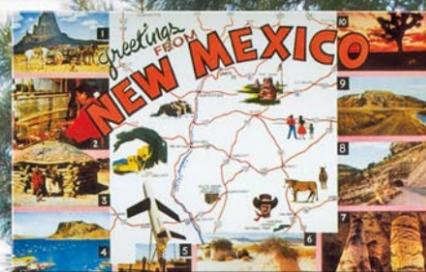


Numero uno Generación dos

by Joe Sage



2013 Mercedes-Benz GL 550 4MATIC

Mercedes-Benz joined the SUV craze in 1997 with the 1998 M-Class (aka ML-Class), at roughly the same time as the Lexus RX, with the swooping lines and fender bulges of the original concept vehicle toned down at first in production, taking most of a decade to come to life. The Mercedes-Benz R-Class—somewhat a cross between the highly stylish CLS four-door coupe and an immensely practical Escalade ESV or Suburban—debuted in 2005 as a 2006 model. The GL-Class, arguably somewhat more conventional in size and shape, joined the lineup in 2006 as a 2007 model. And the smaller GLK followed in 2009. They have now all received comprehensive updates, giving Mercedes-Benz the “youngest” SUV fleet in the US.

The new GL is what brings us together today.

Conquering the US market

We traveled to Santa Fe to drive the 2013 GL-Class and quickly learned that this has been a banner year for Mercedes-Benz, with their highest sales in the 47-year history of Mercedes-Benz USA. And after 15 years of sales, the combined Mercedes-Benz SUV lineup has had six-fold growth. This result has been helped in no small measure by the GL-Class, which now claims the number one spot among SUV sales in America, at 25 percent of the market (“way ahead” of the Escalade at number two). The GL is not designed in the US but is built here, and 53 percent of the GL’s global sales are in the US.

Four years ago, we drove all three 2009 BlueTEC diesel SUVs (see our Sept/Oct 2008 issue) and found that the GL was a group favorite, while a bit of a sleeper, tamer and more familiar in its style and purpose. That’s all relative, but don’t let it keep you from noticing there are now 138,000 GL-Class SUVs on the road in the US. Sales average 21,000 a year, with last year’s 25,000 second only to the GL’s first year. The GL has a 30 percent loyal customer repeat purchase rate and a 58 percent new customer conquest rate. It’s not hard to see why.

At an average of 48 years old, the GL’s buyers are the youngest among SUVs. 91 percent are married and some 80 percent are either baby boom or gen X, most with kids and dogs. We have no problem seeing great appeal also for empty nesters or even an individual.

New enticements outside and in

The GL for 2013 is the model’s second generation, and though it looks similar, it is very new. The vehicle is longer, wider and taller, yet has gained only 50 pounds due to weight savings in materials and technologies throughout. A new grille, headlamps, LED DRLs and LED taillights quickly distinguish the 2013 model—which comes in GL 350 BlueTEC, GL 450 and GL 550 iterations. The GL 550 has a distinct front air dam, lower fascia, fender flares and 21-inch AMG wheels. (At a base price of \$86,900 for the GL 550, versus \$62,400 and \$63,900 for the GL 350 BlueTEC and the GL 450, respectively, the GL 550 has earned its right to stand out.) The interior features a new upholstered dash, an updated central controller and two third-row seats that power-fold separately or together for a flat cargo floor—with manual Easy-Entry from either side. Power Easy-Entry is an option for the second row (which folds not quite flat). A retractable glass sunroof is standard, or optional is a panorama power sunroof, double-sized with a fixed



Our itinerary gave us a mix of pavement and gravel, open plains and high mountain trails and all three models of the 2013 GL-Class. The terrain model at right demonstrates the GL’s abilities to scale a 100 percent grade, handle a 35 degree tilt or ford a 60 centimeter depth. Bottom right: Rio Grande Gorge.

glass panel over the third row. New optional multi-color ambient lighting can round out your interior experience.

Ongoing strides in safety and tech

Mercedes-Benz has been a step ahead of most everybody else for the past few years in electronically-based safety features. Combining performance, safety and convenience, the GL-Class starts with the “mbrace2” system, standard, comprising cloud-based next-gen telematics, including internet access, the ability to interact with your GL remotely, and over-the-air diagnostics. These augment the first generation’s safety, destination planning and concierge features. Optional apps bring custom versions of Google Maps (including street view), Panoramio, Facebook, Yelp and news; more will be added all the time. Mobile apps for iPhone and Droid add remote horn and lights (priceless when looking for your GL in a dark parking lot), and Valet Protect (creating a virtual fence and generating alerts if it is violated).

