

GLK: a G-Wagen-inspired luxury compact SUV. Emphatically not just a downsized M-Class.

Mercedes-Benz has quite a lineup. So much so, it's sometimes hard to keep track of them all. They must know this, as they are on the verge of combining several of their model designations (see page 45). Having recently traveled to Vermont (see *Arizona Driver*, September/October 2008) to drive their new BlueTec diesel M-, GL- and R-Class SUVs (and/or crossovers), and adding to that the big G-Class né Galendewagen, we perceived a pretty full set of options. Not so.

The 2010 GLK350 has a base price of \$34,775, against the M-Class, which starts at about \$48k (and competes with such luxury SUVs as the Lexus RX350). The GL-Class starts just under \$60k and is a strong competitor to a wide range of SUVs. The R-Class is a supremely capable and largely misunderstood vehicle, priced from about \$48.5k, con-

sidered a crossover in their lineup but also counted among the SUVs, able to compete with a Suburban or Cadillac EXV.

But it turns out there was a niche untapped. Mercedes SUV buyers had nowhere to go for smaller size or lower price within their lineup, and aspirational buyers of small SUVs such as the Ford Escape and Toyota RAV4 had no Mercedes option (though they have Porsche and BMW options, and the new Audi Q5 adds another). Mercedes points out that there are five new Luxury Compact SUV vehicles for 2009, so they are wise to be riding this wave.

Any manufacturer seeks customers for new vehicles from either of two places: existing customers switching within the brand, and customers new to the brand, or "conquests." Mercedes is targeting and in fact anticipates a high conquest rate with the GLK.



The downsizing conundrum

As the new GLK entered early conceptual stages, the design team had a clear dictate: do not make this a small M-Class. Mercedes did not want a lineup perceived as simply small, medium and large versions of the same concept. With sensitivity to a market that suddenly thinks downsizing is a pretty good idea, Mercedes is ready to "celebrate small." Their philosophy, which will be carried into their advertising (and has already influenced early TV promotion) is that great engineering is great engineering, at any size.

We doubt they will have much of an uphill battle pitching a smaller vehicle in current conditions. From what we've seen in reactions among the press, on the road, and in general conversation, this vehicle covers all the bases, and very well indeed. Well, except for maybe one, and we'll get back to that.

Hitting the niche

So if the new GLK is not going to seem like a downsized M-Class, then where would they start? Well, a couple of places. From within, they investigated the strengths and attributes of the full SUV and crossover lineup. And they did extensive consumer studies, all of which indicated that, overall, people consider this market and such a vehicle to be an SUV. Whether it is based on a truck frame or unibody automobile construction, and regardless of the degree of utility they require, they see the segment as a two-box SUV. They think crossovers, regardless of function or construction, are distinguished by a jellybean shape. (So for all the effort and discussion that has gone into this topic, there you have it, at least based on those consumer studies.) Interesting, whether SUV or crossover, whether truck-framed or not, there apparently was precious little discussion of whether the vehicles serve a purpose off-road or in deep snow and other adverse conditions. It is indeed all about style and perception.

Styling, performance, versatility

Yes, style... and performance and versatility, the two other attributes the Mercedes product planners assigned to the design team. Stylewise, armed with their consumer perception findings, they went right to the extra-large in their lineup, the G-Class (a boxy brute based on a long-running European military vehicle and starting at over \$100k for the US civilian version). The G-Class is certainly versatile, or at least offers a lot of utility, and its style is 100% SUV. Performance would be addressed on its own, as the GLK's size and weight are significantly lower. G-Class cues include a relatively upright windshield, aggressive front grille, fender flares and a strong character line from the doors to the rear taillight. Chrome

accents are plentiful.

Ultimately, we can't argue that they have avoided creating a downsized M-Class, and they have evoked a bit of the G-Class, but in many ways it's actually not hard to see a lot of GL-Class in the GLK, also. Which is fine; that's already a segment favorite.

A moving target

Of course it takes quite awhile to bring a new vehicle to market, so it's a wonderful thing for all concerned when the right vehicle hits at the right time. And that's just what Geoff Day, Mercedes-Benz USA Director of Corporate Communications, says they have achieved: "the right sizing, in the right vehicle, at the right time, at the right price." He says this is a vehicle anyone can buy now and enjoy.

Dave Larsen, Product Manager for the GLK and M-Class, points out that although the new GLK does not compete with Mercedes' own M-Class, conversely the Lexus RX competes with both. If nothing else, this demonstrates that Mercedes has at least two places for a Lexus (or similar) SUV customer to migrate.

