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The 2006 Mercedes-Benz M-Class has new unitbody construction and is completely restyled.

## M-Class: 'Bigger, faster, stronger, better'

New-generation Mercedes-Benz SUV offers style, sedan-like ride

By **TIM SPELL**

It looks a bit familiar, but aside from tri-star badging and a handful of heritage styling cues Mercedes-Benz's 2006 M-Class is all new.

The truck-based M-Class, a pioneering luxury SUV model created in 1997, is replaced with a unitbody model that Mercedes is touting as being "bigger, faster, stronger and better."

Available in ML 350 V-6 and ML 500 V-8 models with permanent all-wheel drive, the new-generation M-Class SUVs offer more refined exterior and interior styling, greater interior space, added power, and much improved ride and handling.

Exact pricing hasn't been announced but when the 2006 models are launched early this April, the ML 350 will be priced just below \$40,000 and the ML 500 will have a price tag in the high-\$40,000s.

The '06 M-Class SUVs are stretched about 6 inches in length, 2 inches in width and have a 4-inch longer wheelbase. They're larger in every dimension except height, which drops 1 inch.

The vehicle's personality is a major change over its predecessor's, said Ron Mueller, Mercedes-Benz U.S.A. product manager of luxury sport utility vehicles. It's different from the first M-Class, which targeted consumers with a go-anywhere mentality. The originals had to have an off-road heritage and be truck-based with body-on-frame construction.

"Since less than 1 percent of all people really go offroad, the idea of this vehicle is toward maximizing on-road comfort and also getting it through inclement weather," he said.



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Mueller predicts Mercedes' new SUV will appeal to buyers of Lexus RX 300 and 330 models. These SUVs have experienced great success with their car-based platform and slick styling.

"The Lexus buyers rejected the M-Class because of styling more than anything," he said. "And now with the new styling aspect we think we can draw on the Lexus buyer."

Most eye-catching is the front end, which Mueller describes as "masculine and aggressive." Holger Hutzenlaub, senior manager of design, said the styling theme is "refined power," and features a striking radiator grille creating a "driving-forward" feel.

The grille's trio of large horizontal louvers are notched with strings of square-ish holes and dominated with a center-mounted chrome tri-star badge. ML 500 grilles stand out with sterling silver paint and chrome strips. ML 350 grilles are blacked out, but are available in silver with an optional appearance package.

Complementing the grille are headlamps, which extend far to the sides to make the vehicle appear wider.

Optional for enhanced nighttime-driving efficiency are Bi-xenon gas-discharge headlamps, as well as a cornering light function for increased safety at road junctions and tight bends.

Hutzenlaub points to the styling at the flanks that sends a signal of power via "broad shoulders" and muscular wheel arches.

Perhaps the greatest message of refinement comes with a swept-back windshield and a roofline that moves downward at the rear to showcase a clever bit of glass work. Wrapping to the sides in a panoramic style, this rear glass adds lots of polish and flair to the profile.

The one-piece tailgate can be ordered with an Easy-Pack hydraulic system that enables it to be powered opened and closed with the touch of a button.

Spoked light-alloy wheels also add to the theme of power and refinement. The ML 350 rolls on 17-inch wheels and 235/65R-17 tires and the ML 500 is fitted with 18-inch wheels and 255/55R-18 tires. An Appearance Package adds 19-inch wheels to both models.

Power to the wheels comes with a 3.5-liter V-6 or 5.0-liter V-8 engine. Generating 268 horsepower, the much lighter V-6 generates 36 more horses than its predecessor. The V-8 propels the slick body with 302 horsepower.

Driving both V-6 and V-8 models on steep mountain roads, I found the torquer V-8 more capable, but the V-6 had ample muscle to handle challenging uphill stretches. The lighter, stiffer unitbody contributed to making transitioning from straight-aways to the many tight turns an experience akin to being in a sporty sedan.

The new 7G-Tronic automatic transmission also was key to both models confidently cruising in the mountainous terrain. This seven-speed automatic provides smooth, close-ratio shifting.

Its Direct Select feature allows touch-operated shifting by nudging a steering wheel-mounted stalk. The transmission also offers the added control of large buttons, located behind the steering wheel spokes, for clutchless-manual tap shifting.

M-Class models are piloted within a much improved interior.

"It is a mix of German engineering and U.S. needs," Mueller said. "Everything on the interior as far as 32-ounce cupholders, as far as storage space, as far as looks and dynamics, flexibility with the second-row seat folding - everything was focused on the American taste with the German engineering."

Cabin comfort is upped with increased rear-passenger knee room and elbow width. Standard front seats provide the power adjustability of height, backrest and cushion angle. Multicontour seats, standard on the ML 500 and optional on the ML 350, feature contoured backrests that support the torso during aggressive driving maneuvers.

Rear seats are a standard 60/40 split and can be folded to increase cargo-toting capability.

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The optimal M-Class loading surface is provided with optional removable seat cushions that provide a larger, flat-loading surface.

The two-tone interior treatment includes standard cloth upholstery in the ML 350 and leather - an ML 350 option and ML 500 standard feature. Also dressing up the M-Class is bird's-eye poplar wood trim, which is standard on the ML 500 and optional on the ML 350.

The '05 M-Class is making big news on the safety front with an optional Pre-Safe anticipatory occupant safety system. This system prepares the vehicle for an impending collision via a number of automatic measures: pulls driver and front-passenger seat belts taut; electrically readjusts the front passenger seat - seat angle and fore/aft positioning - to the safest position; and, if rollover is a risk, closes the sunroof.

The Neck-Pro option protects front-seat occupants' necks during a rear-end collision via sensor-controlled headrests that move forward approximately 40 mm. Along with a new era in safety, the M-Class incorporates a fresh breed of in-car entertainment gadgetry - an optional iPod music player interface that gives occupants a selection of thousands of music titles.

Advancements in passenger convenience, overall performance and styling are tremendous in the new-generation M-Class.

Hutzenlaub sums up the M-Class as a "chic jack of all trades that dresses you well all of the time."

**SPECIFICATIONS:**

**TYPE:** Luxury midsize SUV

**SEATING:** 5

**WHEELBASE:** 115 in.

**LENGTH:** 188.2 in.

**WIDTH:** 75.2 in.

**HEIGHT:** 71.5 in.

**WEIGHT:** 4,541 - 4,630 lbs.

**DRIVE:** AWD

**ENGINE:** 3.5-liter V-6

**HP:** 268 @ 6,000 rpm

**TORQUE:** 258 @ 2,400 rpm

**ENGINE:** 5.0-liter V-8

**HP:** 302 @ 5,600 rpm

**TORQUE:** 339 @ 2,700 rpm

**TRANSMISSION:** 7A

**WHEELS:** 17-in./18-alloy

**TIRES:** 235/65R-17/255/55R-18

**BRAKES:** Internally vented 4-wheel discs, ABS

**BASE PRICE:** ML 350, high \$30,000s/ML 500, high \$40,000s

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[Back to top](#)