

# Appetizer

## The GLK gives us GL envy

Story and photos: Joe Sage



### GLK REVISITED

Covered at its launch in Santa Barbara's wine country (see the January/February 2009 issue), we now spend a week with the Mercedes-Benz GLK 350 in Arizona.

Mercedes-Benz offers no shortage of SUVs, including the big G-Class, the mainstream GL-Class, the stylish midsize M Class and the underappreciated R-Class. When the GLK was introduced at the end of 2008, they were emphatic that it is not just a downsized M Class. Yet it seems as much related to the GL in styling, and certainly in name.

As we said at the time, the GLK fills a lineup gap we hadn't quite realized was there. Gas price panic earlier that year had people thinking smaller, so they were ahead of the curve. We had driven the BlueTEC versions of the ML, R and GL, fine vehicles that had unfortunately launched with 25% better fuel mileage just as diesel climbed to 20% higher cost. The GLK arrives with estimated EPA ratings of 16/22 mpg city/highway, not a game-changer. Its 3.5-liter 24-valve DOHC V6 delivers 268 hp, still delivering decent performance in a small package. It does offer relative purchase price economy, though, with our highly optioned test GLK stickered at \$42,925. This compares well with, for example, the Lexus RX 350 below, and this is exactly where they want to deliver. The GLK, like the ML, is available as either 2-wheel-drive or 4MATIC awd, perhaps a reason for their

M-Class disclaimer. Here's how basics compare:

| MODEL          | HP  | EPA   | BASE      |
|----------------|-----|-------|-----------|
| GLK 350        | 268 | 16/22 | \$35,475  |
| GLK 350 4MATIC | 268 | 16/21 | \$37,475  |
| ML 350         | 268 | 16/21 | \$46,575  |
| ML 350 4MATIC  | 268 | 15/20 | \$49,075  |
| R 350 4MATIC   | 268 | 15/19 | \$50,175  |
| GL 450 4MATIC  | 335 | 13/17 | \$61,825  |
| G 550          | 382 | 11/15 | \$104,875 |

Apples and oranges galore. The GLK and ML offer 2wd vs 4wd options, with price and fuel economy very close. Power is the same through all but the GL and G-Class. The G-Class is a niche vehicle, but the GL is halfway there on fuel economy and more than halfway there on power. (And then there are the BlueTECs.) Given capacity and price, the R is very compelling. ML and GLK specs are so similar, they really compare on size, style and price. So the GLK? If small size and lower price appeal, might you buy a Ford Escape or Kia Soul for two-thirds the price? It wouldn't have Mercedes panache, that's for certain. If Mercedes style and solid SUV function are for you, well, we keep coming back to the GL as the more compelling vehicle. But at two-thirds higher price and two-third lower EPA, that may be an unfair comparison.

Yes, driving the GLK did give us a case of GL envy, but it also gave us a great appreciation for the niche the GLK fills, and in that niche, it is a very strong contender. It turns out Mercedes was right on the money when they recognized this gap in the lineup. ■



### GLK 350 LOGBOOK NOTES

- Smooth, quiet, solid drive. Small, lightweight, nice size, step right in. You could be given one and never ask another question.
- When an SUV or crossover is 2wd, that may be when it becomes a station wagon.
- Sometimes feels a little too lightweight, e.g. door or parking brake controls.
- It's a rear-driver, but feels torquey at times like a front-, likely from drive-by-wire tech.
- Definitely hits the speed bumps hard.
- Decided it kind of looks like a ski boot.
- Well-equipped. Rain-sensing wipers are a plus. Interior lighting is slick, with a blue light from the bottom of the rearview mirror that shines everywhere you need it but not anywhere else. Facial privacy from outside, but the footwell and seat area are nicely lit.
- Ceiling switches prompt raves, but also a rant: intuitive and handy, mostly, but it's as easy in the dark to call for info or help as to turn on a light, which did happen.
- AM/FM, satellite, CD settings are cumbersome, with screen, two dials, lots of steps.
- C and S settings are comfort and standard, not sport, though standard does have a later upshift point. Unresolved: we can't get it to stay in S. Specs say it will restart in its last setting, but it always comes back as C.

