



ABOVE: The Volvo's feminine shape is soft and rounded. OPPOSITE AND LEFT: The square-jawed Merc is a butch SUV that really shines off the road.

That mean look

The battle is on in South Africa's hot mid-size SUV market. The Volvo XC60 D5 does very well, but what will happen when Merc's smallest SUV reaches our shores next year? Dieter Losskarn experienced the Swede in local sand and the German in foreign snow.

There was a time when cars were square-jawed, it was unheard of for men to go for facials and skinny lattes were just some thin wooden sticks. Looking at the new Mercedes GLK 350 CDI, I got this kind of nostalgic feeling. The smallest SUV from Stuttgart definitely inherited something from the great 'G' – the fingerprints of the legendary Geländewagen are all over its grandson's body.

The GLK looks like cars used to look, nothing soft about it. Thanks to the boxy, edgy design language, GLK design manager Volker Hellwig said, 'It doesn't look much smaller than the M-Class, even though it is.' Looks apart, how does it perform off-road?

Very well indeed, even in the fancy street version with 20-inch wheels. It's best with the optional off-road package, consisting of a hill-descent control, called Downhill Speed Regulation, along with an underride guard and underbody protection and a set of special off-road tyres.

Pressing a button is all it takes for the off-road driving programme to kick in. It adapts the gearshift points and the accelerator pedal moves to the exact requirements of the terrain.

The GLK uses the latest version of 4Matic, which Merc first put on the ML-Class 10 years ago. It's basically an open-differential system where wheelspin is limited by the

anti-lock braking, working like a diff lock. The newest version reacts faster and brakes harder, resulting in more precise traction control in different situations. Usually the power is split at 45:55, but adjusts as the various traction systems determine where torque is needed most. This worked perfectly on the snow-covered gravel passes in the Alps.

Because of problems with converting the C-class based SUV to right-hand drive, it's not yet available in South Africa, but should reach us by mid-2010.

On-road it is as comfortable as a C-class Merc. However, you sit higher so you feel more in control.



'The fingerprints of the legendary Geländewagen are all over its grandson's body.'

Dieter Losskarn

On unrestricted autobahns, speeds of up to 200 km/h were no problem at all. A pleasant surprise was that the diesel consumption seldom goes beyond the eight litres/100 km mark. The GLK feels at home on almost any road surface, thanks to the so-called Agility Control, which includes shocks that automatically adjust to changing road conditions. The system delivers a controlled, sedan-like ride.

How does the Swedish Volvo fare in comparison with the German from Stuttgart? First, I have to confess that my most-dreaded teachers at high school drove Volvos.

It was the epitome of safety – and still is. In fact, the XC60 is regarded as one of the safest cars on South African roads.

For years the Swedes didn't do well in the looks department. This

The profile is deeply raked, with amphibian-look headlights and defined shoulder-lines. The rear LED lights are industrial works of art

has changed dramatically. The new XC60 not only protects its passengers very well, it is also really attractive – although in a more feminine way than the rather masculine GLK.

While the GLK doesn't give a damn about aerodynamics, the Volvo is shapely but soft. Cooler than a frozen Swedish lake in winter, Volvo's baby soft-roader brings a refreshing dose of avant-garde to this hotly contested segment. The profile is deeply raked, with amphibian-look headlights and defined shoulder-lines. The rear LED lights are industrial works of art.

How was the ride? Comfortable, definitely comfortable. The steering is not as precise as on the Merc and the Nordic diesel paired with the Geartronic automatic is not quite as agile as the brilliant 350 CDI of the GLK. But the on-road performance on twisting country roads is flawless, with no recognisable body roll.

While Mercedes cars are safe, Volvo always tries to be safer. The new XC60 even stops itself. The city safety system comes as a standard feature and, when operating at speeds slower than 30 km/h, it will stop the car if it senses an impending accident. The system has a forward-facing laser that can detect objects in the car's path. If the car senses a collision and the driver isn't hitting the brakes or turning the wheel, it will apply full force to the brakes, bringing the car to a full stop.

I experienced it first-hand when I approached my opening garage door too eagerly. The car stopped so suddenly I was thrown against my seat-belt – and got one hell of a fright.

City safety is designed to stop low-speed collisions in heavy traffic or city driving. For speeds of 30 km/h and faster, the XC60 can be ordered



Beautiful behind: the Volvo's rear is attractively shaped and dominated by its characteristic LED lights.

with the radar-based pre-collision system, which also regulates adaptive cruise control. According to Volvo, 75 per cent of collisions happen at low speeds, so the city safety system should make insurance companies quite happy. While the GLK hasn't got this feature yet, its bigger cousin, the E-class, does offer it, so it's only a question of when it will be available for the edgy baby-Merc.

