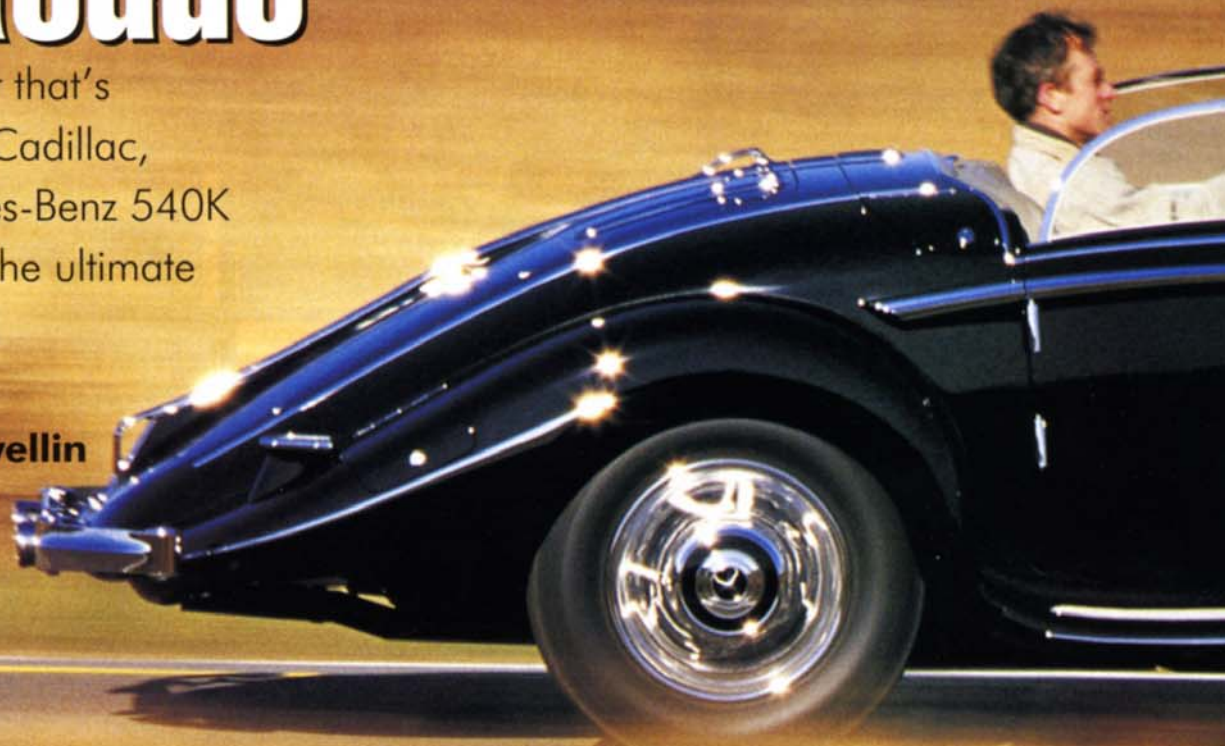


Colossus of Roads

A two-seater that's as big as a Cadillac, the Mercedes-Benz 540K was one of the ultimate prewar cars.

by Phil Llewellyn



Essex, Massachusetts—

A thorough exploration of *Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases* left me searching for what would most adequately describe Dr. Ervin "Bud" Lyon's pristine Mercedes-Benz 540K Special Roadster, so I resorted to a British enthusiast's basic Anglo-Saxon and scribbled "gi-bloody-gantic" in my notebook. This 1937-vintage machine rides on a 129.5-inch wheelbase and is almost 207 inches long, which compares with the figures for the current Cadillac DeVille, one of the biggest cars you can buy, at 114 inches and 210 inches. Probably the most significant difference is that whereas the Cadillac provides barn-dancing space for six, the 540K's beautifully furnished cockpit caters

only to a couple of adults, although a brace of small, agile people can squeeze into the rumble seat, ideally after unbolting their legs.

This breathtaking acreage of German metal is made to appear all the more expansive by the relationship between flawless proportions, outrageously beautiful curves, and a wealth of chrome-plated details. The latter include long and elegant horns; Bosch headlights that could double as kettledrums; exhaust pipes that emerge from the hood like a pair of pythons; and hand-swiveled spotlights that are neatly backed by rear-view mirrors. Above all else, the Special Roadster has the rare degree of presence that commands immediate attention, in any company. Only twenty-six long-tail Special Roadsters

were built—this is one of five with the fully enclosed spare tire. Chassis 154151 was bodied by Mercedes-Benz's in-house coachbuilder, Sindelfingen Karosserie, and exhibited at the 1937 Berlin Motor Show. From there it was bought by Warner Brothers, fitted with a speedometer calibrated in miles per hour, and shipped to Mitropa Motors in New York City for the use of Jack Warner, the movie mogul who employed such stars as Humphrey Bogart and Bette Davis.

