

# CLASSIC DRIVER

## Master-Class



**Despite constantly rising petrol prices the march of the SUV rolls ever onward. The cross between luxury saloon and 4 x 4 creates a car that should make its driver stand out from the crowd. Whether the new M-Class meets this criteria we shall soon find out - we recently tested the range-topping ML500.**

If one compares the new ML with its predecessor you can't help feeling the company could have made one or two more changes. Much of the design of the older car is carried over, including the muscular wheel arches and arrow-shaped rear three quarter view. However it soon becomes clear that changes for the 'second edition' have been aimed at making the car better 'on road' than 'off'. With a better, stiffer bodyshell the car is a much more effective cruiser for Town and Country, and that the role of a true off-roader is no longer pandered to. Witness the wide tyres and lower ground clearance.



Stepping into the comfortable cabin the first impression is of unusual width, and a sumptuous interior that leaves the writer a little lost for words. One rides on well-formed heated multi-contour seats that can be adjusted by inflatable air cushions to quickly provide a perfect seating position. The same can be said for the rear, although the heating elements are absent. Despite the airy cabin, overall visibility is poor to the rear by the treatment of the tail styling and the heavily tinted rear and side-rear windows. When parking or manoeuvring one needs better.



Operating a modern luxury motor car can be difficult given the complexity of the on-board electronic systems. DaimlerChrysler have done a good job because the dashboard of the new ML500 can be easily navigated without too much recourse to the instruction book. That's not to say that everything is easy to use. The heater and climate control settings exhibit such small script that it was sometimes difficult to read.



For a long journey the ML is well-prepared. The electro-hydraulically operated rear door swings upwards and can swallow an extensive amount of luggage. And if the seats are folded down even more can be carried. The aluminium load-divider ensures small items do not move around – a very well made, useful feature. Well done Mercedes.





All loaded up, let's go. Five litres of engine still have to propel 2.2 tonnes of motor car, however take the engine past 3,000 rpm and the acceleration is very strong – although there is little point using more than 5,800 rpm, where the power drops off. The German company does not subscribe to the US idea of V8 thunder, the noise from the tailpipes is quite subdued. Gearchanges are fast and imperceptible and the gearbox will quickly shift down a couple of gears should the occasion arise. The buttons on the steering wheel can be used to override the stick, but after a short time playing around with this we left well alone for the rest of the trip.



It's only in stop-start city traffic that the engine/gearbox becomes a little rough, surely a result of the 4wd set-up and its effect on the wide wheel/tyre combination of our car.



In general though, the car is a sporty all-rounder that combines a powerful engine with a well-sorted chassis and steering. The Airmatic suspension can be felt both in Sport and Comfort mode, but the manufacturer's Standard setting is best. In Sport, Airmatic will lower the car over a certain speed, while the system can also raise the car by up to 80 mm to negotiate small obstacles at slow speed. Such is the sophistication of the chassis and steering that the steering wheel seldom shakes unpleasantly in the hands when on bumpy tracks.



At the end of it all the new ML is a very good car, an almost perfect one in its class. Those wanting the best vehicle across country will be disappointed, however for them Mercedes will be building the G-Wagen for some time to come.

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