

Cool contender in the heated pickup wars

By Joe Sage



Ford. Ram. You hear a lot about these pickups lately. Chevy, too, of course. Sometimes Toyota, even Nissan.

Especially the new aluminum-bodied Ford F-150 and the Ram 1500 EcoDiesel—those two seem to win all the awards. What these share with Chevrolet is a heroic battle for top specs and with them top sales. And the fruits of battle are many—Ford F-150 has remained the top seller for decades, while Ram's sales have been growing by double digits.

Their market volume also somewhat sets the stage for this GMC Sierra Denali 2500 HD 4WD Crew Cab pickup (bearing a powerful Duramax 6.6-liter turbo diesel V8) to feel like a bit of a special discovery.

Those 150 and 1500 models above are officially class 2 light-duty pickups, traditionally referred to as half-tons, despite payloads far higher. This GMC 2500 is classified as medium-duty, despite the HD in its name. The success of the light-duty trucks not only creates a brand halo—a brand-wide boost to pride of ownership—it also brings more resources to the brand—engineering, technology, styling, even advertising. And the commonly-called

three-quarter-ton pickups, like this 2500 (with actual capacity far, far higher), benefit.

Flash back about twenty years. The big brother three-quarters were barely distinguishable, beyond badges and sometimes a bolder stance. All cattle, barely a hat. What mattered was all inside. Since then, though, the heavy-duty trucks—2500 (or 250) and up—have gone much their own way in styling and other visible cues. All hat *and* all cattle.

The GMC badge already promises more than the Chevrolet badge, by intent—Professional Grade and all that. The distinction is important enough for GM to let Ford combine all its F-Series sales figures, while GM splits theirs between Chevy and GMC, ceding the total sales war but maintaining brand image. It seems to serve a purpose, as the higher-volume Chevy lineup is largely out of mind as we try out the big and burly brother GMC.

If you've shopped full size pickups, you know the options pages can be as thick as an owner's manual. There is a lot to consider, with such complex machines that seem to carry such a simple and straightforward purpose—more than is practically feasible. Our

specifications sidebar gives you a slice of the full picture of this feature-rich example.

Even in Monroney sticker shorthand, the inclusions would be four and a half columns long. Some are real breakthroughs, such as the included EZ Lift tailgate, which uses an internal torsion bar and rotary damper to create effortless operation up or down.

Even the add-ons are tremendous bargains. Maybe we spend too much time exposed to German option prices, but when you see options listing at just \$35 or \$55 here—or whole off-road or trailering packages at just \$200-something each—you can be sure that at \$65,000 this pickup has great total value. The only pricey option is the whole Duramax Plus Package, at almost \$9000, but it's the game-changer for this truck: almost 800 lb-ft of torque at just 1600 RPM says it all.

Our Sierra showed up very well dressed, in rich Onyx Black paint and Jet Black Denali leather interior. Despite its utilitarian features—towhooks, underbody shields, heavy-duty rear bumper and industrial grade 4-wheel drive—there's something so handsome about this truck, it seems like a natural



around town, at the office or at the country club. So we took it out for a bigger challenge.

We headed into the hills, to a Jeep road we know. Calling it a road is being charitable, especially when in a 19.95-foot-long, 80.5-inch-wide, six-and-a-half-foot-tall package like this. But the truck fit—and felt—like a glove. We pushed it pretty far, as the road became narrower, steeper and rougher, with no complaints from the truck and none from us. It earns itself a utility grade A, in all meanings of the word. And we had no trouble backing its mass back down quite a distance.

We had three criticisms during our week. The entry steps, handy for someone very short, will just trip up a tall guy, but can be deleted. It was pointless to have keyless

entry but still need to dig out the key to start the truck. And we had to pay too much attention to a jittery shifter when aiming for Drive.

We did love the combination of analog and variable electronic gauges in the binnacle.

And we loved the driving experience. It proved itself on cliff-hanging trails. And as large as it clearly is, it always felt easily manageable on freeways and surface street cornering—powerful, smooth and accurate. A full four-door crew cab and 51.5-foot turning circle? It didn't feel like it.

Settle into the luxurious Denali interior, get your hands on the controls, and you will likely do as we repeatedly did—get close to home, pause, turn up the radio and decide to drive around a bit more. ■

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE6.6L Duramax V8 Turbo Diesel
 TRANSMISSIONAllison 6-speed automatic
 DRIVETRAIN4WD w electronic transfer case
Auto locking RR differential / 4.10 rear axle
 HORSEPOWER397 hp @ 3000 rpm
 TORQUE765 lb-ft @ 1600 rpm
 TOWING CAPACITYBall hitch: 13,000 lb
5th wheel: 17,100 lb
 MAX PAYLOAD / GVWR2,793 lb / 10,000 lb
 BRAKES4-whl ABS, 4-whl disc, DuraLife rotors
 MPG / FUEL CAPACITY(na) / 36 gallons
 INCLUDED: Stability control, trailer sway, hill start, OnStar and WiFi w/trial, EZ lift/lower tailgate, 20" chrome wheels, fog lamps, front hooks, front/rear body-color bumpers, movable tie-downs, LED box lighting, chrome tubular steps, spray-in bedliner, fully boxed steel frame, front leather bucket seats, heated/cooled front seats, memory driver seat, 60/40 fold rear seat, remote start, anti-theft, power slide rear window, dual zone climate, power adjustable pedals, customizable displays, heated wheel, rear camera, park assist, Bos audio, Bluetooth and USB and more.

STANDARD PRICE (6.0L VORTEC V8)\$54,890
 DURAMAX PLUS PACKAGE: 6.6L V8 turbo diesel, Allison 6-spd trans, lane departure warning, forward collision alert, safety alert seat8,845
 OFF-ROAD SUSPENSION PACKAGE: Hill descent control, twin tube rancho shocks255
 CHROME TRAILERING MIRRORS w pwr glass, pwr fold/manual extend, heat, turn signals, LED guidance lamps, amber lights, memory upper glass230
 ROOF MARKER LAMPS55
 CAMPER/5TH WHEEL TRAILER WIRING PROVISION35
 CARPETED FLOOR MATS125
 DESTINATION CHARGE:1095
 TOTAL\$66,400
 (DURAMAX PLUS PACKAGE DISCOUNT):(1500)
 TOTAL AFTER DURAMAX DISCOUNT\$64,900

The Denali's design details—a great combination of handsome, elegant and rugged—announce a vehicle with an enhanced cooling airflow system, better conditioned for heavy loads and higher ambient temperatures. Auto grade braking works with integrated cruise control and—with this diesel powertrain—exhaust braking, all for better tough tow duty.

