

UNSTOPPABLE FORCE, IMMOVABLE OBJECTS

by JAMES GENT

PHOTOGRAPHY by HARISHANKER S

*To many, the Cadillac Escalade is the premium SUV of choice.
But is the Mercedes-Benz GL 500 about to topple the king?
We find out on our very own luxury drive*





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HY ARE YOU ON THIS drive? You don't like SUVs?"

It's a fair question raised by my evo partner in crime AJ. In the past I have questioned the validity of

Sports Utility Behemoths since, to me, unless you are a father of nine and enjoy nightly trips to Ikea for flatpack wardrobes, they've always seemed a little unnecessary.

There's no denying the significance of premium SUVs in the Middle East though: indeed, back in December evo Middle East awarded its first ever Luxury SUV of the Year garland. Hardened 4x4s like the Jeep Wrangler and Nissan Patrol remain the purist's weapon of choice for wadi and dune bashing, but sales of premium SUVs from the likes of BMW, Audi, Mercedes and Porsche that offer practicality, comfort and 'presence on the road' – alongside sufficient off-road capability – still significantly influence sales figures. Many for instance rolled their eyes sceptically when Porsche debuted the Cayenne in 2002, a model that today accounts

for more than half the company's revenue. Such is the influence of the burgeoning segment that even established models, known for harder edges earlier in their careers, have been given the premium treatment. The new Range Rover springs to mind...

"James...?"

The voice emanates from a walkie talkie in the cupholder by my right elbow. In the moments I've been musing my answer, I've forgotten to respond.

"Sorry AJ, was miles away..."

"So...why are you on this drive when you don't really like SUVs?"

"...I want to know what I'm missing..."

You join us en-route to Hatta. Many's the occasion we've put one 500+bhp sports beast to the test on some of our favourite driving roads. But today is different. Today, rather than rattling our innards to pulp with direct steering and turbo-ed bursts of acceleration, we're on a premium cruise across country aboard two premium SUVs, a table at the prestigious Hatta Fort Hotel for a spot of lunch our goal.

'Our two-way convoy (plus camera car) houses 16 cylinders, 843bhp and a whopping 5184kg'



Left: Though we take both the Mercedes and Cadillac for a brief spin on the loose stuff, their true home is the road **Above:** Seat massagers, the GL 500's secret weapon



Up ahead, AJ is at the wheel of, what many would argue is, THE definitive Luxury SUV, the Cadillac Escalade. Despite a rough debut in 1999 owing to questionable build quality and handling compared with its main rivals, comfort, a killer design and some handy celebrity endorsements mean the Escalade remains Cadillac's biggest draw more than 15 years later. At the wheel of what he considers the poster child for Luxury SUV-ing (and the latest generation to boot), AJ is feeling confident.

And me? Well I'm piloting a vehicle we know well at evo Middle East, the Mercedes-Benz GL 500. For the past four months the big Merc has been part of Fast Fleet, and is thus well established with the team's photography crew. There is more to this choice though than a celebratory farewell. An effective Luxury SUV must offer premium build quality and materials, superb ride comfort, lashings of space and 'presence', adjectives few manufacturers

epitomise better than Mercedes-Benz. Now into its second generation after its introduction in 2006, the GL's reputation among customers and critics has seen it legitimately run rivals from Range Rover, Porsche and Cadillac close. If one vehicle can take on the Escalade at its own game, it's the GL 500.

Of course, since our two-way convoy houses 16 cylinders, 843bhp and a whopping 5184kg, fuel is the first order of business. It's a pricey activity: everyone else has 'conveniently' forgotten their wallets so I'm shelling out for everyone. Topped up though, both the GL and Escalade are good for more than 700km each, so this should be our one and only fuel stop. And since I need a second to recover from the hit my bank balance has just taken, it's a good time to compare our contenders, nose-to-nose.

There's no denying it, the Escalade is big. Seriously BIG. Even the Mercedes is dwarfed by the Escalade, the Caddy's Art and Science infused front grille and beefed out bonnet

making an imposing look. Said 'bigness' is further emphasised by those almighty (optional) 22-inch alloys wheels. The matt white paint does at least take the edge off – one does wonder how terrifying this thing would look in black – but there's enough chrome detailing to keep the intimidation high. All the more ironic that at the back the bladed taillights are actually quite elegant.

