

NOT SO MELLOW YELLOW

Does the AMG badge mean Mercedes' new 'baby' sports car will be a fiery, lunatic monster like the SLS AMG it replaces? We find out on a road trip to the Musandam Peninsula in Oman.

ILL ADMIT, AS WE HAMMER DOWN THIS particular stretch of sinewy coastal road, I'm not in the best of moods. It's certainly not down to the car, for this is the AMG GT, Mercedes' replacement to the lunatic SLS we first took for a spin last December (*evo* 089) and which has now landed in the Middle East. Boasting an all-new 4-litre biturbo V8, a front mid-engined layout, and some chassis-related bits and bobs from the now departed SLS, this is Mercedes' long-awaited answer to the Porsche 911, Jaguar F-TYPE V8 R and the Audi R8 among others. So, clearly it's going to be good.

Nor for that matter is my fractious mood down to the road, a stunning pass alongside the Arabian Gulf that stretches more than 40km across the Musandam Peninsula towards Khasab in Oman. It's a semi-regular hunting ground for *evo* Middle East, and offers the kind of landscape John Constable would have weeped for.

No, my ire is in fact reserved for the time we've just spent getting through Omani border control, the sight of a Solarbeam Yellow



by JAMES GENT

PHOTOGRAPHY by ARUN.M.NAIR

\$172K Mercedes sports car with carbon fibre accents, black double-spoke alloys, and a flurry of camera equipment raising the heart rates of border force officers for all the wrong reasons. Not only do we lose almost three hours filling in paperwork and explaining to multiple officials that we're not here to quench our espionage thirsts, we also lose two bags of camera equipment, the local bobbies explaining that we can pick them up when we cross the border later that evening.

The time spent arguing, ironically, has at least given me time to savour the looks of the new GT S. While perhaps not offering the same menacing theatre of the SLS (not least because the gullwing doors are gone), the GT does boast a much sleeker, more elegant look thanks to its über smooth bodylines. The short overhangs on this long wheelbase design and the slick rear wing give an aggression of their very own, and we're still wondering how Stuttgart's boffins at the design easel have created tail lamps so thin, they could have been drawn onto the bodywork. Merc's new 'baby' certainly doesn't disappoint. It's stunning.

On the whole though, I'm pretty cheesed off with the border control nonsense, and ready to make the most of my time on the mountain whilst daylight is still on our side. Which is just as well, since planting the right foot unleashes – almost instantaneously – 503bhp from that biturbo V8. It's an angry response that seems to 'thump' the GT straight down the tarmac in typically bold AMG fashion. This is aided considerably by seamless upshifts from the seven-speed dual-clutch transmission. Indeed, we're barely two kilometres in, and it's already clear that the gearbox is superb, and that the GT – for all it's dynamic power delivery – is much more than just a big, shouty engine.

That same V8 – which is currently deafening Omani residents for several kilometres with its dirty baritone notes – is located essentially under the dashboard for near perfect weight distribution, front to rear (47 and 53 per cent respectively). Both turbochargers meanwhile are mounted internally rather than on the outside of the cylinder banks as is traditional. This 'hot inside V' setup consequently allows more direct response from each turbocharger and lower exhaust gas emissions, but also permits a more compact – and consequently lighter – engine package for improved weight distribution and more efficient power delivery. Indeed, capable of 310kph and 0-100kph in less than four seconds, the performance speaks for itself.

As does the fact that our accompanying Hyundai Tucson crew car – on loan from one of the *evo* wives under pain of colossal bollocking should we destroy the tyres on this run – has quite rapidly gotten smaller in the Merc's rearview mirror. Not that this overly concerns photographer Arun sitting next to me, who, despite a couple of chewed fingernails concerning the missing equipment, is insistent



that I pull over what seems like every 25 seconds to check out “a really cool location for shots.” Even in these semi-baking temperatures, the auburn rocks and occasional sandy beach do make for staggering locations, but I'm more concerned with getting back behind the driver's seat. And, yes, okay, into the air-conditioning...

Indeed, as only the second fully in-house developed sports car from AMG, there's been some considerable work on the underside to make sure the GT is not a sagging mass of understeering jelly. The sports suspension for instance is aluminium double-wishbone across the board for more precise steering response and flatter cornering. The brakes are now larger at 360mm and internally vented for improved cooling and, ultimately, stopping ability, while the light-alloy wheels, 19in at the front and 20in at the back, are clad with performance savvy tyres for 'track-levels' of grip.

Even when at the mercy of my already frayed temper, the slightly larger track-ed rear end simply refuses to budge as I flick-flack through the canyons at the start of the route (once Arun's got the first few shots under his belt at least). A brave pill, less traffic, a bootful with the AMG Dynamic Select drive mode set to Sport +, and only limited traction control should change that. Through these tight confines, this AMG is proving incredibly agile. And, with the performance exhaust system set to ear-bleeding levels as it bounces off the rock walls, the sound is ungodly.

