

ARIZONA DRIVER

THE ENTHUSIAST'S GUIDE TO LIFE BEHIND THE WHEEL

VOLUME 8 NUMBER 4

JULY-AUGUST 2009

2010 Mercedes-Benz E-Class launch

- THE E-CLASS ABSORBS THE CLK
- SEDAN AND COUPE MODELS
- E350 V6 AND E550 V8 MODELS
- SPORT AND LUXURY MODELS

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The quiet middle sister is suddenly all grown up



With E350 and E550 Luxury and Sport models in both coupe and sedan form, Mercedes-Benz consolidates the CLK into the E-Class while also applying a near-5 technological tour de force,

The Mercedes-Benz E-Class, long the simple and functional middle model of the lineup, overshadowed in ways by the affordable C-Class and the high-ticket S-Class, has received massive updates in both style and content for 2010. More big news is the birth of the E-Class Coupe, which replaces the CLK.

This is the ninth generation of the E-Class. Its introduction was accompanied by superlatives from Geoff Day, Director of Communications for Mercedes-Benz USA: the new E-Class is a milestone, the most important launch of the year, everything they know has all put into this, and it is the most technologically advanced automobile on the planet. Far from faint praise. And by "this," they don't mean a car, but rather an expanding family of cars: already a sedan and a coupe, two quite different cars, including E350 versions of each with V6 powerplants, E550 versions with V8s, and the E350 BlueTEC (anticipated to achieve 33 mpg) yet to follow. There are also a wagon and a cabriolet on the horizon (not to mention AMG versions of some of the above).

Mercedes-Benz has had a mind-boggling alphabet soup of model lineups for some time, and they've embarked upon some simplification. Now, rather than the E-Class being a sedan line and the CLK a

separate coupe, the CLK is phased out, replaced by the E-Class Coupe. (The CL is also slated to be replaced by, or evolved into, an S-Class Coupe.) Mercedes emphasizes that while the name change is in the interest of simplification, the new coupe gets most of its parts from the E-Class, so it should no longer be a C, anyway.

The new E-Class endured 6 million miles of testing, the most stringent in the history of Mercedes-Benz, equal to 250 circumnavigations of the globe.

The E-Class comprises both Luxury and Sport subsets, to cater to a wide variety of customer tastes, a strategy Mercedes points out is taken by none of its competitors. They anticipate 80 percent of sales will be the Sport option in the US. (About 15 to 20 percent of E-Class sales worldwide are in the US.)

Suspension is based on the C-Class. The ride automatically transfers into a firmer mode as it encounters different road surfaces. The Sport models sit one inch lower than Luxury, while the 550 sedan and the E63 AMG sedan use AIR-MATIC suspension to adapt to conditions (while this technology is not considered necessary in the shorter and more agile coupes). And owners can select from two

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Our test routes over two days took us to the Nevada Test Site, the progressing US 93 Hoover Dam Bypass bridge and up into the snowcapped Nopah Mountains en route to Spring Mountain Motorsports Ranch. By the time we'd driven most of the cars and analyzed the parking lot at Spring Mountain, we could start to distinguish the many iterations of the new E-Class more readily.

suspension options: comfort and sport. Combine these options with the Sport and Luxury variable, and you can get whatever you want, with a little forethought and sometimes after the fact.

The coupes and the E63 AMG sedan have their shifter in its traditional location on the console. The E350 and E550 sedans, however, move the gear selector to the right side of the steering column, where a "Direct Select" lever electronically controls the seven-speed automatic—lift the stalk up for reverse, push down for drive, and depress a button at the end for park. Steering wheel controls allow for manual upshifts and downshifts. Four-way power seats also feature four-way lumbar support, which, along with massage—and the shifter locations—are all picked up from the top-dollar S-Class.

V8 models include a performance-styled squared-off three-spoke steering wheel with thumb grips, rounded out by the luxury touch of Nappa leather. The instrument panel's information display screen has been moved up higher, closer to eye level, to enhance safety.

The interior features ambient lighting (standard), definitely a significant current trend. Mercedes says this is not only attractive, but also provides a useful eye transition to the dark outside. In the face of landmark technical updates inside and out, we are also told the new E-Class has two new cupholders.

