

Taking center stage

A new GLE—leader in a lineup of unified variety By Joe Sage

Mercedes-Benz has ever-increasing variety among its utility offerings, while more recently unifying their styling and presentation. Both are winning strategies.

The \$150,000ish G-Class, conceived in the original era of big beast SUVs, remains immensely capable off-road today while also being eminently welcome at the country club.

Their modern utility lineup has its origins in the late 1990s, as Mercedes-Benz was one of the first to blend SUV functionality with sleek styling, in the midsize M- (or ML-) Class.

The GLS (formerly GL) arrived only a dozen years ago, but carries the aura of a brand flagship, as though it has been in the lineup forever (and bonus: it starts at just \$70k)

A year later came the GLK, conceived as a

compact version of the GL.

Each had its own distinct styling and identity, sometimes surely leading to an apples-and-oranges decision adding in tangible and intangible factors of both style and function.

Now it's pretty much all apples. With a restructuring of model names brandwide, all SUVs (except G-Class) bear a GL-something name—from the subcompact GLA (an all-new vehicle mid-decade just as the new naming scheme kicked in) to the GLC (replacing the GLK), GLE (replacing the M-Class) and GLS (formerly GL). G-Class maintains its own spot tangential to this naming convention.

The utility names mirror the sedan classes—A, C, E and S for the subcompact, compact, executive (or midsize) and full-size offerings.

Over this same era of nameplate homogenization, styling also became more consistent across the Mercedes-Benz SUV lineup (again with the partial exception of G-Class).

GLC and GLE now sit in the hottest spots of the utility market—compact and midsize. They are currently also quite similar in styling, largely simplifying your decision to factors of size, perhaps powertrain and/or budget.

Both GLC and GLE have been available as SUV (conventional two-box utility) or Coupe models for the past few years (both also with Mercedes-AMG high-performance models).

As this new year dawns and you get used to writing “2019,” here we are already saying “2020” for the new Mercedes-Benz GLE.

We recently headed to San Antonio to meet and drive the new 2020 GLE lineup.

There are three models so far—GLE 350, GLE 350 4MATIC and GLE 450 4MATIC—with either a 255-hp inline-4 turbo or 362-hp inline-6 turbo gasoline engine, both with 4MATIC all-

wheel drive, the GLE 350 also offering front-wheel drive, and all in traditional two-box SUV form.

The brand has sold some five million SUVs by now, of which fully about two million have been the ML and its successor the GLE. As their best selling SUV, and inhabiting one of the hottest segments, they put a lot of attention into this gen-four GLE.

Built in the US, at their Alabama plant (as it has been since early ML days), the 2020 GLE was also largely developed in the US, where our harsh road conditions guided its performance thresholds.

The 2020 GLE is ready for these challenges with highly innovative and highly technical new suspension systems. As hot techno house music amped up from a white GLE parked in the cool night air near San Antonio's Riverwalk, the vehicle launched into an elaborate dance, with all four wheels collectively or individually at their highest and lowest, pitching, yawing, climbing and planting itself to the beat. This was a fun way to show off new E-ACTIVE Body Control, fully active suspension that creates a ride

with just about no body movement, unique to this new chassis engineering. A fully networked hydro-pneumatic suspension, it utilizes the SUV's 48-volt platform in combination with newly-developed air suspension, with spring and damping forces individually controlled at each wheel, counteracting not only body roll, but pitch and squat. A curve function counteracts almost all lateral forces, for seamless, focused cornering on a par with a motorcycle.

In sand or snow conditions where most any vehicle might be completely stuck (and perhaps far from any help), the system has an impressive free-driving mode with individual wheel actuation that actually lets the GLE “jump” rather than dig in, eventually freeing you from the depths. As elegant as a prom date, this vehicle is also a very serious off-roader, benefiting from detailed information on forward and lateral inclination, suspension level and torque distribution—in both the instrument cluster

KEEP RIGHT >>



2020 MERCEDES-BENZ GLE

GLE 350

GLE 350 4MATIC

ENGINE.....new 2.0L inline-4 turbo
 HP/TORQUE.....255 hp / 273 lb-ft
 COMPRESSION RATIO.....10.5:1
 TRANSMISSION.....9G-TRONIC 9-speed auto
 DRIVETRAIN.....GLE 350: RWD
GLE 350 4MATIC: 4MATIC AWD
 0-TO-60.....7.0 / 4MATIC 7.1 sec
 TOP SPEED.....130 mph (electronically lim.)
 SUSPENSION.....F: indep, dbl wishbone
 w coil spring, single tube gas-pressure
 & tubular torsion bar;
 R: indep, multi-link w coil spring, dbl-tube
 gas-pressure & tubular torsion bar

