



Wide Open Spaces

By Joe Sage

Mercedes-Benz has one of the most thorough SUV lineups on the market. King of the hill, but least seen, is the G-Class (the classic Geländewagen), suitable for battle duty. Most popular are the M-Class (their best seller) and the GL-Class (nominally their full-size model). The GLK-Class offers attributes of the above in a smaller package.

And what would you get if you crossed the three-row seven-passengers-plus-luggage all-wheel-drive utility of a Chevy Suburban with the sleek elegance and luxury of a Mercedes-Benz CLS four-door coupe? Meet the R-Class. First shown as a concept in 2001, and brought to dealers in 2005, this streamliner has sometimes resisted categorization. The engine, transmission, seats, steering and other bits are shared with the M-Class and GL-Class. But its station-wagon-esque form has kept it from being tagged as an SUV, despite all-weather and terrain-variety strengths. It has been tagged a multi-purpose vehicle, but at MBUSA online it lives in a category called SUVs and Crossovers. This, then, is their crossover.

Confusing? That's not uncommon with the broad range of vehicles carrying that descriptor. But you will find it more liberating than limiting. Whether you're in the market for a large SUV, a (gasp) station wagon or a capacious executive carrier, the Mercedes-Benz R-Class fills all these niches extremely well.

The R-Class has been extensively restyled and upgraded for 2011. If you've overlooked it before, take another look.

NEW FOR 2011

The changes begin up front, with a recontoured hood and front fenders, a bolder and slightly more upright grille, sleeker side mirrors and new headlights with optional LED daytime running lights. The headlights lead into side contours that, together with the new grille, create a much more dynamic line of force toward the front. The rear receives LED taillights, a new bumper with integrated exhaust pipes and reflectors, and a black rear diffuser.

Inside, you'll find new seat stitching, three interior colors in either MB-Tex or optional

leather, standard burl walnut trim, an easy-to-read 3D instrument cluster with white dials, and an overhead rearview mirror with integrated compass. Add seating for 4 to 7 people, with new "saddle" head restraints for the second- and third-row passengers.

R350 BLUETEC, R350 4MATIC

The Mercedes-Benz R-Class is sold in 86 markets worldwide, with models tailored to each locale. In Germany, there are some nine models, with both short- and long-wheelbase variants and powertrains including an R300, R350, R500, plus 4MATIC all-wheel-drive, BlueTEC and BlueEFFICIENCY fuel and engineering alternatives.

In the US, the choices are simpler. Two versions are being manufactured at the Mercedes-Benz plant in Tuscaloosa County, Alabama, for all 50 states: an R350 4MATIC, with a 268-hp gasoline V6 delivering 258 lb-ft of torque, and an R350 BlueTEC, also with 4MATIC all-wheel-drive, as well as a 210-hp turbodiesel V6 pumping out 400 lb-ft of torque. These achieve city/highway EPA estimated fuel mileage of 18/24 for the

BlueTEC diesel and 15/19 for the R350 4MATIC gasoline model. Any further alternative fuel or high-power versions may arrive down the road.

VERSATILITY—AND SPACE

We're content for now with just two drivetrain variants, as the primary masterstroke of the R-Class is its overall variability.

The interior can be configured to seat 4, 5, 6 or 7 people, and cargo space adjusts accordingly. Headroom is 39.8" in front and even more in the second row, 40.4" with the glass sunroof. The third row still comes in decently, at 37.2". Shoulder room is about 60" for the first four passengers, just under 53" for the third row. Two 6-foot-plus adults were quite comfortable in the front seat during our test drive.

R-Class buyers seeking the most seats opt for a 2-3-2 configuration, with a third seat in the second row. Six people are happiest in the 2-2-2 configuration, which provides an individual seat for each.

Front seat occupants have it best, enjoying standard 8-way power adjustable seats with driver-side 4-way pneumatic lumbar control for driver and passenger, and a special order option adds the luxury of active-ventilated and heated front seats.

Total cabin volume is 162.1 cu.ft., with cargo capacity ranging from 15.2 cu.ft. with all seats raised, to 42.2 cu.ft. with the third row down, and a whopping 85 cu.ft. with both the second and third rows down. Cargo length in these three configurations is, respectively, 18.3", 42.3" or 87.3".

A group of four or family of five will be able to pack freely and travel comfortably. For one or two on weekend errands, you can load up more goodies than there is time to acquire. A family of seven, all with luggage, may need the towing package for a long haul (with a 3500-lb capacity).

The rear liftgate is enormous and lifts clear, and an optional electronic tailgate, which can be operated remotely via switch or smart key—makes access all the easier.

Mercedes-Benz says the R-Class is the most variable and spacious vehicle in their entire passenger vehicle product range.

