

FOUR SEASONS REVIEW

1999 MERCEDES-BENZ ML320

FIRST OF TWO REVIEWS

By
Randi Payton



In its second model year of sport-utility-vehicle competition, the M Class has created an elevated status for itself. The Alabama born and bred, steelframed, four-wheeler has won accolades since its 1998 introduction, mainly because of its lower bumper-to-bumper stance, which may cause less damage to some passenger cars in certain collisions when compared with other SUVs that sit higher.

The *African Americans On Wheels* D.C. staff was eager to get behind the wheel of this luxury SUV. In December, the popular Mercedes-Benz ML320 joined our long-term test fleet for six months, just in time for winter weather testing.

With a ride and handling that are a breeze, driving the ML320 is an exercise in comfort. Getting around the city is a cinch. Its 111-inch wheelbase allows you to squeeze into tight parking spots, unlike some SUVs. The steering is accurate, but not too responsive when returning to its center point. A little extra arm work is necessary.

Built on a unique platform that combines the best of a car and a truck, the M-Class is rather quick for 4,200 pounds of weight. Getting a jump on traffic from a dead stop was never a problem. The new 3.2-liter, fuel-injected V6 engine is coupled with a five-speed automatic transmission and pumps out 215 horsepower. If that's not enough for you, try the V8 powered ML430. If awesome power and wicked speed are what you want, then look for the high-performance 340-horsepower ML55.

Now back to the basics. The interior has a dull, knobby stereo console, and the circular temperature gauges are simple enough for a child to operate. The option package on our model includes a six-disc CD player (which wasn't installed) and a premium audio system.

Despite the missing CD changer, creature comforts include eight-position, heated leather seats, soft leather steering wheel, moonroof and trip computer. We also liked the large pockets imbedded in all four doors and the purse compartment hidden under the passenger's seat.

The ML320 is a vehicle for anyone's favorite pastime, be it

camping, off-roading or city cruising. We never went off-road to experience its independent suspension, except on our stone-filled driveway. In the rain we appreciated its all-time four-wheel-drive system which triggers the anti-lock braking system and traction control. Most four-wheel drive systems use locking differentials.

There is a thin line between love and hate when it comes to the exterior design — you either like it or you don't. A cross between minivan and station wagon, the ruby, metallic-colored 320 is streamlined with gray trimmings, wraparound headlights, 16-inch alloy wheels, and dominating, gray bumpers. A light tint on the windows highlights its black outline.

The four sturdy foldout cup holders were conveniently located, however, power window controls on the center console were not, as the driver's right elbow sometimes unknowingly lowered the rear window.

The ML320 is equipped with a Flexible Service System (FSS) which displays for ten seconds and notifies the driver of its next required service. In case of an emergency, it has a first aid kit located in the back storage compartment.

At 1,900 miles, the check engine light came on. What's the problem? We don't know yet. Stay tuned for the final review.

SPECIFICATIONS

Base price.....	\$34,950
Price as tested.....	\$40,000
Engine.....	215 bhp, 3.2L V6
Transmission.....	5-speed automatic
0-60 mph acceleration.....	9.2 sec.
EPA mileage.....	17 city/21 highway
Miles to date.....	1,900

Visit our web site for weekly car reviews at
<http://www.automag.com>