

2007 Mercedes S550

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trade those options – do whatever it takes....**

Impressions of a special car, By David Ray –

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For: The Wheel



Over two years have passed since I began reviewing automobiles for the Wheel. There have been many exciting moments, spectacular cars, scintillating performances and golden memories. Truly, 2006 represents the pinnacle of the Golden Age of Automobiles. Don't believe what your Dad says – the 39 Packard was cool, but today's automotive options are simply sensational. Into that context we introduce a word that has never been used in these reviews. Upon experiencing the 9th generation of the Mercedes S class, the 2007 S550 astounded us and stood out immediately as "special." This car is not only special, as in unique among its peers, but actually inspirational as well. As many of you know by now, this column is more about the experience and impressions we have with these cars as opposed to a regurgitation of specifications. In the web world, specs on the S550 can be poured over for hours at www.mbusa.com. What we are privileged to provide is a glimpse into these cars that may whet an appetite, answer some preliminary questions, or simply be fun to think and dream about. We have never placed my countenance in a more comfortable setting to drive a car. Not to race or thrash a car, but for real-world driving – the S550 is the most luxurious vehicle we've experienced. While certainly not a sports car feel – it is a luxury sedan after all – this car wraps you in wonderful sensations, adapts to you, supports you and says "Where in the world would you like to go today?" And frankly, you won't care. You'll just want to fire up the 5.5 liter V8, listening to its 382 horsepower purr, and just drive. Yes, this is a luxury car that inspires driving. As we took off on our test drive, I had a sense of being rich. The ergonomics, the smells, and the stitched leather, high gloss hardwood all contributing to a sense that this car was built slowly by someone who was creating art. A lifestyle came to mind – one that included carefree nibbles of Beluga caviar, sipping of Opus One cabernet – yes the drivers who can afford to drive this car have arrived and are enjoying being wherever this "arrived" place is.

Sallying forth on a sporting two lane country road near Hollister, CA, the S550 overwhelms one with its competence. The 391 ft lbs of torque feels like something on par with an M3. Even carrying 4465 lbs on its back, this V8 is stout and delivers an exciting thrust when at full chat. This power gives the Merc a sporting feel that may be a bit beyond its purpose. While acceleration is very respectable with a 5.4 second 0-60mph time, this is certainly no sports sedan. But for the top of the line limo-like 550, having fun at 6/10ths is simply a bonus that most would not expect. Entering curves at sporty speeds (legal of course), we experienced the variable assist steering that seems to be set one notch too aggressively as, upon a quick turn-in not just once did we have a sense of someone grabbing the wheel while we were trying to turn it – we like the concept of this function, but the variability must be invisible to avoid being intrusive. Once again, as with previous Mercedes products, we were taken with the amazingly quick 7 speed transmission. Along with the Audi DSG system, this transmission is simply the best. Super quick, I'd like to meet the programmer of the adaptive software...he or she nailed it. Maybe the most overwhelming sense while taking your first tour in the 550 are the best overall seats we've ever experienced. While certainly not racing seats such as one would expect in a sports car, these seats are a spectacular combination of comfort and support. Often seats sacrifice one for the other. A comfortable seat becomes spongy while many supportive seats have a hard edge or a surface that's just too taught. This vented and heated seat wraps you and says "Stay as long as you'd like." The front seats also offer a state-of-the-art feature called adaptive bolsters. These moving side bolsters, while turned on, will gently press against your right ribcage as you go hard into a left hander, and vice versa. While the similar system on the BMW M5 was too busy and caused a distraction, the active bolsters on the 550 merely cuddle you and just feel good, reminding you that you're not alone. With optional four zone climate control, rear power seats, window shades everywhere you look, this interior lacks nothing. Before moving on to other aspects of the 550 we'd like to add that this passenger compartment is the most handsome we've seen. Everywhere one looks, one sees elegant design, craftsmanship and excellent functionality. Mercedes and Audi are both, for some reason getting dangerously close to imposing technology that alienates customers and prevents sales like the BMW iDrive. However, don't panic just yet – the "S550's Command Controller" looks a bit like iDrive, but it stops short of being an intrusion of a user interface on the driving experience.

This is a big car. The S-Class website brags about its new, longer length at 205 inches. So the car is not perfect. It's our belief that solving space problems by adding length, girth or weight is an engineering cop out. With big overhangs, heavily stylized (dominant is the word they use) wheel arches, the S550 goes not only for the discriminating car person, but for the buyer who needs to make a visual impression as well. What would take "special" to "spectacular" is to see this type of car at 500 lbs (or more) less weight, with less height and an overall, more compact design. "Road hugging weight" was popular with the Mercury's of the early sixties, but its now time for our technology to be felt by the road and at the gas pump as well. So...the S550 makes a big impression. As a car, the word "special" is almost an understatement. Does it take a card carrying membership in the Hedonistic Car Buyers' Club (HCBC) to justify its \$92,000

purchase? Obviously that's not for this writer to decide. What I do know is that the S550 was a very special experience that will stay with me for some time.