MPG.....TBA

GLE 450 4MATIC

ENGINE.....new 3.0L inline-6 turbo
 w ≤ 21 hp EQ boost
 HP/TORQUE.....362 hp / 369 lb-ft
 COMPRESSION RATIO.....10.5:1
 TRANSMISSION.....9G-TRONIC 9-speed auto
 DRIVETRAIN.....4MATIC AWD
 0-TO-60.....5.5 sec
 TOP SPEED.....130 mph (electronically lim.)
 SUSPENSION.....F: indep, dbl wishbone
 w coil spring, single tube shock absorber
 w SSD & tubular torsion bar;
 R: indep, multi-link w coil spring, spgl-tube
 shock w SSD & tubular torsion bar

MPG.....TBA

BODY/SEATING.....steel unibody / 5-seat
 STEERING.....speed-dependent electro-
 mechanical rack & pinion
 BRAKES.....350.....F: 12.89x1.26, R: 12.99x0.55
450.....F: 14.8x1.4, R: 13.6x0.9
 WHEELS / TIRES.....8x19 cast / 255/50 R19
 LENGTH / WHEELBASE.....194.3 / 117.9 in
 HEADROOM (F/R).....40.5 / 39.6 in
 LEGROOM (F/R).....40.3 / 40.9 (opt 41.1) in
 TURNING CIRCLE.....39.4 - 39.45 ft
 GROUND CLEARANCE.....TBA
 TOW CAPACITY.....350.....TBA
350 4MATIC.....7700 lb est
450 4MATIC.....7700 lb est
 WEIGHT.....350.....TBA
350 4MATIC.....4696 lb
450 4MATIC.....4991 lb
 FUEL CAPACITY.....22.45 - 22.5 gal

BASE PRICE: GLE 350.....\$53,700
 GLE 350 4MATIC.....\$56,200
 GLE 450 4MATIC.....\$61,150

STANDARD FEATURES:

Mercedes-Benz User Experience (MBUX) w voice control; 12.3-inch digital cluster and 12.3-inch touchscreen display; navigation; LED headlamps/tail lamps; Apple/Android; blind spot assist, attention assist, PRE-SAFE system, 5 USB ports, 19-inch wheels, easy-pack tailgate, keyless entry/start, cargo cover, chrome package, car-to-X communication and more.

OPTIONAL FEATURES:

E-Active body control w Airmatic air suspension (GLE 450 4MATIC), third row seat package, augmented video nav, MBUX gesture control, heads-up display, 4-zone climate, inductive wireless charging, driver assistance pkg w new active traffic jam assist, energizing comfort, air balance cabin fragrance system, AMG Line pkg, Night pkg, warm & comfort pkg, Burmester 3D surround sound and more.

and in their biggest heads-up display yet.

GLE also receives a version of Mercedes-Benz's 9-speed automatic, as well as a new transfer case.

New to the GLE is fully-variable 4MATIC torque-on-demand, a system that can distribute force from zero to 100 percent to the front or rear axle, also depending upon which driving modes are selected.

Active stop-and-go assistance in rush hour traffic is functional up to 37 mph and works in conjunction with an integrated starter-generator (ISG), which also provides silk-smooth starts after every stop, one of the first things we noticed in our drive.

A combination of active brake assist with cross-traffic assist can identify the risk of a collision when turning across opposite lanes, braking the vehicle at lower speeds.

Cluster and infotainment screens are also not only larger—not one, but two 12.3-inches unified into a single doublewide—but its new MBUX (Mercedes-Benz User Experience) Interior Assistant responds to voice controls and even has the

ability to contextually interpret the intent of your hand and arm gestures (also distinguishing between driver and front passenger). Screen displays can also be customized among four tasteful style settings—Classic, Sport, Progressive (reduced digitalism) and Understated (minimalist digitalism).

The new GLE's wheelbase is more than three inches longer, creating a larger cabin overall, with notably increased second-row legroom, as well as fully adjustable second row seats—and even an optional available third row, with an all-electric second row providing easy access. The third row is deemed suitable for anyone up to 5-foot-10, which they point out provides enough seating overall for “half the soccer team.”

The 2020 Mercedes-Benz GLE 350, 350 4MATIC and 450 4MATIC all go on sale very soon. We were also shown a static display of an AMG version to follow before long. Neither a GLE Coupe version nor potential diesel powertrains have yet been announced or even discussed out loud. ■

OUR GLE DRIVE IN TEXAS

We had three long drives over a day and a half, a chance to try out all three models—GLE 350, GLE 350 4MATIC and GLE 450 4MATIC—including a little bit of town time, a little bit of freeway time, a whole lot of beautiful two-lane Texas Hill Country highway time, and even some challenging time on none of the above.

We did no major rock-crawling (though its E-ACTIVE suspension could handle quite a bit of that), but did do some ranch road driving and some fairly radical water fording. This was just a few weeks after our adventuresome Texas Truck Rodeo courses had been washed out in record rains, and the rivers were still flowing hot, heavy and very high, putting some of our roads underwater in a heavy flow. We took it relatively easy, as causeway roads are very narrow and the penalty for a mistake could be severe, but we could probably have gone full tilt—the GLE's capabilities are impressive.

In all conditions, the GLE gave us a highly engaging and blissfully isolated balance. ■

