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THE SUV ERA



They have refused to budge for more than two decades. But the marque that embodies the essence of supercar sports performance (although not reflected on the Formula 1 racetrack right now) has finally bowed to market pressure.

Because there is a three lettered acronym that is defining vehicle manufacture around the globe – SUV. Well over 30 million Sports Utility Vehicles were sold last year and the demand shows no signs of declining.

So now we await the V12 Ferrari Purosangue. Certainly a few rows down on the grid, it is the retort of the iconic Italian carmaker to the Lamborghini Urus and Aston Martin DBX.

Furthermore, it is bound to be the next status symbol for the well-heeled – already placing orders for a possible 2022 delivery.

It is probably more debatable than a Zondo Commission hearing, but the original Jeep, built by Ford and Willys for the United States Army during World War II is credited as being the first SUV. Morphing into a commercial version as the Jeep Cherokee nearly 40 years later.

But it was after the turn of the millennium that the concept of a supercar turned “station wagon” came into view with the launch of the Porsche Cayenne. It was termed an act of madness!

An act that saw the Cayenne and Macan top the total sales figures by a long shot without alienating their core sports car devotees.

But a few years before the Porsche revolution began, Mercedes-Benz had entered the luxury SUV market with the 1997 MClass ...conceived for the American market and manufactured in Tuscaloosa County Alabama.

Despite a few quality challenges in the early years, the MClass thrived to the extent that BMW got edgy about ownership of the “M” nomenclature and Stuttgart deferred to the ML badging.



All a tad confusing. However, since 2015 it has been proudly badged as the GLE and the latest Mercedes-AMG GLE 63 S 4MATIC+ is topping the lists of SUV searches.

Also, seemingly appropriate in that the Mercedes-Benz EClass is the South African Car of The Year in the Motor Enthusiast’s Choice category.

A recent survey shows that the current luxury SUV buyers want style, power, comfort, and practicality.

The front end of both versions of the GLE are Dwayne Johnson bold and the derriere of the coupé is beyond stunning – even if you have to give up some space and a few thousand Rands.

The pair are powered by a turbocharged four litre V8 that would be enough to leave most contenders in the dust. But this feisty engine is given an extra kick by a crafty mechanism called an EQ Boost starter-alternator.

Do not ask me exactly how it works but it helps the turbo spool up in quick time and, although it sounds like a technical diversion, adds more torque than a couple of Kia Picanto GTs.

Add variable all-wheel-drive and a slick ninespeed ‘box and the GLE 63 S rockets to 100 km/h in 3.8 seconds. Real wolf in sheep’s clothing stuff if you bear in mind this animal weighs in at two and a half tons!

Despite the ability to cut down to four cylinders when cruising, it is rather thirsty (around 11.5 l/100 km) but I do not think fuel consumption is high on the priority list when you are forking out around three million Rands.

Comfort? Well if it was any more comfortable you would be catching a nap behind the wheel ...although the lane tracking package is there to save you.

But take time to get to know the Comfort settings. I was stressed out on a trip to Blythedale in KwaZuluNatal with a tea-cup Yorkie barking in my ear every kilometre of the way before I discovered I could have selected from half a dozen seat massages to ease the strain!

So the big spending SUV buyers also want practicality. Now that is a vague term and I guess the GLE 63 S is practical in that it handles like a sports car and can take you off road

with a flick of extra lift.

Just about every function you can dream of has got a switch or scroll pad on the steering wheel so that you can keep your beady eyes on the road ahead with the heads up display ensuring there are no distractions.

That survey probably left out the most important element – excitement. Not just from the kick in your backside and the crackle of the exhausts when you give it some right foot. Also from climbing into the lush cabin and being confronted with pillar to pillar screens, which must come close to echoing the SpaceXs Crew Dragon spacecraft of Elon Musk.

Every detail configurable to your taste and driving style along with a limitless range of ambient lighting options and even fragrance preferences.

Even if you are not a Liverpool fan, you will never drive alone. The Hey Mercedes voice assistant is part of the MBUX infotainment system and she is always keen to help.

I would probably start by blocking calls from the bank manager.