PERFORMANCE

One place you may not take the R-Class is to the track, though its performance is quite respectable for such a large and useful machine. Weighing in at two-and-a-half tons (4949 lbs for the 6-passenger, 5049 for the 7-passenger version), the gas-powered R350 4MATIC reaches 60 mph in 8.0 seconds flat. At 5203 and 5280 lbs (6-passenger and 7-passenger, respectively), the BlueTEC diesel hits 60 in 8.6 seconds. Top speed is electronically limited to 130 mph on both.



On the road, we had mixed observations, occasionally wishing the handling were a little sharper. But that was easily attributed to the fact that this vehicle doesn't feel as big and heavy as it actually is. A bit paradoxical, but on balance, it handles so much better than the big 7-passenger people-hauler it is, we had to remind ourselves we may have had sport coupe expectations.

In highway traffic, we particularly enjoyed the diesel torque at hand in the R350 BlueTEC: when we needed a quick lane change or power burst (not unlikely, especially during the Thruway phase of our test), we noted so much torque that the engine didn't even need to downshift to generate the necessary grunt.

BLUE IS CLEAN AND GREEN

The R350 BlueTEC continues to be one of the cleanest diesel models in the world. Its V6 achieves output of 210 hp and, as with any diesel, substantial torque: 400 lb-ft. The BlueTEC model also uses less fuel and produces lower emissions. Its AdBlue® urea exhaust gas after-treatment helps it achieve EPA estimated fuel mileage of 18/24 mpg city/highway, while maintaining no higher a level of emissions than a comparable gasoline engine, in particular reducing nitrous oxides. The BlueTEC model already meets tight emission requirements for the EU6 standard due in 2014.

The 3.5-liter gasoline V6 of the R350 4MATIC is known for effortless power delivery and moderate fuel consumption. Its EPA estimated fuel economy figures are 15/19 mpg city/highway.

ELECTRONICS-ENTERTAINMENT

Telematics on the R-Class have a fairly straightforward interface for the complexity of tasks performed. The COMAND system is standard, with in-dash 6-disc

NY-NJ TRAVEL NOTES

We flew to Newark on US Airways, long but easy. From there, a fleet of Mercedes-Benz SUVs drove us to Hoboken NJ.

Notwithstanding the transplant of the NY Giants and Jets to the Meadowlands, it has taken a surprisingly long time for the city to spread into New Jersey. Hoboken and Jersey City, for decades a sea of train terminals and tenements, have sprouted modern high-rise office and residential towers. Wall Street bankers are now able to live in luxury, just a short PATH train or ferry ride from Manhattan, for just thousands of dollars a



month instead of thousands and thousands. And from the Jersey side, they have something those in the city proper do not: a waterfront skyline view of Manhattan.



Our digs were at the posh W Hotel, further proof that this is not your father's Hoboken. The extreme high style of the W is complemented by tree-lined boulevards and promenades along the Hudson River.

In the morning, our route book took us up the west side of the Hudson through busy

KEEP RIGHT >>

Logbook (cont'd) >>



Utility, style and space, space, space are the name of the game. The Mercedes-Benz R-Class offers seating for up to 7 people, plus up to 85 cubic feet of cargo space. Access to all rows is easy, and both the second and third rows can be folded, giving up to 87.3" by 44.5" of cargo area, just shy of a 4x8 sheet of plywood.



CD/DVD changer and high-resolution 6.5-inch color display. A compass function (displayed in two places), Bluetooth interface and an Aux-in connection for mobile audio are also integrated. As part of an optional Premium1 package, the COMAND system has 4GB of added memory for MP3 files, an SD card slot and a hard drive navigation system with SIRIUS real-time traffic. Also in the Premium1 package is a voice-operated control system for many vehicle functions, and a universal interface to connect an iPod or other external music device to the onboard control system, so it can be operated through the vehicle's controls while also recharging.

Passengers can also enjoy full, concert-hall surround-sound with an optional harman/kardon® Logic7® high-output sound system includes a Digital Signal Processor (DSP) and Dolby Digital 5.1. Optional rear seat entertainment adds two large 8-inch screens, a DVD player and two wireless headsets plus remote control, for freedom of movement.

SAFETY TECHNOLOGY

It's common for a manufacturer to introduce its most stunning technologies in its flagship vehicles, then migrate them down the chain. Mercedes-Benz, however, introduced a far-reaching range of technologies, including many breakthrough safety features, when it launched the new E-Class last year (see our July/August 2009 and January/February 2010 issues). Now those are spreading through the rest of the range, including into the new R-Class.

Included here are the PRE-SAFE® anticipatory occupant protection system, a complete restraint system with eight airbags, crash-responsive NECK-PRO front head restraints, and a tire pressure loss warning system. An optional new Blind Spot Assist monitors the sides of the vehicle and alerts the driver with visual and audible warnings if a lane change is signaled with another vehicle alongside. Safety is also enhanced by the sophisticated telematics system "mbrace," the COMAND system interface, and a benefit of the R-Class: the enhanced visibility of its raised seating position.

