-speed automatic transmission. Writing this report makes me drool already. So strong is my passion for this car, so badly do I want to get into one and enjoy driving it, that every time I see a C209 CLK, I drool over it. Be it even a CLK270 CDI (yep, a diesel!), I want this car.

The sad part was driving it up to Mercedes on Monday morning, and handing over the keys of the CLK. It hurt; in the short time-span that I had held the keys, I had grown attached to the car. I loved it; I wanted it.

Luckily, I had no car in which to return home, so a young and attractive female secretary gave me a last ride back in my newly-found dream car: the (2002 and onward) Mercedes-Benz CLK240 (C209).