

The G-Class - IN A WORD, WHOA

by Phil Audibert

Mr. Postman in front of me, with weak winking turn signal, is slowing down on a busy four lane to turn into a driveway. The guy in the huge yellow dairy truck behind me hasn't noticed. I'm about to become the tasty filling in a mail- and milk-truck sandwich. As USPS takes his sweet time getting the hell off the road, my rearview mirror fills up with yellow. Because I'm trapped by traffic, I can't change lanes, and it would be rude to push Mr. Postman out of the way - although I could. Either this truck is going to rear-end me or I've gotta get outta here, like now.

Postal's wheels barely clear the pavement edge before I tromp down on the accelerator. Without one smidge of turbo lag, my head slams back on the headrest. Sounding like a speedboat impatiently clearing a no wake zone, I leave that dairy boy like he's standing still.

I breathe a sigh of relief. Bob beside me visibly relaxes. It would not do to bend this vehicle, because: first, I don't own it; second, it's black, beautiful, and brand new; and third, it costs \$120K and change. That's too many quarters out of my piggy bank.

"120K and change, huh? That sounds like a pretty nice, fast sports car," you say.

Nuh-uh! It's just a metal box on wheels. But ooohhh what a box and what wheels!

Please, with your deepest bow and most eloquent hand flourish, bid a warm welcome to the 2009 Mercedes Benz G55 AMG, the top of the food chain in luxury sport utility vehicles. There is none better. The Cadillac Escalade? The Lincoln Navigator? Mere pretenders. A tricked-out Humvee with all the bling comes close, but no cigar. It's much more comfortable than a Landrover. A Porsche Cayenne? Yeah maybe, but they only jumped on



Photo by Susie Audibert

This is the real deal. It has the history, the toughness, and the luxury. It doesn't get any better than this in an all-terrain vehicle. "As far as its capabilities, it is equal to if not greater than anything on the road," understates the nattily attired Bob Novotny, who is my passenger on this little jaunt. He should know. A salesman for Mercedes Benz of Fredericksburg, Bob's been dealing this marque for 29 years now.

Asked to sum up the G55 in 25 words or less, he craps out at 70. "It is the most luxuriously appointed utilitarian vehicle in the market today. It will absolutely do whatever is demanded of it whether it is on the road or off the road. You can take it in the back country, do what you need to do and then go out to a four-star restaurant that night. Just hose it off and go." The promotional literature he stuffs into my slightly shaking hand says it all: "In a word, whoa."

The letter G, which spawned an entire Mercedes Benz class, stands for *Gelaendewagen*. Roughly translated, it means "off-roader." Novotny explains it was born when the shah of Iran asked Daimler to design and produce a vehicle for his personal guard. But before they could build it, the Shah was deposed. Still, Daimler recognized it was onto something here.

At first the only way to track down a G-Class in this country was through the gray market. Then a West Coast company acquired

exclusive distribution rights and sold them to a handful of movie stars and millionaires. "When Daimler realized that there was truly a strong demand for this vehicle in the U.S., the company made an arrangement to buy back the distributorship. Then the cars could be sold and serviced at Mercedes Benz dealers," says Novotny, who remembers driving one himself back in 1981. At three tons curbside weight, its then 87 horsepower engine was severely taxed, to say the least.

Now let's look under 2009's hood. Same weight, bigger engine: a 5.5 liter, 24 valve supercharged V-8 producing 500 horses. Needless to say it can flat out get up and go (zero to 60 in 5.4) when you, uh, feel you're about to become the tasty filling in a mail and milk truck sandwich. And 15 miles per gallon highway really isn't all that bad when you consider the power it has.

Novotny explains that each AMG engine is built by one man in the assembly plant in Austria. That technician sees your motor through from start to finish. And when he's done, he puts



Photo courtesy of Mercedes

his name on a small plaque on the engine block. That's the kind of pride they have in this power plant, and every time you hear that glorious engine note, you will think of that technician.

There's lots more - from the 19-inch wheels that can scale and ford practically everything to the, count 'em, *three* differentials, to the nice tight suspension with none of that squishy "heeeerrrrre we go" feeling. For a vehicle that weighs more than a rhinoceros, it handles like a cat.

And then there are the luxuries. Obviously the seats are all leather. Heck, even the headliner is, but oh what leather—softest glove-like texture you can imagine—*designo*, they call it. The leather and wood steering wheel fits the hand perfectly. In cold weather it is even heated. So are the seats, natch; but in hot weather they're ventilated too. You can adjust them 10 different ways. You can even inflate and deflate bellows to change pressure points on your back, seat and legs on a long trip.

Speaking of long trips, the G55 offers plenty of what the industry calls "infotainment" options, from Bluetooth, Ipod, MP3 connectivity to CD/DVD, SIRIUS, GPS, all blasting away on a Harman/Kardon surround-sound system.

Safety equipment abounds, from the tire pressure monitoring system to fog lights that illuminate around corners. The Bi-zenon headlamps actually have heated washers; so do the rain-sensing windshield wipers. Mercedes has even included a first aid kit in the cargo area, which by the way, at almost 80 cubic feet, would look much better when appointed by your new Jarrett Signature rifle or that bamboo fly rod you picked up at Rose River Farm this past May.

Which leads me to the fact that there's something slightly old fashioned and comforting about this vehicle with its square windshield and acres of head and foot room. Yes, it is a metal box on wheels with the aerodynamics of a brick, but in these capricious times, it has remained true to its basic shape from the get-go. Even the thumb buttons on the doors are old style, imparting a sense of permanency, solidity, and reliability. And the vehicle is not too darn big, either. Like the Jarrett rifle and the cane rod, it's just right.

And whenever you think it might be a little too old fashioned, just press down on that accelerator, and you will be reminded: In a word, Whoa!

Many thanks to Mercedes Benz of Fredericksburg for letting me experience the G55 AMG. (540) 373-5200. mboffredericksburg.com.



Photo courtesy of Mercedes