

FINDING BALANCE IN THE MATRIX

BY JOE SAGE

MERCEDES-BENZ & MERCEDES-AMG UTILITY LINEUP

GLA	
Mercedes-Benz GLA 250 (FWD).....	\$ 36,230
Mercedes-Benz GLA 250	38,230
GLB	
Mercedes-Benz GLB 250 (FWD).....	\$ 38,050
Mercedes-Benz GLB 250	40,050
GLC	
Mercedes-Benz GLC 300 SUV (RWD)	\$ 43,200
Mercedes-Benz GLC 300 SUV	45,200
Mercedes-Benz GLC 300 Coupe	51,600
Mercedes-Benz GLC 350e SUV.....	51,900
Mercedes-AMG GLC 43 SUV.....	\$ 59,500
Mercedes-AMG GLC 43 Coupe	63,000
Mercedes-AMG GLC 63 SUV	73,750
Mercedes-AMG GLC 63 Coupe.....	76,500
Mercedes-AMG GLC 63 S Coupe	84,100
GLE	
Mercedes-Benz GLE 350 SUV (RWD).....	\$ 54,750
Mercedes-Benz GLE 350 SUV	57,250
Mercedes-Benz GLE 450 SUV	62,500
Mercedes-Benz GLE 580 SUV.....	tbd
Mercedes-AMG GLE 53 SUV (4MATIC+)	\$ 72,350
Mercedes-AMG GLE 53 Coupe (4MATIC+)	76,500
Mercedes-AMG GLE 63 S SUV (4MATIC+).....	113,950
Mercedes-AMG GLE 63 S Coupe (4MATIC+).....	tbd
GLS	
Mercedes-Benz GLS 450	\$ 76,000
Mercedes-Benz GLS 580	tbd
Mercedes-AMG GLS 63.....	\$ 132,100
G	
Mercedes-Benz G 550	\$ 130,900
Mercedes-AMG G 63	\$ 156,450

All Mercedes-Benz are 4MATIC unless noted as FWD, RWD; all Mercedes-AMG are 4MATIC unless noted as 4MATIC+. All information current as of publication, subject to revision or errors and omissions.

The big G-Class aside, you can first get oriented among four primary sizes: GLA, GLC, GLE and GLS-Class, re-named a few years ago (except GLS was always GLS) to correspond with A, C, E and S sedans and coupes.

GLE is the flagship, GLA the smallest (GLB offers another row of seats). In between, GLC and GLE together comprise more models than all other classes combined. GLC and GLE are visually similar if viewed separately, though distinctive in size if viewed side by side.

Your next choice is between Mercedes-Benz models or higher performance Mercedes-AMG models. Pricing is carefully sequenced from GLC to GLE, until you mix in the AMG models, introducing intriguing overlap. You also have the choice (in some cases) of a conventional boxy SUV or a sleek Coupe (SUV).

Powertrains have apples'n'oranges and a few wild cards (such as GLC 350e with a 90kW electric motor) or a different zero-to-60 comparison between 4MATIC and front-drive on the GLA (itself an unusual variant for Stuttgart) versus 4MATIC and rear-drive on the GLE. Most sixes are inline, but you'll spot a V6. AMG engines are "enhanced" or "handcrafted" per model level.

Understanding where the Mercedes-AMG GLE 53 Coupe sits in the grander scheme of things surely proves useful. (The chart at left will help.) Twenty-nine basic choices may seem like a lot, but they inhabit a very structured matrix. Once oriented, you can find the one just right for you.

We've driven most GLE models at one point or another, including the GLE 63 S for a week quite recently (see our Nov/Dec 2020 issue), so were interested in seeing how the 53 slots in, comparatively. (We've also driven AMG GT four-door coupes in recent months—both the GT 53 and GT 63 S—a parallel pairing in fundamental ways.)

If the Coupe variant rings your bell, note that on the GLE it's only available in AMG versions (unlike on the smaller GLC, a model that strikes us as very similar to GLE in style and feel).

All comparisons aside, each speaks for itself. We drove this Mercedes-AMG GLE 53 Coupe in town on the usual mix of surface streets, boulevards and freeways. If you were to drive the 53 and the 63 S back-to-back, you'd surely notice a difference—603 vs 429 hp, 627 vs 384 lb-ft of torque (plus up to 21 hp and 184 lb-ft from EQ Boost in all cases). You'd also notice the difference on the day of purchase—the 63 S costs about \$40 grand (or over 50 percent) more than the 53 (a higher ratio

than the power difference, though there are any number of other differences, too). But when driven individually, either one is mighty rewarding.

The power curve is strong and satisfying, all the moreso in sport mode, with absolutely instant response when the light turns green (we often avoid next-up sport-plus settings in town). Weight and distribution specs are not yet stated for the GLE 53 or GLE 63 S. The 63 S has a V8 to the 53's six, and its rear brakes are an inch larger, but all in all, the feel is similar, with both built atop essentially the same suspension and 4MATIC all-wheel drive.

Cornering and handling are superb. We noted performance comparable (pro rata or better for its height and weight) to a low-slung all-wheel-drive luxury performance coupe. On a lengthy stretch of roadwork stripped down for resurfacing, the GLE was smooth, quiet and blessedly rattle-free—nice in its own right, and also great for enjoying the included Burmester Surround Sound audio system.