PRE-SAFE® uses a combination of active and passive safety, networked with the Brake Assist System (BAS) and Electronic Stability Program ESP®, whose sensors recognize potentially critical handling situations and relay information to electronic control units in milliseconds. This also initiates occupant protection through seatbelt, seat and sunroof controls.

Safety features also include a steel reinforced cabin with front and rear crumple zones, front and rear outboard seatbelts with pre-tensioners and force limiters, dual two-stage front airbags, side airbags mounted in front seat backrests, window curtain airbags, 4-wheel ABS disc brakes with BAS, an ESP trailer stabilization system, Anti-Slip Regulation (ASR), LATCH-lower anchors and tethers for children, rear door child safety locks, acoustic signal for vehicle locking/unlocking, antitheft alarm with engine immobilizer, SmartKey with panic button and an enhanced tire pressure monitoring system.

PRICING AND OPTION PACKAGES

Base price for the R350 4MATIC is \$50,240 and the R350 BlueTEC starts at \$51,740, plus an \$875 destination charge.

The R350 4MATIC is equipped with 18" 5-spoke wheels and 255/55 R18 all-season tires, and the R350 BlueTEC comes with 19" AMG 5-spoke with 225/50 R19 all-season run-flat tires.

Standard equipment is extensive. A few highlights include a power glass sunroof with sunshade, power windows, dual-zone automatic climate controls, 8-way power adjustable driver's seat with power 4-way lumbar support, a 4-spoke multifunction leather steering wheel, the COMAND system, in-dash 6-CD/DVD changer, Bluetooth hands-free calling, integrated garage door opener, burl walnut trim, six cupholders, cruise control, rain-sensing wipers, automatic headlamps, 4MATIC all-wheel drive, 7-speed automatic transmission with DIRECT SELECT shift lever and steering wheel mounted shift paddles, front steel



suspension with self-leveling rear air suspension, 4-wheel disc brakes and dual integrated chrome-tipped exhaust pipes.

Optional packages include the Premium 1 Package (\$4,000), which adds auto-dimming driver side and rear view mirrors, hard drive navigation, enhanced voice control for telephone and nav, Gracenote® media database, HD Digital Radio®, iPod/MP3 media interface (in glovebox), memory for driver seat, power steering column, power folding mirrors, power lift-gate, power steering column, rear view camera, SIRIUS® Satellite Radio with real-time traffic and Zagat restaurant guide, 115V AC power outlet, 4GB hard drive with Music Register for download of MP3 files.

The Premium 2 Package (\$6,050) includes all the Premium 1 items plus the harman/kardon surround-sound system and KEYLESS-GO.

A Lighting Package (\$985) adds LED daytime running lights, Bi-xenon headlamps and a headlamp cleaning system.

A Sport Appearance Package for the R350 4MATIC only (\$1,350) adds dark tinted sport rear tail lamps, heat-absorbing blue tinted glass for the first row and 20" AMG 5-spoke wheels.

Stand-alone options include Blind Spot Assist, Parktronic, a wood/leather multifunction steering wheel, mbrace telematics, Panorama Sunroof with electric sunshade, the 7-seat option, a 3,500-pound Class II Trailer Hitch, 3-zone climate control and rear air conditioning, rear seat entertainment system, heated front seats and KEYLESS-GO.

It's clear Mercedes-Benz is serious when they describe the R-Class as being particularly suited to tailor-made customization.

The vehicles come with a 4-year/50,000-mile warranty, 24-hour roadside assistance and Mercedes-Benz maintenance system.

The new R350 lineup should be at dealerships by the time you read this. ■

city streets, riverfront park lands and small waterfront towns as we passed into New York state, then across the spectacular Tappan Zee Bridge, a 3-mile span curving just above water to its high point, a cantilever truss bridge 138 feet above the Hudson, and into Westchester County.

Continuing up the Hudson River Valley on the Taconic Parkway, we reached Blue Hill at Stone Farms, a stylish yet classic facility featuring an organic agricultural research complex, as well as on this day a tasty lunch. From there, we had three test routes crisscrossing the Hudson River, West Point, Bear Mountain Bridge, Palisades Interstate



Parkway and a construction-challenged bit of the New York Thruway.

We flew back from Newark, but not immediately: the second morning found us at



water's edge, catching a small commuter water taxi, which took us up the Hudson a ways, then back south past the World Trade Center site and Statue of Liberty, around the tip of Manhattan and up the East River to the Brooklyn Bridge, where we did part two of this trip, driving the new smart fortwo electric drive on the mean streets of Brooklyn (see July/August issue).—JS