Larsen provides us with a brief history of Mercedes SUV offerings. They start in 1997 with the first M-Class, a fairly tame takeoff on their first SUV concept show vehicle, a fairly traditional body-on-frame SUV, trucklike in its basis though styled for a broader audience. The European Galendewagen was available for many years from just one source in the US, a specialty dealership in New Mexico. But in 2001, the consumer-friendly G-Class entered the marketplace, very trucklike and all business. As the segments matured, and with one eye on the competition, the M-Class for 2005 was completely redone with unibody construction replacing the body-on-frame truck approach. They were surely doing something right, as M-Class sales have gone up while that segment is down overall, giving Mercedes an ever-increasing share. 2005 also brought the big R-Class, and 2006 brought the new GL-Class, both with third-row seats and 7-passenger capacity. GL sales are currently down 7%, but as the segment's sales are down a whopping 25% overall in the current economic climate, the GL's share is also increasing.

In 1997, one class of SUV (the new M-Class) comprised 12% of MBUSA sales. By 2007, four SUV classes from Mercedes-Benz (including the crossover R-Class) were contributing 30% of sales. For 2009, they will have five classes with the addition of the GLK. The Luxury Compact SUV market is estimated to grow by a whopping 72% from 2007 to 2010. So now that we think about a lineup of eleven classes of car and five SUVs, it's clear this is not one SUV too far;



SANTA BARBARA

We flew nonstop to Santa Barbara, a very easy southern California getaway. The airport there is very small and fairly close to town (and the beach), a quick in and out. Mercedes met us there, so we didn't do a rental car transfer. Our nonstops were with US Airways, a CRJ small jet on the way over and a DeHavilland Dash-8 prop plane on the way back. The prop flight takes a little longer, but gives you a better look at scenery below.

We stayed at the Canary Hotel in downtown Santa Barbara, enjoying a rooftop reception with mountain and ocean views, dinner at their Coast Restaurant, and our final dinner at San Ysidro Ranch, where JFK and Jackie honeymooned.

Our test drive was through Santa Barbara's wine country in the Santa Ynez Mountains, with lunch at Fess Parker's Wine Country Inn—that's right, Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone. Though Parker had been there for the prior wave of journalists, he wasn't for ours, although his daughter was, and she set things up so we could access the production end of the winery for some photography. ■



Photos Joe Sage



on a pro-rata model basis, it's exactly right for the share.

GLK be nimble

If you've ever driven the big R-Class, you know that Mercedes can deliver what they call a "small and nimble" feel in a big vehicle. (This is much the case with the big Audi Q7 as well.) Despite being masters of that trick, however, with the GLK they promise just the opposite: a small and nimble vehicle that, well, feels large and stable... and nimble.

This was borne out on our 200-mile tour through Santa Barbara's wine country, which included minor freeway time, a lot of two-lane highway and even a little small-town driving. The vehicle's height and short stance could contribute to top-heaviness or sway in some vehicles, but it is almost imperceptible in this all-wheel driver. But while contemplating this, we directed our attention to the road we were traveling—a rough, narrow, cracked, patched, rutted and rotted rural two-lane—and noted that the ride was firm and smooth as silk, absorbing it all. This is no minor feat, especially given the 19" wheels and the shallow sidewall those bring. Very nice.

Keeping it simple

One breath of fresh air is a simplified set of options for the GLK (something little Honda figured out long ago). There are just five packages and eight options total. Packages include Premium (sunroof, satellite radio, power liftgate, rain sensors, driver memory seat and such), Multimedia (including voice-controlled phone/audio/nav, rear camera with larger display, and updated sound system), Appearance (20" wheels, all season tires and aluminum roof rails in place of the standard black rails), Full Leather Seating (including premium interior lighting) and Lighting (adaptive bi-xenon headlamps, LED taillamps and corner-illuminating foglamps). Standalone options are Parktronic, 6-CD changer, media interface, trailer hitch, styled running boards, heated front seats and rear seat entertainment. As for that trailer hitch, the 3.5L 268-hp 24-valve V-6 will tow 3500 pounds.

So what was that one thing? Fuel economy is rated at 16/21 mpg (with 4Matic), not bad for a luxury ute that hits 0-to-60 in 6.5 seconds, but not eye-popping in a market seeking the small. Despite the diesel treatment just applied to the M-, GL- and R-Classes, there are no BlueTec or BlueHybrid versions for the GLK at this time. The first GLK should arrive during January, in 4Matic fitment (4Matic all-wheel-drive generally distributes grip about 45/55% front/rear and adds about 145 pounds to the vehicle). A rear-wheel-drive version is due in April. ■