We took the AMG GLE 53 into the countryside for a cruise on one of our favorite twisty-hillies, Bartlett Dam Road, here punching it up to sport-plus to great effect. (The road is being prepped for extensive surface work, which gave us more rough surfaces upon which to affirm its smooth ride and quiet cabin.) Suspension is far more sophisticated than even this challenging drive reveals, with phenomenally advanced electronics to handle a variety of driving and crash mitigation scenarios, with even more advanced systems also available.

Of our sample's options (at right), we could live without some, such as a \$1600 alternative headliner. Some will surely prove indispensable, such as heated/chilled cupholders for just \$180 (worth it in our climate, even just for the show-off factor). Driver assistance has the usual collection of love-

em-or-hate-em overrides, but incrementally priced well whether you are a taker or a leaver of these. Two comfort packages total \$3150, but seem irresistible, adding winter warmth, summer cooling and addictive massaging seats. Some may seem they should be part of such a car in the first place (such as the Acoustic Comfort package) or part of an AMG in the first place (from AMG Nappa leather to AMG steering wheel, to AMG wheels—and interestingly enough, some of these are included, while others cost extra). Optioned however you wish, you have can one beautiful and capable vehicle for \$76,000 base, \$96,000 as ours was outfitted, or any number of places in between.

It was good to drive the AMG GLE 63 S and the AMG GLE 53 in fairly close sequence, but not vital. If we drove both on the same day under the same conditions (as does happen sometimes) we'd have maximum comparison, which can be equal parts more enlightening or more confusing. Then again, if that's what it takes to maximally compare them, it underscores the fact that, one at a time on most days, you might be hard pressed to fret the difference. Compared with the AMG GLE 63 S, the AMG GLE 53 at \$40 grand less hits an appealing balance of power and price. Balance is measured more than one way, of course, and the 63 S will deliver other buyers a balance of another sort.

We would not begrudge anybody the \$114,000 (base) AMG GLE 63 S—it's a wondrous machine and no doubt essential for competitive emotional reasons in our plentiful top dog neighborhoods. Or maybe not. You can demonstrate financial wisdom and find plenty of joy to be had in the GLE 53. (And of course there are still the other 27 models in the Mercedes-Benz and AMG utility lineup.) You will easily find your own best balance point. ■

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SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE	AMG-enhanced 3.0L inline-6 turbo with EQ Boost & elec auxiliary compressor
HP/TORQUE	429 hp / 384 lb-ft
+21 hp & +184 lb-ft via EQ Boost =	450-568
ZERO-TO-60 / TOP SPEED	5.2 sec / 155* mph
*[w optional summer tires; otherwise 130]	
DRIVETRAIN	4MATIC+ full-variable AWD
TRANSMISSION.....	AMG Speedshift TCT 9G-Tronic 9-spd automatic
SUSPENSION	F: indep double-wishbone; R: indep multi-link; F/R: AIRMATIC air suspension
STEERING.....	speed-dependent electro-mechanical rack & pinion
BRAKES	F: 15.8; R: 13.6; (other info tba)
WHEELS	21" AMG twin 5-spoke F: 10.0x21 cast; R: 11.10x21 cast
TIRES.....	F: 275 / 45 R21; R: 315 / 40 R21
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	195.3 / 115.6 in
TURNING CIRCLE.....	tba
HEADROOM (F/R).....	40.2 / 37.8 in
LEGROOM (F/R).....	tba / tba in
CARGO CAPACITY	27.5 / 63.2 cu.ft
GROUND CLEARANCE	tba
TOW CAPACITY	tba
WEIGHT	tba
FUEL CAPACITY	22.5 gal
MPG	18/23/20 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE	\$76,500
DESIGNO® CARDINAL RED METALLIC.....	1080
AMG BLACK EXCLUSIVE NAPPA LEATHER	4550
BRUSHED ALUMINUM TRIM	nc
STEERING WHEEL: AMG performance steering wheel, Nappa leather / Dinamica.....	500
NAPPA LEATHER WRAPPED DASHBOARD.....	nc
WHEELS: 21" AMG twin 5-spoke	nc
AMG PERFORMANCE EXHAUST	1250
REAR SIDE AIRBAGS.....	700
HEATED-COOLED CUPHOLDERS	180
BLACK DINAMICA HEADLINER	1600
MBUX INTERIOR ASSISTANT	200
REAR SEAT ENTERTAINMENT PRE-WIRING	170
MBUX TECH PKG: MBUX augmented video for navigation; heads-up display	1450
DRIVER ASSISTANCE PKG PLUS: active distance assist Distronic®, active steering assist, active lane change assist, active emergency stop assist, active speed limit assist, active brake assist w cross-traffic function, evasive steering assist, active lane keep assist, active blind spot assist, Pre-Safe® Plus rear-end collision protection, Pre-Safe® impulse side, route-based speed adaptation, active stop-and-go assist, traffic sign assist.....	1950
PARKING ASSISTANCE PKG: surround view camera system	500
WARMTH & COMFORT: rapid heat front seats, heated front armrests & door panels.....	1050
ENERGIZING COMFORT PKG PLUS: vented front seats, air balance pkg, active multicontour front seats w massage feature	2100
ACOUSTIC COMFORT PKG: increased cabin insulation, infrared-reflecting windshield film, acoustic & infrared-absorbing side window film.....	1100
DESTINATION CHARGE	995
TOTAL	\$95,875

