

The bold and the powerful



The sleek Mercedes ML 500 is as smooth and powerful a ride as expected. The surprise came when Dieter Losskarn boarded Merc's brand-new V6 family transporter, the Vito Sport.

I tried to find excuses not to drive the Vito. I wasn't keen on being seen in a boring people-carrying traffic obstacle. But when I collected the ML 500 for a couple of days, the media liaison woman from Mercedes pressed me to try the new Vito as well. Not wanting to jeopardise my anticipated driving pleasure in the V8-powered SUV, I agreed.

The ML is a dream. The previous model, launched in 2005, experienced the usual face-lift halfway through its cycle, in late 2008. The changes were mostly cosmetic, with GLK-inspired headlights, grilles and foglights, pushed way out to the end of the revised front bumper. The permanent all-wheel drive Merc looks even bolder than its predecessor, but the petrol and diesel powerplants have remained the same. The tail door now opens and closes at the touch of a button.

One look at the wide tyres and you are excused for thinking 'strictly



'I had to admit the parked people carrier was pleasing to the eye – a bit like a pregnant M-class.'

The low-down

Mercedes ML500

Price: The M-class entry-level model is the ML350A (R640 000), followed by the ML320 CDI (R650 000). The powerful ML500 driven by *Getaway* sets you back R742 000 and the insanely powerful ML63 AMG breaks right through the R1-million pain barrier for a car, at a cool R1 105 000.

Engine: 5,5 litre V8 – 285kW/382 hp

Torque: 530 Nm

0–100 km/h: 5,8 sec.

Top speed: 250 km/h (governed)

Consumption/100 km: 12,8 litres (according to Merc)

Fuel tank: 95 litres

Range: 742 km

Approach angle: 25 to 31°

Departure angle: 24 to 29°

Ground clearance: 261 mm (291 mm with high-lift air suspension, included in the optional off-road package)

Wading depth: 500 mm (600 mm with off-road package)

Weight: 2 830 kg

For a similar amount of money (R742 000), you could buy:

BMW X5 4,8l Steptronic R702 000

Audi Q7 4,2 Tdi Tiptronic R738 500

VW Touareg 4,2 V8 Tiptronic R647 500

Volvo Executive V8 Geartronic R638 000

Porsche Cayenne S 4,8 l, 8cyl Tiptronic R850 000

Mercedes Vito 120 CDI Sport

Price: R478 800

Engine: 3 litre V6 Tdi turbo diesel –

150 kW/201 hp

Gearbox: 5-speed automatic

Torque: 440 Nm

0–100 km/h: sub-10 sec.

Top speed: almost 200 km/h

Consumption/100 km: 9,2 litres (according to Merc)

Fuel tank: 75 litres

Range: 815 km

Weight: 2 940 kg

For a similar amount of money (R478 800), you could buy:

VW 2,5 l Tdi Caravelle (128 kW) Tiptronic R462 500

Chrysler Grand Voyager (3,8 l, 6 cyl, 142 kW) R399 900

For more information: www.mercedes.co.za



ABOVE: Crash test approved – the ML is one of the safest cars available in South Africa. **RIGHT:** Vito Sport accessories are geared for outdoor activities. **OPPOSITE:** Clever design tricks make the family resemblance between the Mercedes ML (above) and the larger Vito Sport (below) immediately noticeable.



city slicker'. Remember this is a high-performance car on the road with a top speed that is governed at 250 km/h; without the electronic limiter, the ML500 would go even faster. But you don't go mountaineering in sneakers either. With the right kind of tyres and the optional off-road package, the ML is more than capable when the tar ends.

The off-road package – which isn't available for the top-of-the-range AMG version of the ML – consists of a high-lift air suspension, raising the ground clearance to an amazing 291 mm. Diff-locks of 100 per cent on centre and rear axles, low range that can be engaged at up to 70 km/h and belly guards complete the adventure equipment.

The '500' badge on the rear of the ML is misleading. There is a hearty 5,5-litre V8 rumbling under the bonnet. At home in the city, the roomy SUV moves with absolute ease and

the acoustic park assist helps you to fit into even the tightest of parking spaces. When you leave the city, the ML's V8 accelerates in a typically quiet and distinguished Mercedes way.

For sound effects, you'll have to go for the AMG model. But be careful, the sound-proof cabin and relaxed shifting of the seven-speed gearbox means you don't realise how fast you're going.

Even in sport mode, the vehicle is still comfortable – a huge difference to the Audi Q7, for instance, which even with the suspension setting in comfort mode is still as firm as a sports car. With the Merc, the emphasis is on safety and comfort, without losing out on the sportiness.