Aggressive looks must be a pre-requisite for Luxury SUV design, since the Mercedes dons a similarly butch look courtesy of those massive air intakes in the front bumper, bonnet grooves and bulbous headlights, and some 19-inch AMG alloys. There's less ground clearance on the GL though and less chrome giving it a much sportier atonement that the petrolhead in me can't help but relate to, my first blue ribbon then going to the Merc.

Inside however the Escalade storms back into contention. True, I do wonder if the enormous column shift gearbox is a bit utilitarian for

Right: The Cadillac may lose out to the Mercedes on the outside... **Below, right:** ...but it's an entirely different prospect in the cabin

'The Escalade is big. Seriously BIG. Even the Mercedes is dwarfed'



Caddy's flagship model, but on the whole it's a superb environment. Our ESV test model boasts an extended wheelbase, allowing more legroom for occupants. The second row bench has also been ripped out to make way for two captain's chairs, into which you'll slump like they're made of marshmallow. Even on the third row comfort is surprisingly good, Cadillac having moved the rear axle in this fourth gen model to allow rear passengers more head and legroom. Six-footers and above won't want to do full journeys in the back (it's still a little cramped) but compared with the contortionist attempts needed for rival models – including, it has to be said, the GL 500 – it's a revelation.

Where the Merc wins back some kudos though is in the front, the leather-clad buckets offering superb support and comfort in equal measure: it's a notable difference to the Cadillac's driver's seat where more lumbar support wouldn't go amiss. Our fully laden GL 500 also brings with it AMG detailing (check the floor mats), Bluetooth connectivity, and seat massagers that we almost wore down to the nub during our four-month loan period. The centre console is standard Mercedes fare, a bastion of buttons and rotary dials, alongside which you'll find enormous cupholders and hidden storage compartments. It's not the most elegant of layouts, and after much swearing, it's decided that Cadillac's CUE infotainment system is more intuitive than Mercedes' setup. The Escalade gets the nod for cabin comfort.

Back on the road, the combined grunt of two V8s mean we're up to speed quickly, and back down again shortly after as we wait for



the Acadia to catch up. "Which is faster?" my walkie talkie chirrups, and since AJ and I are both secretly 8 years old, we decide to find out with a quick sprint from 40kph to a perfectly legal 139kph. Mercedes territory.

The Caddy may house almost 1.5-litres of displacement more than the GL under that enormous bonnet, but GM's V8 also kicks out 15bhp and a sizeable 246lb ft of torque less: a previously confident AJ in the Escalade is now in trouble. The Cadillac holds its own impressively for the first gear change, but soon the Merc's

might pulls it cleanly ahead, the turbocharged ‘whoomp’ and accompanying pick-up a war cry over the V8’s more linear acceleration.

The highway portion of our journey nears its end as we hit two-thirds distance, only 50 clicks lying between the evo team and our luncheon table at the Hatta Fort Hotel. From hereon in the roads take us through the mountains, dipping and climbing in unison with the changing terrain, long straights now breaking into high and low speed corners: utopia for sports cars, but one that could ultimately be the undoing for either one of our Luxury SUVs. I’m keen to see how the Escalade handles itself, and dutifully swap keys. The results, as it turns out are mixed.

Supple suspension means that even with those enormous 22-inch wheels, the ride is pillowy soft in the Escalade, give or take the odd quiver across the rougher tarmac. And even though it couldn’t quite match the GL in outright pace, the V8 bolted down under that enormous bonnet is still pretty sprightly on the straights: downshift with the thumb switch on the column-mounted gearshifter (not the most user friendly setup), wait a beat as the V8 takes a big breath, and there’s some urgent pull as 414bhp hits the road through all four wheels.

As the road begins to weave more emphatically about the mountain range though, a few issues do arise.

For this stretch I switch the suspension from cushiony to Sport, and even though the suspension stiffens accordingly, there’s little tangible difference: through the turns, there’s quite a lot of bodyroll as 2739kg swings from side-to-side. Surprisingly, despite the rather awkward setup for manual changes, the six-speed automatic lends itself well to the changeable road surface, solid changes and little electronic nannying allowing me to get the Escalade at least partially settled heading into the longer, higher speed turns. There’s a limit to how far I can push the big Caddy though, despite the grip from the front tyres. The high centre of gravity, coupled with the body roll, doesn’t give me a huge amount of confidence to push overly hard, and as a result, AJ in the pursuing Merc is having no trouble staying on my tail (we’ve left the Acadia far behind). The steering doesn’t particularly help in this regard either. At low speeds it’s light, making the big Caddy easily manoeuvrable in tight confines. But on this stretch it feels a little numb, with little feel for the road surface through the still soft suspension and very little connection with

the front wheels. Slightly smaller wheels could dial in a little more responsiveness, but it’s clear the Escalade does not feel at home here.