It's a similarly theatrical experience on the inside. The low slung confines of the 'greenhouse' cabin and bulky A-pillars mean visibility could be better, the taut suspension and lumbar supportive sport seats could offer more pliancy for a 'GT' car, and some of the silver trim about the dashboard neither looks nor feels as refined as we'd expect from a Mercedes. But the eight-buttoned V-formation on the centre console is a stirring sight, as is the tablet-like screen rising above the four cylindrical air vents and the Alcantara-lined flat-bottomed steering wheel. It all combines to particularly enchanting effect. Having said that, I'd dearly love to meet the madman who thought placing the hazard warning light switch on the roof was in any way a sensible idea.

Opposite: Sunbeam Yellow meets Azure Blue Arabian as our Omani road trip takes in the Musandam Peninsula



**'I'D LOVE TO MEET THE MADMAN WHO THOUGHT
PLACING THE HAZARD WARNING LIGHT SWITCH ON
THE ROOF WAS A GOOD IDEA'**



Canyon walls soon turn to open air, and a stunning 50ft drop down into the azure blue waters. It's been some time since I've seen this view, and I can't help but catch my breath: oh to have those impounded camera bodies with us here, now. Slightly further back, the Tucson camera car has somehow managed to get itself into a race with a local driver. Whether this is down to the impetuous spirit of my colleagues getting the best of them on this road, or the tailgating Lexus saloon scything perilously close to their bumper and offering very little concern for their welfare, I'm not too sure. I have my suspicions though, which are validated moments later by said maniac – having eradicated his microscopic patience – crossing lanes onto the wrong side of the road around a blind corner in his efforts to get past the Tucson. Quite how the oncoming Toyota pick-up managed to avoid what seemed like an inevitable smash we shall never know...

Moronic road users though are but a blip on the radar – albeit an irritating one – as we continue our drive next to the water, and the asphalt begins winding even tighter to the cliff-face en-route to Khasab, the AMG GT S really begins to come into its own.

There is no trace of understeer, for instance. Not even a hint of it. The position of the V8 (set right back against the bulkhead as it

is), the low centre of gravity and stellar grip from the tyres make it next to impossible to lean too heavily on the front end into the corners. Of course we shouldn't dismiss the role of that aluminium spaceframe: borrowed in essence from the SLS AMG Black and weighing just 231kg, it brings the GT's overall kerb weight down to 1570kg and provides a much longer and wider platform, allowing the GT S to corner so beautifully flat. While the AMG GT may not be as precise as a Porsche 911, it's still stunningly composed through the turns, the rear end again only tweaking sideways if I really stand on the loud pedal. It's so unlike the brash, tail-happy AMGs I've experienced in the past.

If there is one criticism, aside from the overly-stiff ride quality, it's the steering. It's enormously precise, despite the sheer size of the bonnet stretching out in front of me, and the grip from the front tyres borders on insane. But there's not an inordinate amount of feel that's coming through either, the somewhat darting tendency of the front end taking a little time to dial in. Weight shift under cornering though is beautifully subtle. Even as the speed continues to rise, this poise remains unaffected by the undulations of the road, and it's not long before the azure waters disappear and a multitude of fascinated



onlookers spy a Sunbeam AMG rolling through Khasab.

Turns out \$172K sports cars are not the most common of sites in Khasab, a quaint little town – port adjacent – more indicative of Middle Eastern rural life than Dubai's more bustling metropolis. Indeed, while the AMG GT had barely registered on our highway run to the Oman borer, it's now a prime target for iPhone shots as we cruise through town (the Tucson by comparison barely registering). Even the local police force, clearly amused by our presence, keeps a watchful eye. It makes me wonder if our friend in the Lexus saloon made it this far...

After our adrenaline pumping drive up, down and round the mountain, I'm staggered. In developing its new sports car, Mercedes has clearly opted against challenging the Ferraris and Lamborghinis of this world to take the fight directly to Porsche. And there's no doubt, thanks to the GT's composure and agility through the turns, that Mercedes has worked wonders. Comfort and practicality may not quite be to the level that a 'GT' badge would suggest, but let's not get bogged down with nomenclature. Give or take a little more feel through the steering, the GT S is a stunning machine to both look at and pilot. And, yes, keep you occupied at border control. ☒

MERCEDES-AMG GT S

Engine V8, 3982cc, twin-turbo

Power 503bhp @ 6250rpm

Torque 479lb ft @ 1750-4750rpm

Transmission Seven-speed dual clutch, rear-wheel drive, limited-slip differential

Front suspension Double wishbones, coil springs, adaptive dampers, anti-roll bar

Rear suspension Double wishbones, coil springs, adaptive dampers, anti-roll bar

Brakes Ventilated discs,
390mm front, 360mm rear

Wheels 9 x 19in front, 11 x 20in rear

Tyres 265/35 ZR19 front, 295/30 ZR20 rear

Weight 1570kg

Power-to-weight 326bhp/ton

0-100kph 3.8sec (claimed)

Top speed 310kph (limited)

Basic price \$172,770

On sale Now

EVO rating: ★★★★★

