

Mercedes GL450 SUV A Tad Too Serious To Be Fun

by Mark Maynard

The American-bred sport utility vehicle is a constant frustration to the import imitators.

Those brands -- the Europeans mostly -- tend to take carmaking seriously and want to overthink and overengineer their versions of the SUV.

It will have no compromises, drive with the fury of a sport sedan and climb mountains like King Kong.

MERCEDES-BENZ GL450 - The new \$56,000 Mercedes GL450 can come with power folding mirrors that automatically fold when locking. Its 335-horsepower engine can pull a 7,500-pound trailer. CNS Photo courtesy of Mercedes-Benz. That's impossible, of course, and unnecessary. But the imitators continue. Mercedes-Benz is the latest to step into the ring with its "big" SUV, the GL450, a 335-horsepower, all-wheel drive, seven-passenger truck with the heft to pull a 7,500-pound trailer.

It joins the boxy and iconic G-Class (\$81,675), a leather-lined military-grade vehicle that really can climb like King Kong.

Mercedes hopes the sleek and efficient GL will appeal to its base of U.S. buyers when it's time to replace their Dodge Durango, Lincoln Navigator, Cadillac Escalade, etc.

Some will. Some will still prefer the American SUV, even as it has become better groomed, due mostly to the imports.

GL450 pricing starts at \$55,675. The test truck was \$68,075.

And it is a fine piece of horseflesh, with air suspension, permanent four-wheel drive with hill-start assist and descent speed control and a special off-road ABS algorithm, all of which takes the place of a two-speed transfer case.

There is the Off-Road Pro package, which adds a two-speed transfer case with locks for the center and rear differentials and a modified air suspension that raises ground clearance to a foot and the low-speed fording depth to about 2 feet.

Yeehaw!

But don't even think about getting mud on this carpet.

Built with a full metal jacket and all the latest safety features, the interior is trimmed in bird's-eye maple, leather, power front seats and a glass sunroof with a skyview over the third-row seats.

The two 50/50 split third-row seats fold flat at the push of a button, either separately or together.

It's nice to look at inside and out. Some of the interior plastic isn't any better than what's found in a Ford, but the impact of that is diminished by expanses of stitched leather and polished wood.

The second and third rows are spacious in all capacities with good sightlines, though a grab handle on the door pillar would be a welcome boost.

Passengers settle in with reclining seatbacks, a center armrest with storage and slide-out cup holders, lights, seatback pockets and fan control. The low transmission tunnel gives more footroom for three-across seating, but the center seat sits high and forward, like a bar stool.

Stepping into the third row might be the smoothest action of any SUV. And there's legroom for adults.

The small skylight takes away the closed-in effect, and the rear air-conditioning vents are good for dogs or kids. Power folding seats are an up-and-coming must-have SUV convenience; same with the power tailgate.

The GL is nice enough to drive, but not exciting, except for the baritone thrum of the engine.

The 4.6-liter V-8 works with a seven-speed automatic transmission with sport mode and steering wheel shift buttons. The well-stepped shift points to keep the power fluid.

The electronic gear selector stalk - for reverse-park-drive - is a little too minivan to be in a truck, though I appreciate its compactness.

Steering, brake and throttle inputs are well-balanced. The ride is smooth enough, but busy, almost choppy at times, even when in the comfort mode.

The suspension lets it haul flatly around corners, but sometimes it will bobble like a truck when pulling into a driveway - odd how the air springs work.

Fuel economy, using 91 octane, is EPA rated at 14 mpg city and 18 highway. According to the onboard computer, my mileage around town was in the 13s. And then there was that little electronic hiccup. Twice, while pulling away from a stop, the accelerator response was delayed. The first "what-the-heck" moment happened when I wasn't getting forward motion and needed to get out of an intersection.

