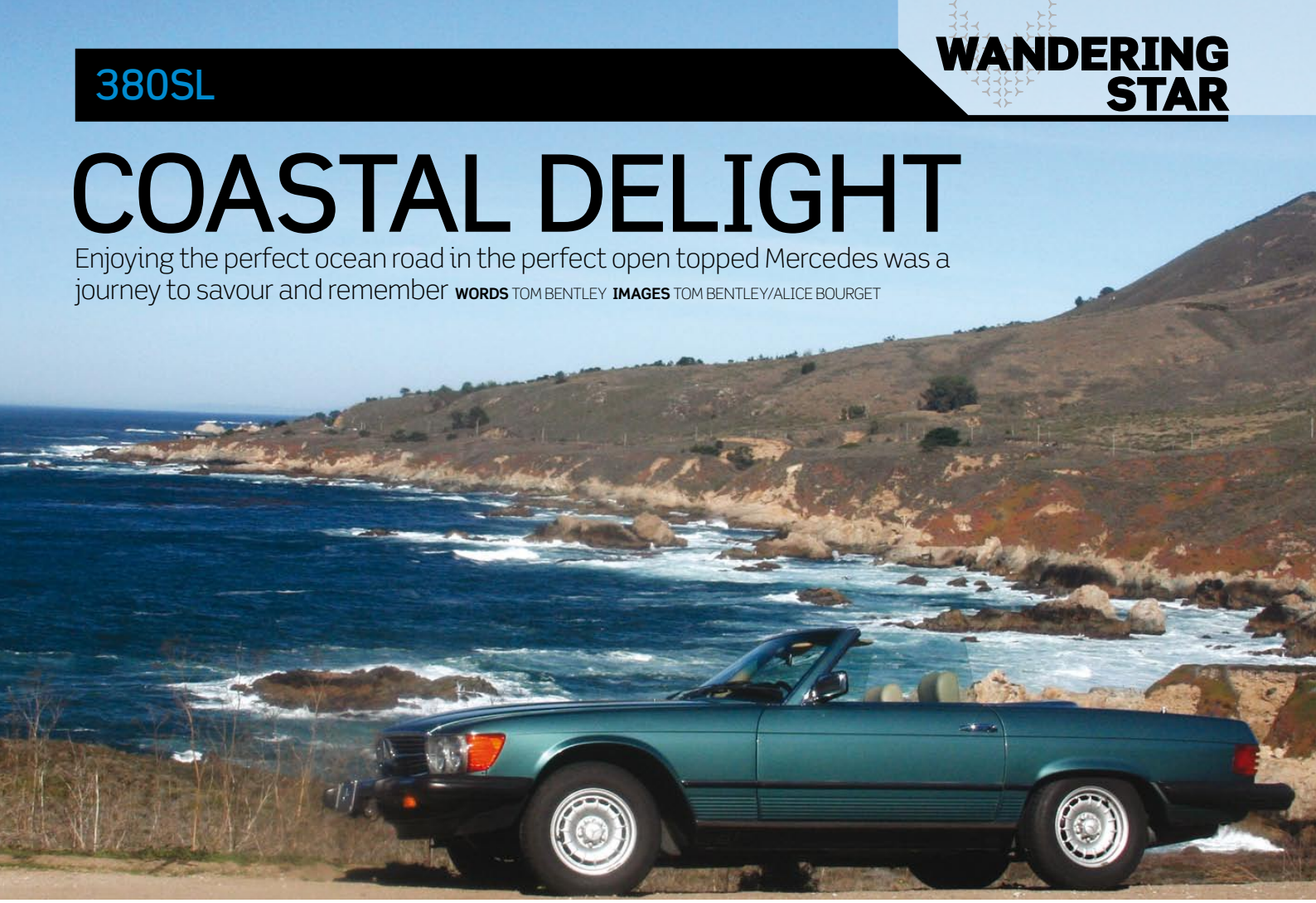
COASTAL DELIGHT

Enjoying the perfect ocean road in the perfect open topped Mercedes was a journey to savour and remember **WORDS** TOM BENTLEY **IMAGES** TOM BENTLEY/ALICE BOURGET



TAKING A DRIVE DOWN ONE OF the world's most stunning coastlines seems like reward enough. But taking that drive in a sharp, 1981 380SL on a warm and sunny day – where the rolling landscape and the shifting light on the dazzling ocean are perfectly matched to the steady pulse of the engine and the sparkle of its chrome – is heaven sent. I recently took my roadster for a top down drive on California's Big Sur coastline, and my admiration for the stunning coastal curves and hilltop vistas was all the more renewed because the car seemed to enjoy the ride as much as I did.

The drive begins just south of the charming town of Carmel, where the highway starts to rise and fall in layers of ocean hugging hills and valleys. The 380SL is a nice match for the route's swooping curves – the two seater has that vintage Mercedes solidity where its balanced weight holds steady, and the big steering wheel doesn't have to be yanked or feathered too finely to swing its massy front end through a series of corners. My ride is not a fire breather – the 380SL was the least powerful of the US imported R107s – but it has a good base of torque in its small V8 that hauls it up hills with a steady purr. And with the top down, the vantage points for taking in the delicious scenery are wide open.

The removable hardtop/convertible aspect of this Benz is intriguing because you can drive in three modes and all are very different. Hardtop on, the Mercedes feels a touch heavier and a tad less responsive. And on this age of SL, putting the hardtop on and taking it off is not done in a swift sum of seconds, as with its younger descendants. It is a two-person operation, and that weighty baby does not fold away – it is kept in my garage. With the convertible soft top up, visibility is slightly affected and the Benz roadster is a mite noisier on the highway. But when you have the top down, noise is irrelevant. The thrill of the drive and its in-your-face feeling are my primary motivations.

> "The roadster flows on the steady diet of ups and downs and ins and outs of the Big Sur drive"

Because the SL is fairly nimble for something of its considerable weight (1,540kg without and 1,580kg with its hardtop), it flows on the steady diet of ups and downs and ins and outs of the Big Sur drive, where I can feast on the rich palette of the sea's deep blues, caught in narrow coves thrashed by waves, or rolling over big outcrops of rocks close to the shore.

There are also some lay-bys on both sides of the road to take photographs of the famed arch of Bixby Bridge, or the beautiful Point Sur Lighthouse atop the towering Point Sur. I can even take pictures without getting out of my parked car!

Once in Big Sur itself, there's much to do – hike in a selection of beautiful parks, check out interesting, small boutiques and craft stores, or catch a bite to eat. The 380SL has plenty of room for several suitcases in its boot, so an overnight stay or a longer break is a cinch. But on this particular day, I turned the roadster round and headed home – and the drive back wasn't too bad either.

The 380SL's modest V8 engine made light work of California's coastal roads.