Attentive parents will appreciate new “Control” features including geofencing, speed alert, driving journal and curfew-minder services.

At your fingertips are the Mercedes-Benz COMAND

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2013 Mercedes-Benz GL 350 BlueTEC



Photos: Greg Jarem [3]



Happy on a smooth urban street, the GL has the range and the grunt to also tackle the wilds. The interior is clean yet engaging and feature-laden. A flat third row and tilt second add up to enormous storage volume. At left, we scale Taos Ski Mountain, pass through Taos on US 64, enjoy Wheeler Peak, New Mexico's highest, and wrap up our road trip near La Fonda Inn at historic Santa Fe Plaza.

control knob and center display. Hard-wired are a rear camera, power liftgate and second row 115v outlets. Electronic safety systems include Attention Assist, Adaptive Brakes, Crosswind Stabilization—which applies brakes on one side, to provide steady forward tracking and feel—and Airmatic suspension.

Operational and comfort options include an on- and off-road package and soft-close doors. Optional electronic safety and performance features include an Active Curve System, Active Parking Assist, Active Lane Keeping Assist and SurroundView camera, which eliminates your blind spots by assembling multiple triangulated camera views into one CGI image of the whole vehicle—a feature that will spoil you instantly.

The 2013 GL-Class marks the debut of another Mercedes-Benz technology that is sure to work through the whole lineup—Collision Prevention Assist. Evolving from the Distronic Plus With Pre-Safe Brake system—of which we had our first thrilling demo in the 2010 E-Class (see our Jul/Aug 2009 issue)—this system measures your vehicle's dynamics against the measured space between you and others, then provides visual warning, then audible warnings, then raises your brake

boost for a quicker stop (performed by the driver).

The GL will look great pulling up to the club, but its off-road capabilities are prodigious: it can climb a 100 percent (45-degree) grade, handle a 35-degree sideways tilt, and ford a 60-cm (24-inch) water hazard.

A GL-Class for every budget and need

This is where it gets easy. You know you want a new GL. And this is also where it gets tough—each of the three models is very compelling in its own way, and a fourth (arriving next year), well, ditto.

	GL 350 BlueTEC	GL 450 4MATIC	GL 550 4MATIC	GL 63 AMG
Horsepower	210	362	429	550
Torque (lb-ft)	398	406	516	560
MPG (city/hwy)	17/21	14/19	13/18	tba
Base price (\$k)	\$62.4	\$63.9	\$86.9	tba

The GL 350 BlueTEC has a 3.0L V6 turbodiesel with the best fuel mileage of the bunch—able to make it from Santa Fe to Las Vegas, Nevada on one 26.4-gallon tank with 3.2-gallon reserve. The diesel is expected to account for 60 percent of GL sales.

Choosing between the GL 450 and GL 550—both bearing 4.6L biturbo V8 engines—probably comes down to your budget. With all the power, creature comforts and style upgrades of the GL 550, and only one point loss of fuel economy, it makes all the sense in the world—other than costing 36 percent more for that 18 percent gain in horsepower (and 27 percent in torque). If you have the extra \$23k, you won't be disappointed. The 5.5L biturbo V8 AMG model is due to arrive in the first quarter of 2013. Details will follow, but it could easily top \$125,000. All four have seven-speed automatics. Tow capacity is 7500 pounds for the current three (AMG t.b.d).

Despite differences in fascias, wheels and various features, every one of the GLs is a stunning combination of beef and grace. You can't go wrong with any.

Pounding around northern New Mexico

We put significant miles on the GL, and they were just our kind of miles, driving from Albuquerque up Highway 14 through Madrid, through Santa Fe to Tesuque Pueblo, then north through Española and across beautiful two-lane highways and lesser roads to the Earthship natural and recycled building complex northwest of Taos. From there, we hit many miles of gravel, across the high plains to the precipice of Rio Grande Gorge. The road snaking down to the river crossing is tight, rough and full of hair-pin turns. Nothing fazed the GL. Climbing out the eastern banks of the Gorge, we regained pavement, then took winding roads to Taos Ski Mountain, moving back to gravel for the climb to Bavarian Lodge. Cliffhanging and riverside two-lanes from Taos south to Española opened up to four-lane US highway on our final stretch back to Santa Fe. The GL's performance was flawless throughout, and comfort never dimmed.

We were able to drive all models during the course of the day, then had a chance to repeat one, and went straight to the 550. After all, we weren't paying for it. Whether 350, 450 or 550, the GL-Class is a wonderful SUV. If you don't believe it, just try to find a used one. ■