What about the Swede's off-the-beaten-track performance? It doesn't really look like an off-roader. Surprisingly, the ground clearance is higher than on the GLK.

But while it's perfect on dirt roads or sandy tracks, Volvo doesn't offer an optional off-road package for the XC60 like Mercedes does for the GLK, which restricts serious off-road adventures. Anyway, that's not what you want to do in a pretty car like this anyway. Comfortable family trips to places like Namibia, which include long gravel sections, are no problem at all.

So which one is it, the Swede or the Teuton? Sauna or sausage? As always, it is a matter of personal preference and taste. And as long as there is no right-hand drive GLK available in South Africa, you've got no choice anyway. ■

The low-down

Volvo XC60 T5 Geartronic
Price: R481 000
Engine: 2,4 litre 5 cyl. 136 kW/190 hp
Torque: 400 Nm
0–100 km/h: 9,9 sec
Top speed: 208 km/h
Consumption/100 km: 8,3 litres
Fuel tank: 70 litres
Range: 843 km
Approach angle: 22°
Departure angle: 27°
Ground clearance: 230 mm
Weight: 1 846 kg

Web www.volvo.co.za

For a similar amount of money (R481 000), you could buy:
Audi Q5 2,0T FSI S Quattro S Tronic R463 000
BMW X3 2,5si Steptronic R470 600
Volvo XC60 D5 R453 000

Mercedes GLK 350 CDI
Price (in Germany): E46 053 (about R523 000)
Engine: 3,0 litres V6 cyl. turbo diesel – 165 kW/224 hp
Torque: 540 Nm
0–100 km/h: 7,5 sec
Top speed: 220 km/h
Consumption/100 km: 8 litres
Fuel tank: 66 litres
Range: 825 km
Approach angle: 23°
Departure angle: 25°
Ground clearance: 187 to 201 mm (depending on wheel size)
Weight: 1 880 kg

Web www.mercedes-glk.com

For a similar amount of money (R523 000), you could buy:
Audi Q5 3,2 I FSI Quattro S Tronic R517 500
BMW X3 3,0si Steptronic R503 500
Land Rover Freelander 3,2 i6 HSE Premium A/T R459 000



Wheels etc

Hybrid SUV gets an upgrade

Lexus has introduced the new-generation RX, including an upgrade to the country's only petrol-electric hybrid SUV.

The RX350 features a refined 3,5-litre petrol V6 engine with maximum power of 204 kW, paired with a new six-speed automatic transmission and with active torque control all-wheel drive, the RX350 does 0–100 km/h in eight seconds.

The second-generation Lexus hybrid drive technology ensures the RX450h has class-leading CO₂ emissions and a claimed fuel economy of 6,3 l/100 km. Mated to a 3,5-litre V6, the performance hybrid – with a total system output of up to 220 kW – offers petrol V8 levels of performance with the economy and torque characteristics of rival turbodiesel SUVs. Prices start at R633 400 for the RX350 and R698 700 for the RX450h. Web www.lexus.co.za.

Another Navara option

Nissan has widened its Navara range with the new XE King Cab, adding practicality in a price bracket the brand hasn't previously occupied. The XE classification may denote entry-level status, but considering the luxurious nature of the Navara LE, it's still a very well-equipped vehicle, with electrically-operated windows and mirrors, front-loading CD player, air conditioning and remote central locking all standard fare.

The drive train is the same found under the hood of the double-cab diesel Navara, a 2,5-litre turbodiesel developing 106 kW and 356 Nm as a 4x2, boosted to 128 kW and 403 Nm in 4x4 form. This low torque gives the Navara King Cab a trailer towing limit of 3 000 kg on 4x4 models. Prices for the 4x4 King Cab start at R320 000. Web www.nissan.co.za.



The sexiest Volkswagen ever

I never looked twice at the old Scirocco. Like most Volkswagens, it looked rather conservative. The new Scirocco 2,0 TSI DSG sports coupé has made a tectonic shift towards cool. It drives and feels like a sports car. The quick shifting sequential six-speed automatic gearbox is a dream. In sport mode, you literally shift gears by playing with your foot on the accelerator, accompanied by glorious sound effects. The sporty bucket seats give fantastic side hold in quick bends. It's much lighter, lower and slightly wider than a Golf, making it so much more agile with the same 147 kW 2,0 litre TSI engine (6,7 sec 0–100 km/h; top speed 233 km/h; consumption 7,6 litres/100 km).

In the VW pipeline is a 195 kW R version, due to arrive towards the end of the year. The Scirocco costs from R336 500. Web www.vw.co.za.