Buying a Special Roadster in Germany involved parting company with 28,000 reichsmarks. The price is meaningless until you realize that Hitler's grand design included selling the Volkswagen for 900 reichsmarks. In the United States, New York's



Mitropa Motors asked \$14,000 for a Special Roadster when \$3450 was the price of a Packard Twelve convertible coupe and a rag-top Oldsmobile Six left change from \$1000.

Only two owners stand between Jack Warner and Bud Lyon, who bought the big Benz in 1993. Fully restored by Paul Russell and Company in Essex, Massachusetts, it graced the greensward at Pebble Beach in 1995, when the judges at the world's most prestigious concours d'elegance hailed it as the best car in its class and the winner of the Mercedes-Benz Trophy. Other awards include Best in Class at Meadow Brook Hall in 1996 and Best of Show at Amelia Island in 1997.

"Cut to the chase!" Jack Warner might have barked at this juncture, so here we go.

Feeling a tad nervous, I open a door that feels massive enough to withstand direct hits from a howitzer. The gray leather looks as classy as the black-on-cream Motometer dials, the most important of which reads to 4000 rpm while the speedometer, on the passenger's side of the oval instrument panel, is marked at 28, 48, 83, and 110 mph—the maximum permissible speed in each respective gear. As with many prewar cars, the rather important space between the bottom of the king-size steering wheel and the back of the seat accounts for only a tiny percentage of the Special Roadster's overall length, so concern about the Llewellyn waistline was appropriate. The view is inspirational, because the windshield has a chromed central spine that

sweeps along the hood's central hinge to the three-pointed star, which surveys the world from the six-gallon cooling system's filler cap. Other capacities include 2.2 gallons of engine oil and twenty-eight of gasoline.

A touch of the button brings throatily burbling life to the 5.4-liter straight-eight whose intake manifold is a work of art. Concentration is the name of the game, because the 540K must be worth ten times as much as my home on the opposite side of the Atlantic. Sitting on what is for me the wrong side of a vast car, I am about to drive on the "wrong" side of a Massachusetts road that is neither broad nor straight nor devoid of traffic.

Although the clutch does not demand a push that would uproot a giant sequoia, the



vintage stuff

gearbox requires concentration and patience when I am more concerned about avoiding other vehicles. The shifter is almost as long as my leg and places first where second would be in a conventional H layout. From there it's slowly up, across and up for second, then straight down for third—but fourth is engaged by pushing the lever sideways and then forward, without touching the clutch pedal. In 1939, Mercedes offered what was then the novelty of a fifth speed for long-legged cruising on the autobahn.

Contrary to expectations, the steering was not engineered to make Hercules puff and grunt. Although the wheel is too heavy to be twirled with one finger while zipping backward into a marginal parking slot, serious effort is not needed until the Special Roadster is virtually at a halt. That said, Lyon's comment about having to turn back if we encounter wet tar makes me wonder if my strength and stamina would be up to a ten-point turn.

The highways around Essex are not as smooth as the cheeks of a marble madonna, so the 540K's suspension comes under close scrutiny. I had expected a car that weighs about 5600 pounds to ride well, and it does, but credit also goes to what is a remarkably

This 1937 Mercedes-Benz 540K is one of only twenty-six long-tail Special Roadsters built and one of only five with a fully enclosed spare tire. It was originally owned by movie mogul Jack Warner.

