

Convertible buyers come in different flavors, just like the convertibles themselves. These two examples from Mercedes Benz appeal to two very different types.

With seating for four, the CLK is a smooth all-rounder, cradling its occupants in a softer, luxurious package. By contrast, the sharper-edged SLK is a sports car pure and simple. Well, maybe not so simple—it's got plenty of gadgets. But all the basic elements people love in both open top motoring and sports cars are there in abundance.

The CLK comes in both hardtop and convertible models. With both convertibles, operating the top is as simple as holding a switch down to fully raise or lower the top. CLKs have smooth lines and manage to look upscale in a nicely understated way.

Inside you'll find beautiful leather seating surfaces, thick and soft. Put the key into its slot and the shoulder belt is brought forward to your waiting hand by a motorized carrier. With top down, there is a bit of cowl shake, inherent in all convertibles to some degree.

With a 3.5L V6 producing 268 horsepower mated to the new 7-speed automatic, the CLK accelerates smartly. Mercedes has the best answer to the manually-shiftable autos since you don't have to move the lever out of "D"—just slap it back and forth and it will up- and down-shift at your whim.

Handling is good; after initial softness at turn-in, the tires and suspension take a set and everything sticks well until the tires squeal. A 302-hp V8 is available if you want more punch, but you probably won't corner any faster and most drivers should find the V6 to be nicely satisfying.

Turning the corner, the retractable hardtop SLK 280 rushes in with a raspy



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL COONEY



Mercedes Benz CLK 350

Mercedes Benz CLK 350 & SLK 280 Convertibles Drop-tops for wildly different tastes


snarl and grabs your attention. While it's available with the 3.5L V6 found in the CLK, my tester arrived with the new 2.8L V6 producing 40 fewer horsepower, at 228. With that, you save about \$4,000 compared to the SLK 350, or about a hundred bucks a horse. A 355 hp V8 is another option.

The 2.8 V6 with 7-speed auto (6-speed stick is standard) has plenty of punch and is a great choice. There's enough power to keep the chassis and tires working at their limits and have loads of fun on sharply winding roads. Here's a sports car that makes it easy to explore the envelope, and with excellent feedback you always know right where you stand. Everywhere the CLK

is soft, the SLK is sharper in response. Steering, braking, left-right transitions—the SLK is a highly responsive handler and driving enthusiasts will enjoy pushing it hard.

Inside, the seat height adjustment doesn't go far enough. And the semi-circular instrument cowl rises an unnecessary two inches above the gauge bezels to further obscure the view of shorter drivers. My wife, at 5-0, couldn't see comfortably over the hump. As for me, at 5-10, I desperately wished for another three inches of leg/seat room. I was unable to get fully comfortable. Everyone fits differently, though, so take a drive and see for yourself.

Mercedes' CLK 350 convertible starts at \$53,700 and my tester totaled \$56,665 including destination. It is EPA-rated at 18-city, 27-highway mpg and I averaged 21.1 mpg. The new SLK 280 begins at \$42,900 and this one totaled \$48,415 with destination and options including the 7-speed auto and navigation. The 280 is EPA-rated at 20-city, 27-highway mpg. In my week of too much fun, I averaged 22 mpg.

Two flavors, two quite different driving experiences. My pick? One SLK to go, please—in black. 

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Mercedes Benz SLK 280

