

Mellow Mountain Rides

In the Mercedes ML

By Roger Witherspoon

The late morning fog hung onto the tops of Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains like billowy clouds which had somehow slipped from their heavenly moorings and fallen onto the blue-green spikes below. The result was a meandering ridge-running highway which alternated between stretches bathed in cool, clear light and sudden blind patches of swirling gray mist.

Mindful of the dual dangers of meandering cows and motorists playing a high speed game of blind mans bluff, I kept the Mercedes ML 320 in the right lane, rolled well below the 65-mile per hour speed limit and cruised towards Richmond. Suddenly, a speeding tractor trailer materialized inches from the passenger side of the car, blindly barreling out of the fog and onto the highway. Simply sliding over was not an option: there was a car about 10 feet behind me on the left and gaining fast. If I moved into his path, I would probably be rear-ended.

So I hit the accelerator, gunning the Mercedes' diesel powered engine and sharply swerving left across the highway onto the gravel shoulder, banking on the SUV's traction and stability control programs to keep the ML 320 under control until the car in the left lane had passed and there was room to slide back onto the highway. Neither the car nor the marauding trucker looked back as they sped into the morning mist. But that didn't matter.

Driving a Mercedes is as much about navigating the dangers of the highways and byways as it is about comfort and style, and the ML 320, a "crossover," mid-sized SUV fits that bill. Most crossovers are stretch versions of existing sedans, or truncated versions of small truck chassis. In this case, however, Mercedes opted to design a unit-body chassis just for the ML which lies in between the two standard chassis sizes. The ML's body rises or falls at the push of a button, making stepping into the SUV as easy as stepping into the average sedan.

This is a diesel powered SUV, which means its responsiveness comes as a surprise to motorists familiar with standard gasoline motors. The ML 320 is powered by a 3.0-liter, V-6 engine delivering just 215 horsepower, an output which would be puny in a regular gasoline engine. But more of the power produced by a diesel engine goes straight to the axels and, as a result, the level of torque from this V-6 jumps to 398 pound-feet , about twice the level produced by a gasoline powered V-6.

On the road, that translates into a vehicle which seemingly has considerably more power and responsiveness than one would expect. Despite the obvious fact that the ML 320 is a mid sized SUV, it acts and handles more like an upscale sports car powered by a V-8.

There is another significant difference. The reported gas mileage provided by the US Environmental Protection Agency tends to be inflated because the mileage rates are determined by running test cars on a treadmill rather than in real driving conditions. So I was expecting the diesel-powered ML 320 would get about five miles per gallon less than the EPA's projected 18 miles per gallon in city driving, and 24 miles per gallon on the highway. Instead, the Mercedes provided a nice variation on Southern Comfort by

delivering 26 miles per gallon in stop and go traffic in the New York City area, and 35 miles per gallon on the open highway roaming through Virginia.

Inside, there are most of the comforts one would expect in a \$60,000 car – and a few omissions. For entertainment, the ML has AM/FM and Sirius satellite radio, as well as a DVD player in the rear with LCD screens set into the back of the rear seats. On the other hand, the CD player is located inconveniently behind the navigation system screen on the dashboard, and can only play one disc at a time. In that price range, one would expect a six-disc player.

In addition, the navigation system is not up to the usual Mercedes standards. It is cumbersome to use, and its controlling satellite easily loses orientation. Driving south, the navigation system announced that the car was now off road and guidance could no longer be provided. In reality, I was on a US Interstate 81, and off road turned out to be the entire state of West Virginia. The system could find Roanoke, Virginia, the bustling city in the western end of the state, but decided that Virginia Tech, in Blacksburg, about 30 miles away, was also an off-road excursion. Getting directions should not be that difficult.

But those are relatively minor drawbacks. If you want to get on the open road and see the country, the ML 320 provides a comfortable way to travel.

2008 Mercedes ML 320 CDI

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| MSRP: | | \$60,860 |
| EPA Mileage: | 18 MPG City | 24 MPG Highway |
| As Tested Mileage: | 26 MPG City | 35 MPG Highway |
| Fuel: | | Diesel |

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|------------------------------|---------------------|
| Performance / Safety: | |
| 0 – 60 MPH | 8.0 Seconds |
| Top Speed | 136 MPH |
| Towing Capacity | 7,200 Pounds |

3.0 – Liter, aluminum V-6 engine producing 215 horsepower and 398 pound-feet of torque; 7-speed, electronically controlled automatic transmission with electronic manual mode; electronic stability control; 4-wheel independent suspension; rack & pinion steering; hydraulic power-assisted, 4-wheel disc brakes; 4-wheel drive; 19-inch 5-spoke aluminum alloy wheels; front dual stage airbags, front & rear side and curtain airbags; front and rear fog lamps xenon curve illuminating head lamps; hill assist and downhill speed regulator.

Interior / Comfort:

AM/FM Sirius satellite radio; Harmon/Kardon 8-speaker sound system with rear and steering wheel controls; DVD navigation system; DVD player with headrest screens; leather steering wheel with fingertip audio and cruise control; voice command; Bluetooth communications; leather seats; heated front seats; rearview camera; 3-zone climate

control; fold-down rear seats, 60/40 split; power sun roof; 220-lb roof rails; rear cargo organizer.