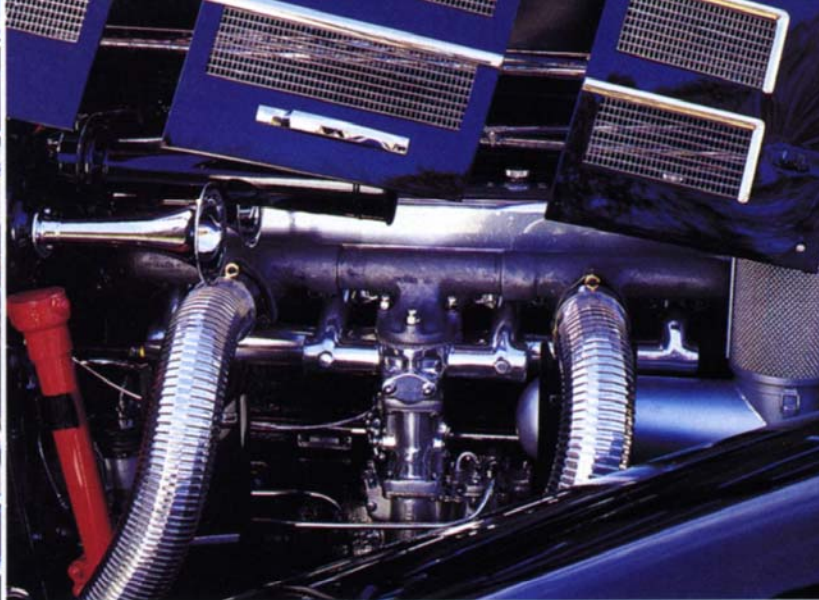


sophisticated all-independent suspension layout for 1937, with coil springs at each corner and wishbones in the front. At the back, Mercedes used a "compensator" spring to deter the swing axles from trying to turn the 540K into an enormous three-wheeler should the driver back off while cornering hard. In general, this colossus of roads proved considerably more agile than expected when I reacted to a sudden "Right here!" from the passenger seat.

The long-stroke straight-eight's torque makes it easy to amble along, trying to look

nonchalant while attracting as much attention as a movie star, but the right foot ventures a little closer to the carpet when we reach the first stretch of straight, open road. Vivid acceleration is not on the menu, for reasons that include having only 115 bhp to haul so much metal when the straight-eight is operating in its normally aspirated mode. But the 540K sprouts horns when we reach the freeway, at which juncture the right foot goes right down, past the conventional full-throttle position to... "Blimey!"

The K indicates the presence of a



Left: The black-on-cream dials and four-spoke steering wheel lend a touch of elegance. Above: The intake manifold of the 5.4-liter straight-eight is a work of art. Below: Despite its generous exterior proportions, the 540K can comfortably seat only two passengers, not counting the rumble seat.



vintage stuff

Kompressor—the supercharger that cuts in “on demand” and boosts power to 180 bhp at 3400 rpm while torque climbs to a hefty 318 pound-feet at 2200 rpm. But the noise is what makes the “blower” so much fun. Today’s copywriters strive to describe the magic of a supercharger when talking about the likes of the Mercedes-Benz SLK and the Jaguar XKR, but you have to listen to detect a faint whistle. At this end of the aural scale, the 540K Special Roadster’s blower makes other drivers pull over and pray, because it screams and howls and shrieks and wails and shrills like a busload of banshees, mainly because the supercharger blows through the carburetor rather than sucking from it. Mercedes used the same foot-to-the-floor principle for the previous decade’s SS and SSK racers. At Le Mans, dicing with Sir Henry “Tim” Birkin’s supercharged Bentley, the engine in Rudolf Caracciola’s SSK eventually failed because the idea was to restrict the supercharger to short bursts. With this in mind, I soon eased off rather than risk scat-

tering 540K components halfway across the county.

The 540K Cabriolet tested by *The Autocar* in 1938 clocked 0 to 60 mph in 16.4 seconds and ran out of steam just short of 105 mph. Far from fast by today’s standards, the Special Roadster was brutally swift in 1937, when ordinary mortals dreamed of owning a car powerful enough to hit 60 mph. Although too massive and Teutonic for many tastes, it had to be considered by anyone wealthy enough to shop at the top of the market, and the fact that its production life coincided with Mercedes’ domination of grand prix racing counted for a lot. Over in Europe, there were several rivals for the motoring millionaire’s money. Britain’s contenders included the 4.25-liter Bentley, which weighed about a third less than the Special Roadster, even with a Park Ward sedan body, and Lagonda’s beautifully engineered V-12. Francophiles might prefer a Delahaye Type 135, a Bugatti Type 57SC, or a drophead Tipo 68 Hispano-Suiza powered by a 9.4-liter V-12. Maybach

and Horch catered to Germans who wanted to be patriotic but preferred something other than a Mercedes, while Italy’s outstanding Thirties supercar was the magnificent Alfa Romeo 8C 2900.

It is tempting to categorize the Mercedes as a sports car, albeit a gargantuan one, or as a forerunner of the postwar gran turismo (GT), but it is not really agile enough to rest easily in either company. The 540K Special Roadster’s natural habitat is a world of long straights, gentle curves, and grand hotels, so this is really what the prewar French would have termed a *Grande Routière*—a car in which to cover long distances, ideally after arranging for your luggage to travel by train.

I will always associate this legendary monster with the supercharger that prompted another dive into my well-thumbed thesaurus. Thrilling, stirring, emotional, exciting, and stimulating would be appropriate words, but what I actually said after the blower cut in for the first time was: “Fan-bloody-tastic!”