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Sporty, light and compact

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IN EARLY DECEMBER last year, Langkawi was the scene of a most-welcome German invasion in the shape of two pairs of Teutonic tearaways - Mercedes-Benz's latest sports roadsters, the 2.0 litre and 2.3 litre Mercedes-Benz SLK.

Not only did the locals embrace this intrusion with open arms, it also increased their foreign vocabulary by three words - Sportlich, Leicht and Kompakt - whose combination of first initials give the roadsters their SLK tag. Anglicised, the three German words when translated spell Sporty, Light and Compact. Very apt, for a two-day test drive on the demanding road conditions of the island bore this claim as no idle bluster.

Cycle and Carriage Bintang Bhd (CCB) took advantage of the Langkawi Motor Show 1996 (LIMOS '96), the country's premier motorshow, for the Malaysian unveiling. Not one to do anything by halves, CCB chartered a DC-10 aircraft to fly up guests including motoring journalists to Langkawi for the occasion. Upon arrival on the first day it was straight to the Mahsuri Exhibition centre for the opening ceremony in the presence of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. It was to be the next day when the serious business of test driving the SLK would take place.

Up at the crack of dawn, a hearty breakfast and a general briefing about CCB and some technical run down of the car and route instructions, we were off! Malaysian Business got the honour of testing the more powerful of the two models first - the 2.3 SLK which is also neatly referred to simply as the Kompressor (a German word which simply means Supercharged).

The first leg took this writer and his co-driver Azizul Shamsuddin along the dusty road from Cenang beach to the long and snakey climb up Teluk Datai. Discretion getting the better part of valour, we decided to keep the 'Vario roof' - the SLK's metal retractable top fully deployed on the stretch from the Pelangi Beach Resort.

Two years ago when this writer was last in Langkawi, there was so much construction work going on with lori hantu transporting dug-up earth every which way. Today, more of the same! Azizul smugly surmised the grimey fate suffered by another pair of test drivers who shot past us in the less powerful 2.0 SLK and threw caution to the winds and drove with the roof down. It did kick up a dust storm causing quite a bit of consternation in the face of an old Pak Haji riding a rickety underbone laden with the day's provisions. In deference to seniority and just plain good road manners, we gave him a wide berth before finding a suitable spot near Pantai Kok to overtake.

Such an occasion gives the SLK an opportunity to demonstrate the 'supercharged' nature of the Kompressor. A firm stab of the 'gas' pedal and one goes... 'whoosh'.

Mercedes-Benz has the distinction of being the first car manufacturer to introduce 'supercharged' engines - used by its racing cars as far back as the 1920s and 1930s - in its standard production cars. The supercharger as opposed to the turbocharger works by compressing air before it is ingested in the cylinder. This increases performance and torque, especially at low revs. Due to the clever mechanical coupling between supercharger and engine, the torque build-up is smooth, arresting the problem of turbo-lapse. This has resulted in a high performance curve of six-cylinder unit coupled with the fuel economy of a four-cylinder one.

All this techno-babble when translated on the road means so much power

`on tap' - pickup to you and me. Indeed, the kampung roads on the route leading to the scenic approach to Teluk Datai presented ample opportunity to put the Kompressor to work. Every so often one had to hang back on the tail of a heavily-laden service buggy delivering provisions to one of the numerous hotels on the island. When the coast was clear, it was great fun to see the envious expression of the bemused driver being passed. After a brief pit stop at Teluk Datai, it was time to allow Azizul to take over the wheel for the journey to Pantai Tanjung Rhu.

With the car in Azizul's competent hands, this writer got the chance to get a feel of the ride from the passenger's perspective. Just before setting off, we decided the conditions were suitable for the roof to be rolled back. We chose to do so despite the gathering of ominous dark clouds gently drifting inland.

`No problem,' said Azizul who confidently predicted that should the need arise, we could easily get the roof back up in time and not get a soaking. Five minutes into the journey, the heavens opened! Having been told that the roof will not open or close while in motion, we pulled up immediately on to the kerb and prayed hard the top would retract quickly. There was not much we could do but stay still as the whirring sound of the roof mechanism retracted and extended obligingly even as the first drops of penetrating water droplets started to rain down upon our heads. In the event, the top did deploy fully within the 25 seconds Mercedes-Benz claimed it would.

The wet roads presented another challenge to Azizul's driving skills and that of the road handling qualities of the 2.3 SLK. Both were not found wanting. In such driving conditions, speed was reduced considerably but this did not diminish the driving pleasure nor ride comfort. The pitter-patter of driving sleet against windscreen and roof was kept out with great efficiency and the air conditioning did a great job in maintaining internal comfort. By the time we got to Tanjung Rhu for a `coconut drink' stop, the rain had stopped and the sun peeked out again.

After the short break we changed cars. This driver took over the wheel of the 2.0 SLK for the two-stage journey back to our hotel near the Cenang Beach. No doubt there was a demotion in the power department. The difference was quite glaring but this did not mean the 2,000 cc was anywhere near underpowered at all.

The highly developed 2-litre, 4-cylinder, naturally aspirated engine includes features such as a camshaft which is adjustable while running, anti-knock control and sequential fuel injection. It offers increased power at lower revs, improved fuel consumption and a lower level of particulate emissions.

It is perhaps now appropriate to look at the SLK from the view of its attractive shell. One look and there is an instant recognition of its sportiness. This is derived from its distinctive wedge shape and flowing lines which at four meters tip to tail, is around 500 mm shorter than the Mercedes-Benz SL sportster. For the first time, Mercedes-Benz has incorporated light-weight material magnesium in the body structure, thereby achieving weight savings of up to 50 per cent and fuelling the car with greater economical performance. It has inset headlights and a new pressed-metal front grille sporting the instantly-recognisable three-point star. The athletic-looking back end is fitted with triangular rear lights and in keeping with its overall style, comes with forged, light-alloy wheel hubs. The SLK roll bars prove that aesthetics and safety need not compromise one another. For styling and protection they are integrated into the bodyform and securely anchored to the car's cross-members. Wing mirrors are colour coordinated with the bodywork to enhance the overall look. Not only are they electrically adjustable and heated, curved glass

on the driver's side helps to eliminate blind spots. Halfway into the return journey, it was swap-time again and Azizul took over the pilot's seat. This left this writer enough time to marvel, take note and enjoy the warmth and cosy interior of the SLK cabin. Its door sills and control pedals gleam in brushed stainless steel, fitted with non-slip rubber studs. A two-toned interior finish sets off the sporty appeal. Small and nimble, the steering wheel is leather-covered and the central driving console and door catches have a carbon-look finish. Ivory-coloured instruments with rounded numerals and ringed with chrome remind one of the glorious days of old. Behind the scenes lies the state of the art technology which makes the SLK a true machine consonant with the demands of the next millenia.

As the SLK is a two-seater, space is not a problem. One gets a feeling of racy comfort exuded by the high profile seats. A newly developed seat suspension system offers support and generous cushioning coupled with its low-slung seat positioning. This is adjustable for more leg room and torso height. Fabric and pattern designs are totally new with fine leather upholstery and precision needlework evident round the steering wheel. In no time, we were back at the Pelangi Beach Resort having clocked up 120.5km on the test drive which took a little under three hours. That we got back in one piece, dry and raring to have another go the next day bear testimony to the claim that the SLK is the ultimate roadster for Malaysian roads.