

TALES FROM THE AUTOBAHN

The Mercedes-Benz museum takes a ride through more than 130 years of automotive history

BY PHILL TROMANS

Plenty of car manufacturers have what they call heritage fleets—collections of vehicles they have made in the past. Brands like to bring them out at car shows and events to display their history and expertise over the years. Sometimes the vehicles are just stored in warehouses, other times they are housed in specially built museums.

When Mercedes-Benz decided to build a museum to show off its heritage fleet, it did not hold back. Rather than procure a few dusty corridors in a corner of a factory, Mercedes spent about \$165 million on a purpose-built nine-storey museum near its Stuttgart headquarters. Designed by renowned Dutch architects UN Studio and opened in 2006, the striking edifice stores more

than 160 vehicles of all shapes and sizes, along with about 1,500 other pieces of automobilia.

The museum has become the number one tourist attraction in Stuttgart, according to reviews website Trip Advisor and welcomes nearly a million people a year. It is easy to see the appeal. For anyone with a passing interest in cars, Mercedes is one of the landmark brands. Its founder, Karl Benz, created the first motorcar powered by an internal combustion engine within spitting distance of the museum in 1886 and naturally, a replica of the Patent-Motorwagen is on display on the top floor.

Visitors descend through the helix-styled building but it becomes clear the exhibits are not just interesting to those with octane





Images courtesy of Mercedes

The Mercedes-Benz museum in Stuttgart

running through their veins. The curators of the museum have invested considerable time, research and expertise to ensure the cars reflect the social changes the world has seen over the past 130 years.

Enter the soaring atrium and the scale of the project is immediately apparent. The ceiling rises 33 metres high with exhibits peeking over the edge of each floor to tantalise. The tour, supported by audio guides, starts on the top floor after a futuristic ride in a bunker-like elevator and charts the events that led to the creation of the car, before moving through the development of Mercedes and its vehicles in the run up to the First World War.

The pace of technological development is then shown against the backdrop of the two world wars but it is the post-war rise in Mercedes' fortune that is the most fascinating section, particularly given Germany's position in the world post-1945. Lower floors look at particular changes in safety and technology after 1960 and there is a focus on the present day and a future encompassing emission-free mobility.

Before visitors emerge in the atrium again, there is a floor dedicated to Mercedes' considerable motorsport heritage, from early Grand Prix racing to modern-day Formula One and a tremendous display of record-breaking cars, including the 1938 W125 Rekordwagen – an experimental machine that set an as-yet-unbroken speed record of 432kph on a public road.

All the exhibits are supported by wall displays, editorial and a fascinating amount of video footage collated from a range of archives. For petrolheads, it is a must-see but even those who cannot tell a C-Class from a 300 SLR will find plenty to entertain and inform. For Mercedes, the museum brings in revenue but perhaps more importantly, it is a tremendous boost to brand awareness. It is no surprise, once visitors have descended through several hours of fascinating automotive history, they are confronted with a gift shop, a sizeable new car showroom and even a section selling beautifully restored classic cars. So engaging and well executed is the museum though, it is not hard to forgive a bit of salesmanship.