It’s a marked difference to the Mercedes. Sitting lower to the ground than the Caddy (boasting a lower centre of gravity as a result) and fitted with stiffer suspension and smaller wheels, the GL is immediately more composed than the Escalade. Even into the sharper turns, there’s remarkably little bodyroll for such a large vehicle, the grip from the front tyres limiting the amount of understeer too. As such confidence to push the GL much deeper into the corners is far greater than a vehicle of this size has any right to, despite the hefty 2445kg kerb weight. Perhaps more impressive though is the agility through the turns as power from that V8 is fed in: feather the throttle (yes, you actually can do that in the GL), keep the nose as tight as you can, and the nimbleness of the GL is quite extraordinary. Stand on the loud pedal a little harder and there’s a definitive kick from the turbocharger as it sends 429bhp to all four wheels. There’s no denying that the GLs ride is stiffer than the Escalade’s, and as such arguably not as comfortable, but it’s a compromise that ultimately produces a sportier drive.

Once again, steering is not particularly direct.

These are SUVs and not superlight Caterhams after all, so some slack is a given. Even still, the power-assisted steering feels overly-servo-ed to really provide a crisp connection to the front wheels, heft lock-to-lock intercut with a little wooliness. It’s not enough to dump us into the rock face however, solid gear changes through the seven-speed automatic maintaining an extraordinary amount of balance through the turns. I can’t imagine many GL owners would give the big Merc a thrash like this though, and do wonder if paddle shifters are necessary...

The mountain route dutifully comes to an end just a few kilometres from the Hatta Fort, and though the thrash hasn’t been the experience I’d hoped for in the Escalade, it’s a run that nevertheless has proven the quality of the Mercedes: perhaps not quite at the same level as the Cadillac as a premium highway cruiser, there’s no doubt the GL 500 has outperformed its hefty SUV DNA impressively. It seems unlikely though that limited dynamism will hinder the Escalade’s sales figures, the quite superb build quality and comfort – plus that aggressive design – still the benchmark for the segment. Its rivals may prove sportier and nimbler but I’m not sure the Cadillac has been usurped just yet. ❏

MERCEDES-BENZ GL 500

Engine V8, 4663cc
Power 429bhp @ 5250rpm
Torque 516lb ft @ 1800-3500rpm
Transmission 7G-TRONIC PLUS 7-speed automatic, 4MATIC permanent four-wheel drive
Front suspension Double-wishbone, anti-dive control, torsion bar stabiliser
Rear suspension Multi-link / anti-squat and anti-dive control / tubular torsion bar stabiliser
Brakes Hydraulic dual-circuit braking system, internally ventilated (front), solid disc (rear)
Wheels 8.5 J x 19 front and rear
Tyres 275/55 R19 W front and rear
Weight (kerb) 2445kg
Power-to-weight 175bhp/ton
0-100kph 5.4sec
Top speed 250kph
Basic price \$99,300

evo rating: ★★★★★

CADILLAC ESCALADE

Engine V8, 6162cc
Power 414bhp @ 5600rpm
Torque 460lb ft @ 4100rpm
Transmission Hydra-Matic 6L80 six-speed automatic, four-wheel drive
Front suspension Independent coil-over-shock, 36mm hollow stabilizer bar, Magnetic Ride Control
Rear suspension Solid axle with five-link location and coil springs, 28mm hollow stabilizer bar
Brakes Power-assisted four-wheel disc, vented front and rear rotors, 330mm (front), 345mm (rear)
Wheels 22-inch front and rear
Tyres P285/45 R22 front and rear
Weight (kerb) 2739kg
Power-to-weight 151bhp/ton
0-100kph N/A
Top speed N/A
Basic price \$92,500

evo rating: ★★★★★☆

‘It’s clear the Escalade does not feel at home on the twisties’