# Queen bee

## Crossover pioneer, updated

By Barbara and Bill Schaffer - photos by Joe Sage



The third time is a charm for the Lexus RX, and that's saying a lot, because the first two generations were impressive. Completely redesigned for 2010, but with a familiar look, the Lexus RX is a little larger, significantly more powerful and one of the most technologically advanced crossover SUVs on the market.

A product of Lexus L-finesse design, the RX combines a sleek coupe-like roofline, broad shoulders and a smooth underside to produce a low 0.33 coefficient of drag with an almost boat-like silhouette. The resulting body is familiar but distinctively new.

No off-the-rack interior for Lexus, the RX is dressed in couture with a stylish dash that breaks from the typical symmetry with a sweeping center stack. Gauges are illuminated with a high contrast Organic Light Emitting Diode technology for a crisp appearance. Elegant leather seats, wood trim and convenient storage compartments are not only pleasing to the eye but provide top level comfortable and function.

Two drivetrain choices are available: a 3.5-liter V6 for the conventional RX 350 and a 3.5-liter Atkinson-cycle V6 with electric motors for the hybrid RX 400h.

Our test RX 350, rated at 275 hp, has a new silky smooth six-speed automatic transmission powering the standard front-wheel drive. An optional AWD system with viscous coupling locking center differential pro-

duces a 50:50 front/rear torque distribution. The EPA rates the gas-only RX at 18 mpg city and 24 mpg highway. Zero to 60 mph acceleration is rated by the manufacturer at 7.5 seconds for the AWD.

(The hybrid 400h produces a net 295 hp and V8-like power, but with four-cylinder-like fuel economy, rating 28/27 mpg city/highway (26 hwy with AWD), in electric-only or gas-only modes as well as a combination.)

The Remote Touch interface allows the driver to control audio, navigation, climate and Bluetooth using the screen and a computer-mouse-like controller on the console. The control has an adjustable force feedback system that simulates notches as the cursor rolls over function buttons. Many functions are duplicated with stand-alone buttons for those who prefer conventional controls. This is one of the most intuitive control systems we have ever used in a car.

A wide-view side-monitoring system with a television camera mounted in the right sideview mirror to display the passenger-side blind spot on the nav screen. Front and side display modes are activated manually, or automatically when you shift from P to R or R to N in forward range, at speeds up to 6 mph.

Lexus has also brought back automatic high beams seen on Cadillacs in the '60s, switching from high to low beams when headlights of oncoming vehicles or taillights of cars being overtaken come into view.

Our heavily optioned test RX had a base price of \$36,800 and stickered at \$49,300. ■



### RX 350 LOGBOOK NOTES

- Visualize lopping off the rear roof spoiler, and you'd pretty much have the "active utility vehicle" shape of BMW X6 or Acura ZDX.
- 644 pages for the main manual, 410 pages for the nav manual, and... 1, 2, 3, 4 other manuals, plus a quick guide on DVD. Power points seem to be under a removable storage tray in the console, or else in the trunk.
- Temp controls for the driver's side are handy, but swooping instrument panel style dictates an unmatched position for the right side, and with the shifter up high, you have to reach around it, blind, to adjust.
- We hoped low expectations for 3/4 rear visibility would leave us pleasantly surprised, but that wasn't the case. It's minimal.
- We'd like to try the AWD. This front-driver has some torque steer and uneven tracking.
- Seat slides back when you get out, back up when you get in, slides forward. Some might love this; we seek a way to turn it off.
- The 644-page manual shows three audio units, none of which match what we have.
- Lots of things light up at night, but not the transmission indicator. For that, you fumble.
- There is no question these are popular. While driving ours, we notice, more than ever, that they are everywhere in droves. -JS