When the good time I had in the ML came to an end, I had to swop it for the Vito. Seeing the parked people carrier, I had to admit it was pleasing to the eye – a bit like a pregnant M-Class, I thought. From certain

angles, the resemblance to the SUV of the same mother was a great design trick. With restyled headlamps and grille, as well as large vertical tail lights, it appeared more dynamic than the old model.

Taking it for a ride, the five-speed automatic gearbox was a big relief, especially in rush-hour city traffic as you move around without all that exhausting clutch pushing and hand-brake pulling. It was nimble and agile – words I never thought I'd use to describe a van – sorry, MPV (multi-purpose vehicle).

On the winding coastal stretch between Camps Bay and Hout Bay, it was entertaining to sneak up behind unsuspecting sedan drivers until their rear-view mirrors were completely full

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footnotes

Where to stay with a Merc

\$\$\$\$ Vineyard Hotel & Spa has traditional decor with a fresh touch in Newlands, Cape Town. It's a bit of the historic winelands in the city with a surprisingly large, tranquil garden. Large breakfasts are served. B&B is from R1 035 a person sharing. Tel 021-657-4500, e-mail hotel@vineyard.co.za, web www.vineyard.co.za.

\$\$\$\$ Harbour Bridge Hotel & Suites is a new boutique hotel beside the Roggebaai Canal, which leads from the Cape Town International Convention Centre to the V&A Waterfront. Hop on a water taxi if you want to go shopping. From R1 125 a person sharing. Tel 021-4 65-3530,

e-mail info@relais.co.za, web www.relais-hotels.com/harbour_bridge.

\$\$\$\$ Ezard House in Camps Bay, Cape Town, offers ideal ML500 ambience, with its relaxed, first-class service and unbeatable sea views. The rooms have private saunas and there's an excellent restaurant. B&B is from R1 500 a person sharing, including airport transfers. Tel 021-438-6687, info@ezardhouse.com, web www.ezardhouse.com.

\$\$\$\$ Greenways Hotel is one of the largest properties in Bishopscourt, Cape Town. B&B is from R920 a person sharing. Tel 021-761-1792, info@greenways.co.za, web www.greenways.co.za. ■



of Vito. Then, when they finally gave way, to roar past. Acceleration and road-holding were impressive. This is how Merc should recruit potential Vito Sport buyers: on the move.

I had so much fun with this vehicle, I wanted more. If my family roots were in a deserted, hot, oil-rich country, I most probably would've asked the guys at AMG to take care of pimping up the Vito V6 for me.

The Vito 120 CDI Sport is definitely a family transporter that finally puts an end to the dreaded question from the rear seats: 'Are we there yet?' ■

Next month: We check out a Nissan X-Trail in French clothes: the Renault Koleos 4x4, an affordable multi-cultural cross-over.

Wheels etc

Upmarket trailer park

One of the coolest overnight stays is on the roof of the Grand Daddy Hotel (formerly known as the Metropole) in Cape Town's trendy Long Street. Seven shiny silver Airstream caravans have unbeatable Table Mountain and city views. The vintage American classics (circa the 1950s) were bought on eBay, imported from Great Britain and the United States and completely refurbished before being lifted by crane to the rooftop. Green plants, barbecues, wooden walkways and US mail boxes between the two-sleeper trailers add to the strong Americana feel. At R945 a night for two, this one is sure to turn into a trailer cash cow. Web www.granddaddy.co.za.



Backseat driver's aid

There was a time when the only way to get a message to your motorbike pillion passenger or riding partner was to flip up your visor and bellow, 'Coffee break?' or, 'Speed trap ahead.' Bluetooth technology has made it possible to talk comfortably to another equipped rider with surprising clarity.

The fully waterproof Supertooth Moto hands-free unit clips snugly into a special bracket, fastened securely to the outside of your helmet, and it's simple to pair the devices to each other, a cellphone, or GPS unit.

Five hours talk time is possible, with a claimed range of over 200 metres. However, I found 100 metres



was more realistic in built-up areas, with wind noise a problem on my unit over 90 kph. A travelling charger is provided with the unit. This is a clever device whose time has come – but if you have a chatty pillion passenger, you may long for the good old days when you could feign deafness.

A single unit (cell to helmet) costs R1 400, a twin unit (rider to pillion or fellow rider) R2 255. Web www.bike-2bike.co.za.

Rob House



Boot and all

Recently launched as part of a joint venture between Mahindra and Renault, the Logan with a deceptively compact exterior will surprise with its roomy interior. Its seat width of 1 420 mm and boot space of 510 litres makes this a great family car. Beware the light, camel-coloured interior if you have messy kids. At R107 000, it's aimed at first-time buyers and families. Web www.renaultlogan.co.za.