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2009 Mercedes-Benz M-Class



Diesels Across America With Mercedes-Benz

History Repeating: Five Decades Ago, Diesel-Powered Cars Were An Anomaly. That's No Longer The Case. The Rattle Continues.

text size

By Editors of Motor Trend

Photography by Julia LaPalme, Brian Vance, William Walker

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"Mister, they don't make diesel engines small enough for passenger cars. If I put diesel fuel in your tank, this car will never run again," grumbled the attendant of a little Midwestern station. So we had to pop the hood of Motor Trend's test car to prove there really is such a thing as a diesel car."



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So began a story entitled "Is the Diesel the Coming Economy Car?" in our June 1959 issue. In just four pages, it talked about the pros, cons, and costs surrounding diesel power for passenger vehicles and chronicled a 5122-mile trip our editors made across America in a new Mercedes-Benz 190D "Ponton" sedan, the first diesel-powered automobile sold in (relatively) mainstream numbers in the United States.



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Fast-forward 50 years to a conversation over drinks at this year's Geneva motor show among executive editor Matt Stone, Geoff Day of Mercedes-Benz USA, and Christoph Horn and Koert Groeneveld of Daimler AG. With Mercedes-Benz preparing to launch its first 50-state-legal, BlueTEC clean-diesel-powered sport/utilities (ML, GL, and R-Classes), the Mercedes guys thought it would be fun to recreate that memorable and, it turns out, prophetic, cross-country trek of 50 years back. We agreed on one condition: that we also take along a 190D to better connect the dots between the decades.

Road trip...

The Players

Mercedes-Benz - Then and Now

For two vehicles born of the same parents -- the new-for-2009 ML320 BlueTEC and Oilivia, our 1960 190D sedan -- they couldn't be more different. Yet, the connection is clear. Both are diesels. Both are well-constructed four doors. And each is capable in its own way.



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The ML320 is one of three "clean diesel" BlueTEC models M-B is rolling out on a 50-state basis (the new powertrain also is available in the R- and GL-Classes). BlueTEC employs a sophisticated exhaust system and urea-solution injection to meet emissions requirements and boils out as much torque as a small locomotive: 398 pound-feet, served continuously from 1600 to 2400 revs. The seven-speed automatic trans ensures the engine is always spinning within its prodigious powerband. Unlike diesels you may remember from the past, it doesn't rattle or smoke, and it's got accelerative ability to spare.

Oilivia does embody most of the bad stuff you recall: It's slow, idles like a pint-size Peterbilt, smokes, and has zero accelerative ability to spare. But that was the state-of-diesel art back then. The 190D was your only choice, too; no other carmaker sold diesel-powered passenger cars in the U.S.

The biggest differences between this odd yet happy couple are technology and efficiency. The ML carries on-board computing power exceeding 1960s-era spacecraft; the 190's power accessories are few. Although the pair gets similar mileage during our cross-country jaunt, the 190 churns out 28 horsepower per liter, the BlueTEC, a clean-burning 70. The ML will tow 7200 pounds; the 190D works hard to maintain 50 mph up a grade.

Though different, the muscular ML320 BlueTEC and this cute, crimson 190D make wonderful travel partners. Separated by five decades, they're united beneath the same three-pointed star.

- Matt Stone