



THE FIRST DRIVE | 2020 MERCEDES-BENZ GLE

TECH TIME

A COMPELLING CASE FOR PAYING THE LUXURY PREMIUM.

IT'S TOUGH TO GET LOST IN TEXAS, but we're having a fun time trying. The Mercedes-Benz GLE350 we're driving has the coolest navigation system we've seen: A front-mounted camera provides a real-time backdrop for superimposed and animated navigation aids, such as street names, arrows, and the like. The tech is called augmented reality. Whatever the name, watching each graphic appear atop the view of the route ahead is surreal—and one of many reasons the GLE commands a premium.

With safety and infotainment systems becoming so refined,

advanced, and widely available, the case for a luxury SUV weakens with each model year. The 2020 GLE counters that notion by delivering both the upscale people-mover experience those new to Mercedes aim to buy into and the innovative, future-forward technology that luxury devotees expect.

Buyers have the choice of two engines: the GLE350's 2.0-liter turbocharged inline-four-cylinder, rated at 255 hp and 273 lb-ft of torque, or the 3.0-liter turbocharged inline-six, with 362 hp and 369 lb-ft, in the GLE450. You won't find yourself wanting for more power from the 2.0-liter, unless you're really trying to mash it. Still, we favor the 3.0-liter

because it's available with a 48-volt electric system that, among other things, powers an EQ Boost, which adds an electric motor that bumps the GLE450's output by up to 21 hp at low rpm.

That 48-volt battery also powers something rarely seen in the automotive industry: a shiny new feature that lives up to its marketing. E-Active Body Control is an optional suspension system that works in tandem with Mercedes's Airmatic air suspension to analyze and quickly react to road imperfections. It seeks to make bumpy roads feel smooth and to all but eliminate body roll in corners. It's mind-bogglingly good at both—like playing a driving game while seated on your couch.

The GLE's system is more advanced than the Magic Body Control setup in the S-class. According to Stefan Cytrynski, who led development of the system, the physics of an SUV help it perform better, too. The camera, mounted just in front of the rearview mirror, has a better angle on the road, thanks to the SUV's height, and the extra suspension travel allows the GLE to soak up bigger bumps than a sedan.

A curve-inclination function can lean the GLE450 into bends, like a motorcycle or a high-speed train, so occupants don't slosh around as much. But the most novel mode—or the most comical, depending on which demo video you watch online—is the bizarrely named Free-driving mode. It makes the GLE bounce on its air springs to help find traction if it's stuck. The system also lets you adjust the suspension height at each corner, making the GLE possibly the most high-end factory lowrider ever.

The two GLE models get different versions of Mercedes-Benz's 4Matic system.

In the GLE350 (where all-wheel drive is an extra-cost option) torque is split between the axles 50/50. In the 450, a multidisc clutch within the transfer case allows for variable power distribution from zero to 100 percent, on demand. Both models are equipped with the same nine-speed automatic transmission, which is all but perfect. Shifts are precise when you gun it, and there's zero hunting for gears otherwise. During regular driving, you'll have a hard time even noticing shifts.

Other aspects of the 2020 GLE are good, but not quite so perfect. The brakes don't inspire confidence when slowing the vehicle from high speed; the pedal requires more effort than expected—one of the rare instances in which additional brake boost might actually help. And while we don't expect a mid-size SUV to have sports-car steering feel, the GLE's wheel offers next to no feedback. Effort stays artificially constant at every steering-wheel angle, which means it's as easy to turn the wheel under hard cornering at speed as it is at a standstill.

Inside, a third row is optional. Perhaps more notable, if gimmicky, is the driver's seat. Enter your height into the MBUX (Mercedes-Benz User Experience) multimedia system, and the seat and steering wheel move into a "suitable" position. Ours turned out a little odd.

There is a bit of gizmo overload in the new GLE, but all of it works well, which is what really impresses here. Lots of luxury automakers are piling on technology; few have integrated it as deftly as Mercedes has. Our advice: Order a GLE450 with the E-Active Body Control and black fender flares. You'll get a handsome, comfortable luxury SUV that delivers on its future-forward promises. —JAMES TATE

MERCEDES-BENZ GLE450 4MATIC

PRICE \$62,145
POWERTRAIN
3.0-LITER TURBO-
CHARGED I-6, 362
HP, 369 LB-FT; AWD,
9-SPEED AUTOMATIC
WEIGHT 5000 LB
0-60 MPH 5.5 SEC
TOP SPEED 130 MPH
ON SALE SPRING

