

Meandering in Mercedes' Mini Truck

By Roger Witherspoon



On a normally sane day drivers on the Goat Trail, on the east side of the Hudson River opposite West Point, spend most of the three miles or so in the 20 - 30 mile per hour range. That's reasonable since the one lane Trail starts a 400-foot, winding drop from the upper realm of the Hudson Highlands down to the river's edge through a series of one lane switch-backs and S-curves with a mountain on one side and a straight drop on the other.

Unless, of course, you're in a sports car and want to push the envelope a bit and run in the 50 – 60 range to see how well it handles on very tight curves. That's a category which generally rules out trucks, SUVs, and most regular sedans.

But it seemed ready made for the Mercedes GLK-350, a mini-truck with four wheel drive and the handling characteristics of the company's sport line. It's an interesting vehicle, with the aggressive, large, forward leaning grill of a racer and 20-inch, seven-spoke, mag wheels to match the attitude. It doesn't have the soft curves and flowing lines usually associated with cars drawn with Mercedes' crayons, either. This one has sharp angles and elbows, and a rakish rear rather than the standard box found on station wagons or the gentle incline of most small SUVs.

But the GLK runs on rugged roads with ease. The independent suspensions and traction controls smooth out the meanest roads and make an interesting run out of what would be considered a very reckless ride in just about any other vehicle.

It is not going to challenge the serious road runners, but the GLK's 268 horsepower, V-6 engine can launch this mini-truck from 0 to 60 miles per hour in just 6.5 seconds and roll to nearly 145 miles per hour, making it a running companion to the Porsche Cayenne, Jeep Grand Cherokee SRT-8, and the BMW X-5. And that's rare company to run with, though the GLK is smaller than its more established high-speed companions, and generally competes in the \$50,000 price range of the Audi Q5, BMW X3, and Land Rover LR2. In that class, the GLK has managed to grab 35 percent of the market from its small-SUV competitors in the past year. That's a hefty slice for a

relatively new model. It comes with a seven-speed automatic transmission with an electronic manual mode for extremely smooth, nearly instantaneous gear changes.



The GLK-350 is a luxury cross between a station wagon and compact SUV, providing the kind of room one would look for in these types of vehicles while managing to maintain the maneuverability and ride handling of a large sedan. It might be considered a luxury version of the Volvo XC-60, which is also designed for the niche between the station wagon and the small SUV.

Volvo packs a lot into its more traditionally-styled vehicle, and Mercedes will have to work to justify spending about \$6,000 more. But if you have work to do, the GLK can tow 3,500 pounds, about a week end's luggage more than the Volvo.

Inside, the Mercedes mini-truck is fully loaded. The high roof line provides the kind of head room and spaciousness that one expects in an SUV, and the double sunroof – full glass panels over the front and rear seats – adds to the spacious feeling. Only the front sunroof fully opens, though there is a powered sunscreen which can cover both panels.

The décor is soft, double-stitched, leather, the textured kind usually found on expensive gloves; and dark wood accenting the dash, doors and center console. On the safety side, the GLK has halogen high density headlights which turn in the direction of the steering wheel, as well as adaptive cruise controls accessible from the tri-spoke steering wheel. There is an easy to use Bluetooth system to facilitate hands free driving and a navigation system with real time traffic updates.

For comfort, the front seats can be heated, which is appreciated in northern climates and on long drives. There is enough head and leg room in the back seat for the average NBA player to nap during a long road trip. And in addition to the regular power outlets used to charge cell phones and smaller items, the GLK has a standard 115-volt outlet to power heavier electric users such as computers.

On the entertainment side, the GLK offers a smorgasbord of options. There is AM/FM and Sirius satellite radio. If you prefer to bring your music, there is a six-disc CD player in the dash, connections for an iPod or USB to play 1,000 or so of your favorite jams, and a 6 GB hard drive to build your own mobile juke box. The sounds all flow through a Harman/Kardon, 12-speaker, surround sound system which is equally adept at hard rock or soft jazz. The entertainment, navigation and Bluetooth cell phone

system are all manual or voice controlled. And if your passenger has a laptop or game system, there is a 115-volt power outlet to plug into.

Mercedes is sliding into a new niche with a new style and a lot of goodies. It is off to a fast start, but it remains to be seen how far ahead of the pack it will roll.



2010 Mercedes GLK 350

MSRP:		\$48,735
EPA Mileage:	16 MPG City	21 MPG Highway

Performance / Safety:

0 – 60 MPH	6.5 Seconds
Top Speed	143 MPH
Towing Capacity	3,500 Pounds

3.5-Liter aluminum alloy V-6 engine producing 268 horsepower and 258 pound-feet of torque; 7-speed automatic transmission; 4-matic permanent all wheel drive with 45/55 front/rear power split; electronic stability and traction control; independent front and rear suspension; ventilated disc brakes; anti-lock brakes; 20-inch, 7-spoke alloy wheels; rear view backup camera; bi-xenon active curve, high density headlights; fog lamps; dual stage driver and front passenger air bags; window curtain airbags.

Interior / Comfort:

AM/FM Sirius satellite radio; 6-disc, in-dash CD and MP3 player; iPod and USB port; 6-GB hard drive; Harman/Kardon LOGIC 7 surround sound with 12 speakers; Bluetooth cell phone connection; voice activated entertainment, phone and navigation systems; 7-inch LCD screen; tilt & telescope, leather wrapped steering wheel with fingertip audio, Bluetooth, and adaptive cruise controls; power sunroof and rear liftgate; 115-volt outlet.