

2

Birth of the G-Wagen

In today's marketplace, for a major car manufacturer not to have an SUV (or sport utility vehicle) in its line-up is unthinkable, with even the likes of Porsche, Maserati, Jaguar and Bentley – makers of pure sporting and luxury machines – getting in on the act nowadays. It wasn't always that way, though ...

For the current generation, it's taken for granted that an SUV is a standard vehicle type, rather than something specialised, aimed at a market niche. Indeed, when the author was looking for one in Japan a couple of years ago, several books and magazines devoted purely to SUVs were available to guide me through the multitude of offerings from all over the world. The mud-plugging image of the past has slowly but surely given way to smooth sophistication – the modern sport utility vehicle is a car for all seasons that will probably never go off-road for its entire life. Indeed, some of the latest offerings are simply cashing in on an upswing in the SUV's popularity, styled to look like one, yet possessing none of the attributes that would endow it with good off-road performance.

Before looking at the development of the G-Wagen (or Geländewagen), it's worth a couple of pages to discover the roots of the SUV, for unlike the majority of car or body types still on sale in today's showrooms, this one, like the people mover (or MPV), is actually a relatively new breed. Even after its introduction, it seems odd – particularly with so many on the road nowadays, and something of an SUV boom before the Lehman Brothers crisis made people tighten their purse-strings – that it took some time to become accepted as a mainstream product, and even longer to become fashionable ...

The new Mercedes-Benz SUV in the terrain it was built for.





A 1981 230G cabriolet – the entry-level Geländewagen, and soon to become the 230GE, making these important reference pictures.

Short- and long-wheelbase estates from 1990. As it happens, despite the late 1989 public debut, the press launch (held in the south of France) didn't take place until March 1990, and full-scale production of the W463 models would only start in the following month.



Military Matters #3

The G-Wagen was basking in its newfound popularity in showrooms at this time, and also found favour in new and existing military circles. The German army took delivery of another large order for an open ESK Wolf with rear seats early in 2000, and this was developed into the lightly armoured LIV or AGF Serval that entered service in 2004. The LAPV Enok is a more heavily armoured closed variant that began its military career in 2008, with over 300 built so far.

Another interesting variant emerged in 2006, this being the limited run Panhard built for the French Special Forces. It was based on the Greenline W461 with full-time 4WD and a G270 CDI engine, although since 2008 the Panhard PVP (aka the A4 AVL) is now considered France's replacement for the old P4. There is also a Force Trax model built in India, adding to the number of nameplates used on the military machines. In fact, we should mention here that Force Motors (previously known as Bajaj Tempo) have been building an SUV based on G-Wagen technology since the late-1990s, although the bodies are locally built.

Across the Atlantic, Canada ordered well over 1000 cars, which could have their light armour removed depending on the mission scenario. In addition, the US Marine Corps ordered 150 G-Wagens to replace its ageing Desert Patrol Vehicle line, and the company received another commission for almost 400 cars to be used by the US military based in Europe.

Switzerland began renewing its Puch fleet with G300 CDI models recently, and Algeria has started building CKD machines. Meanwhile, nations as far flung as Finland, Sweden, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, countries born out of the former Yugoslavia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Mexico and Indonesia have all created fleets of G-Wagens for military use. Even Russia has a few, and they can often be seen as escort vehicles for the President and Prime Minister. Australia has also fallen under the Geländewagen's spell, its government eventually taking delivery of more than 2000 vehicles of varying types, including a number of rare 6x6 models, with a pair of driven axles at the rear.



The ESK Wolf in a Rheinmetall AG press shot.



Canadian Land Forces Command soldiers pictured in convoy in the US during a joint-exercise conducted in 2008.



Dieter Zetsche, Chairman of the Board of Management of Daimler AG and head of Mercedes-Benz Cars, presenting the GLA model at the 2013 IAA.



Chris Pratt and Bryce Dallas on the set of *Jurassic World* with suitable transport. A 6x6 version of the G-Wagen was also featured in the film.



Mike Horn pictured in Graz during a factory tour in April 2015. The Swiss explorer and adventurer made good use of the G-Wagen on many of his expeditions, including a recent one to conquer K2.