

I'll let you in on a secret or two: Chrysler's new Crossfire is a more serious sports car than even Chrysler is letting on. And it's built at the Karmann assembly plant in Germany, alongside the Mercedes SLK and CLK.

As the first-born child of the marriage between Chrysler and Daimler Benz, the formula is simple enough: take the popular Mercedes SLK two-seater, add a new body, modify the interior a bit, stiffen the suspension, and *voilà* ! a sleek new sports car is ready for the winding road.

Stylish it is—everyone everywhere wanted a closer look. Fastback roof and sleek lines tightly wrapped around 225/40x18 front tires and 255/35x19 rears give the Crossfire a rakish, dynamic stance. Its tapered boat tail rear draw your eyes to the wide tires, while seven-spoke dish-shaped aluminum wheels complete the sporty look. A rear spoiler pops up automatically at about 60 mph and self-retracts again at lower speeds.

Despite somewhat cramped quarters, even six-footers can find comfort due to decent legroom and a telescopically adjustable steering wheel. The leather seats hold driver and passenger nicely in place during spirited cornering thanks to functional side bolsters. Knobs on the center stack are logically placed and easy to use. Heated seats add considerably to the comfort quotient on chilly mornings.

At about 160 inches in length, the Crossfire is only two inches longer than its SLK sibling. Even so, it has a small but usable trunk that is fairly deep.

Driving the Crossfire revealed some surprises, good and bad. On rough uneven surfaces, a few squeaks emanated from the dash. Most of the time, though, all was quiet in that respect. And, the rear design elements of the small backlight and inward curving rear pillars conspired to limit the rearward view and made safely backing up quite difficult. If you frequently need to back up, as I do when exiting my driveway, make that part of your test drive.

Assuming, however, that most of your driving is in forward mode, you'll find lots to enjoy in the Crossfire. The Michelin Pilot Sport 2 tires offer plenty of stick, and you can



Chrysler Crossfire

A German-made V-6 sports car for \$35,000? Yes!

corner very hard in this car without losing traction. On winding mountain roads, its quick steering response and stiffly sprung suspension combined to make for loads of fun, surefooted driving pleasure. This is a serious sports car, pure and simple. While not in Corvette or Porsche territory in acceleration (more on that later), its sharp handling delivers satisfaction when pushing hard.

The only motor offered is the Mercedes 3.2L V-6 rated at 215 horsepower and 229 lb.-ft. of torque. You can choose between a 6-speed stick and 5-speed automatic. My



manual shift version provided precise shifting with smooth clutch take-up. Very nice.

I drove the 6-speed Crossfire at Willow Springs Raceway and found it to be a solid handling car with great entertainment value. Cornering as

hard as I dared, it just hunkered down and stuck like glue through the winding asphalt curves. Its steering gave good feedback and I felt in control at all times.

While its brisk acceleration will be adequate for many, it's a bit lacking if you're looking for real excitement. The solution to that is just around the corner, however. An optional 330 horsepower engine will be available soon, as will a convertible version (which, with top down, should solve the rear visibility problem!).

This Crossfire is EPA-rated at 17-city, 25-highway mpg. In my combination of city, freeway and mountain driving, the Crossfire delivered a highly respectable 22.2 mpg. Anti-lock brakes, traction control, Mercedes' Electronic Stability Program and side airbags are standard. Its MSRP including destination fees totaled \$34,495.

Looking for a fun, sharp handling two-seater? Here's one made in Germany, with Mercedes Benz engineering, that won't bust your budget and can give you a lot of driving satisfaction. Especially if you're fortunate enough to have a winding road near you.

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