

THIS WEEK >



THAT'S B-I-N-Z, NOT B-E-N-Z

ATTENTION, HIGH ROLLERS: WE'VE GOT YOUR LIMO

» WHEN IS A CAR that looks like a Mercedes-Benz and drives like a Mercedes-Benz not really a Mercedes-Benz?

When it's a Binz, from a company that has manufactured coachbuilt Mercedes models for more than six decades. Today, the company produces two Binz-badged six-door limousines based on the E-Class sedan.

The main differences between the XL Six Door and the XL Vis-à-Vis are their interior seating arrangements and whether the second-row doors have exterior handles.

Every Binz limo begins life as a standard E-Class. The cars arrive at the company near Stuttgart, where they are carefully disassembled, stretched about one meter and reassembled. The entire process takes 10 weeks.

Two diesel engines are offered, as well as a 3.5-liter, 268-hp V6 and a range-topping 302-hp V8. We bypassed the diesels and jumped straight into a Binz XL Six Door fitted with the V6. An estimated 0-to-60-mph time of 8.4 seconds isn't exactly neck-snapping. Top speed is electronically limited



to 130 mph with the V6. Binzes powered by the V8 have a more autobahn-friendly limit of 167 mph.

From behind the wheel (unless you're looking for street parking), the big Binz doesn't feel all that different from a standard E-Class sedan. The steering is accurate, and the brakes—the largest fitted to the E-Class—provide drama-free stopping power. Leaving the driver's seat for a short ride as a pampered passenger, we found the Binz quiet and the ride composed and comfy.

Binz has a close working

relationship with Mercedes, ensuring that the ESP and self-leveling air suspension are set up to compensate for the Binz's extra length. Weight is only 300 pounds more than the standard car.

The options list is huge. The average price of \$69,000 (not including the cost of the base E-Class) easily doubles if a car is fitted with TVs, DVD players and custom leather and paint. During our visit, the first Binz limo to be sold in China was days from delivery. Although it lacked a built-in fridge and the sliding roof of more elaborate versions, the black XL Vis-à-Vis model was equipped with a custom entertainment system and rear-facing jump seats.

With all the extras and six doors, we doubt anyone would ever mistake this Binz for a mere Benz.

—NICK KURCZEWSKI