My reaction was to just press harder on the gas pedal, which worked both times. The throttle woke up and did its job. And the "Check Engine" light came on. The vehicle still drove without issue and there were no other such occurrences, but that doesn't inspire confidence.

The GL seems to have it all, except fuel economy and a little more cargo room. This is a big SUV for Mercedes, but not big enough for many families.

By the time a family of four and a friend or two get packed for a getaway weekend, there's little room behind the third row to stow luggage. That means things will be lashed to the roof rack, which is never a simple project, nor aerodynamic.

Even grocery space is limited behind the third row, but folding the seatbacks gives too much space; bags and bottles get loose and can be a stretch to reach.

The GL is too serious to be fun, a little small to do it all and too pretty to use as a truck. It's just a typical SUV - but without the lock-and-load appeal that sells so well for the American brands.

Copley News Service SPECS2007 Mercedes-Benz GL450 Body style: 4-door, 7-passenger sport utility with electronic four-wheel drive Engine: Aluminum, DOHC 4.6-liter V-8 with variable valve timing Horsepower: 335 at 6,000 rpm Torque: 339 at 2,700-5,000 rpm Transmission: 7-speed adaptive automatic with manual shift and sport modes Acceleration: 0 to 60 mph, 7.4 seconds EPA fuel economy estimates: 14 mpg city, 18 highway Fuel capacity: 26.4 gallons; 91 octane recommended DIMENSIONS Cargo space: 10.6 cubic feet behind third row; 43.8, third row folded Front head/leg/shoulder room: 40.1/43/58.3 inches Middle head/leg/shoulder room: 40.6/40/58.9 inches Rear head/leg/shoulder room: 38.5/34/50.5 inches Length/wheelbase: 200.3/121.1 inches Curb weight: 5,249 pounds FEATURES Standard equipment: 2-zone air conditioning with 14 vents, bird's-eye maple trim, stitched upholstered leather dashboard, 60/40 split folding second-row seats, 50/50 split power folding third-row seats, 8-way power and heated front seats, 6 CD changer and auxiliary input for digital audio, leather-wrapped multifunction steering wheel with tilt and telescopic adjustment, tinted glass, load leveling (and height-adjustable) air suspension, cargo cover, floor mats, rain-sensing wipers, class IV tow rating Safety equipment: Dual-stage front air bags, front side air bags, active front head restraints and belt pretensioners, window curtain air bags (all rows), electronic stability and traction control, ABS and brake force distribution CHASSIS Brakes: Power-assisted 4-wheel vented discs (14.7-inch front, 13-inch rear) with 4-channel ABS and Brake Assist Plus Steering: Speed-sensitive power-assisted rack-and-pinion; 39.7-foot turning circle Suspension: 4-wheel independent with Airmatic air springs Tires and wheels: 265/60 HR 18-inch on alloy wheels PRICING Base: \$55,675, including \$775 freight charge; price as tested, \$68,075 Options on test car: Premium package (\$4,500) includes Parktronic (front and rear alerts to objects), power passenger seat with memory presets, autodimming driver and rearview mirror, hands-free phone system, power tilt-telescope wheel, power folding mirrors, rear audio controls, DVD Command navigation system, Sirius satellite radio, Harman Kardon audio, power tailgate; 3-zone climate control (\$1,320) includes third-row controls and infrared glass; multicontour seats package (\$800); sunroof package (\$1,510) includes power rear quarter windows; wood-leather steering wheel (\$540); rear dual-screen DVD entertainment system (\$2,630); appearance package (\$1,100) includes 19-inch wheels and stainless-steel skid plate Warranty: 4-years/50,000 miles with roadside assistance Where assembled: Tuscaloosa, Ala. PLUSES: Lush, Mercedes power treatment with capable cornering. Optional power fold mirrors that automatically fold when locking; excellent second- and third-row roominess; third-row skyview MINUSES: Small cargo space behind third row. No backup camera. Large outside mirror frames but small mirrors. Navigation system is a chore to use.

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