



## VENUS & MARS DRIVE MERCEDES

JIM LUJKENS & MARY M. HEDBERG

"I'm hoping that Santa Baby will put one of these under my Christmas tree."

# Driving the CL550

**Venus:** I've never been known as a "car" gal. I've bought, driven and enjoyed many cars in my lifetime but I can truly say that I have never fallen in love with any of them. That all changed when I caught my first glimpse of this CL550. It was love at first sight! Its striking presence took my breath away.

**Mars:** No doubt part of your lust was caused by its striking Titanium Grey paint. When I requested the vehicle for this month's review I specified no black, silver or white cars. There are already enough black, silver and white Mercedes on the road. Even considering my request I, too, was blown away when the CL came into view. All I could think of was that this must be the new Batmobile.

**Venus:** Mercedes might call it Titanium Grey but to me it could be better described as a light eggplant color. The paint certainly had some red and blue undertones in it, which gave it a spectacular hue when viewed in the sun. I don't know why anyone would want a traditional color when something this striking was available at no extra charge.

**Mars:** For once I couldn't agree more. I always tell people I am an art and color guy and this car was the personification of all that I value. The interior was equally striking. Instead of boring old black or grey it was Cognac Brown, which complimented the

exterior perfectly. In fact the color combination was so striking that this car could have been a designo edition, but without the designo price tag.

**Venus:** The color combination drew admirers no matter where we went and was certainly the most talked about and inquired about element of the car. Can you believe it? Three hundred words gone already and all we've talked about is the color. Occasionally, I get more seat time in a review vehicle than you and this was one of those times. I can truthfully say that I enjoyed every minute behind the wheel of this car. It only took me about ten miles to feel right at home.

**Mars:** Of course, all of this CL's great equipment, either standard or optional, was easy to love and made you wonder how you ever did without it. For instance, the optional Distronic cruise control was amazing. Once you learned to trust the car, and kept your foot off the brake, Distronic was a marvel. It automatically kept a predetermined distance between you and the vehicle in front of you. If you are following someone at 70 miles per hour on the interstate and they slow to zero, Distronic will slow your car to zero as well. Although it can be a little disarming at first, it doesn't take long to have complete faith in the system.

**Venus:** Conversely, if you pull out to pass

the car in question, Distronic will quickly accelerate your car back to its preset speed. Additionally, the transmission does all of this speeding up and slowing down without the least bit of hesitation. In fact, the 7-speed automatic transmission operates so seamlessly it has to be felt to be believed. The optional heated steering wheel would have been fun to experience but the temperature never got cold enough during our review for us to experience it.

**Mars:** For comparison I drove a previous-generation CL500 and there is literally no comparison between the two cars. The new electronic direct-select shifter was literally night and day better than the previous car's gated shifter on the console. In fact it felt archaic compared to how simple and elegantly the new column-mounted shifter operates.

**Venus:** Shifter, smifter! It's music that makes the world go around. On one longer trip I popped in my favorite Enya CD and was instantly rewarded by the 11-speaker, 600 watt harman/kardon Logic7 digital surround sound system. I felt like I was gliding along in my own personal concert hall. Meanwhile, back in the real world, the dynamic rear view monitor and Parktronic was great at protecting my new love from errant power poles. Of course, their value was somewhat mitigated



because I always found myself parking out in the middle of nowhere.

**Mars:** Speaking of music, I was impressed by the PCMCIA memory card slot in the dash. It allows you to bring along your own digital music and uses the COMAND system's graphical interface to scroll through your song titles or playlists. Also impressive was the electronic trunk closer. While not as high-tech as the PCMCIA slot, I found myself using it frequently and really appreciated its assistance.

**Venus:** That's one of those bells and whistles that you wonder how you ever got along without. Keyless Go was another. With this option, part of the Premium II package on this car, you can keep your keys in your purse and the car will automatically lock or unlock as well as start up. I never had to waste time fishing in my purse for the key but could instead enter the car as soon as I walked up to it. That's much safer and was appreciated by this gal. When the really bad weather hits you wouldn't have to worry about your locks freezing either.

**Mars:** One feature I'm sorry that we didn't get a chance to try was the Night View Assist. This system uses infrared technology to identify objects that are up to 500 feet ahead. Unlike some systems that identify only warm objects like humans or animals, Night View Assist locates cold objects like cars or debris as well. Unfortunately, we never had the car out at night. While some of the features on this car were a little over the top there is no doubt that they combined to make a memorable driving experience. These same features will eventually trickle down to more popularly priced vehicles, making this technology available to all.

**Venus:** In the meantime I'm hoping that Santa Baby will put one these new CLs under my Christmas tree. •



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