On the first evening, we were given a demo of the Pre-Safe Brake feature, on a coned and blockaded course set up in a large Las Vegas parking lot. The demonstration was given by the two German engineers who developed the system, a couple of young guys who no doubt cut their teeth on PlayStation and were very enthusiastic (and informative) showing it off. It's dramatic to experience, neck-snapping during the full-blown collision with a large foam wall. Each of the new safety and tech features could easily warrant its own full-blown brochure, but the basics are presented in the sidebar.

Bernhard Glaser, Mercedes General Manager of Marketing/Product Management, tells us there are three key reasons buyers choose the coupe over the sedan: styling, performance/handling and exclusivity. To achieve high style, all the sheet-metal details have been exaggerated and are all "sexier," according to Glaser. The E-Class Coupe and E-Class Sedan, in fact, share a grand total of zero body panels. There is no B-pillar in the E-Class Coupe, unlike competition in the segment. This is a feature that can be traced back to the 1968 Mercedes-Benz C 114, their first performance coupe.

The overall impact of the coupe's styling is that of a powerful "forward wedge." Up front, rather than an above-hood ornament, a center star is integrated into a two-lamella grille, looking more powerful and more streamlined, as opposed to delicate and luxurious. Daylight running lights are fabricated with seven LEDs. The front of the car suggests an overall V-shape, again accentuating its aggressive stance. (The V-shape is reflected on the interior, with cues applied to the instrument panel.)

The panoramic sunroof (standard) retracts, rather than just popping like the rest of the segment, and a mesh air dam controls turbulence. The E-Class coupe has standard split folding rear seats, optimizing the utility of the coupe format.

Utilization of high- and ultra-high-strength steel has knocked off 20 pounds of mass. Airflow has been engineered to keep dirt off the taillights (the stylists also considered what they call "night design," the ability to recognize the E-Class at night just by its taillights). Other details include chrome handles for folding the front seat (easier to see at night, along with chrome plates on the door sills), a seat belt "presenter" (so the belt is basically handed to you), and yet another suggestion of the V-shape on the mirrors.

At launch, the E-Class Coupe will be available as an E350 with V6, chrome lines, a paint-color-matched diffuser, oval tailpipes and 17" wheels, or an E550 with V8, a massive air intake, black diffuser and rectangular pipes.

Agility Control Suspension is upgraded to Dynamic Handling Suspension on the V8. The Sport model is programmed with a quicker throttle response, more aggressive shift pattern and firmer suspension.

How to choose among them all? The sedan/coupe alternative is a personal choice and therefore easy enough. Other comparisons of V6/V8 and Sport/Luxury are combinations of objective and subjective considerations. Cross-comparing every variable (e.g. whether to go with the Sport model or the Luxury model with suspension on the sport setting) is a challenge. Style will probably be one primary guide between Sport and Luxury, though the suspension and ride equality are quite different. Driving will be the tie-breaker on engines. Our test drive gave us plenty of variables. The larger engine was a killer (in the best sense) on flat straightaways, such as our drive out past the Nevada Test Site. But the E350 Sport Coupe with the smaller engine handled much more nimbly in the twisty mountain climbs en route to Spring Mountain Motorsports Ranch near Pahrump, Nevada (just east of Death Valley, California).

There will be an AMG sedan (in fact, we had a look at the prototype in Las Vegas, though it was not available to drive), but Mercedes says an AMG coupe is unlikely, given the volume difference and sportiness of the E550 coupe as is.

The E-Class began dealer deliveries in June, 4MATIC all-wheel-drive versions are set to arrive in September, followed by the E63 AMG sedan in November, then BlueTEC in March 2010 and a 4MATIC wagon in June 2010.

The 2010 E350 coupe has a base price of \$48,050 (plus \$875 destination), compared to \$48,100 for the 2009 CLK350 coupe it basically replaces. Mercedes calculates this is 8.2 percent increase in product value, given all the technologies and other improvements in the new vehicle. The E550 Coupe starts at \$54,650 (also an 8-10 percent improvement).

With such a powerful collection of technology, form and function in the E-Class, one obvious question is: where does this leave the S-Class? The E-Class delivers so much, with features the S-Class doesn't even include, at half the price. Mercedes tells us the next S-Class will have all these features, too, but the answer seems to boil down to prestige: the S-Class buyers know who they are. It seems the E-Class buyers will know who they are, as well, and they'll have every right to feel pretty proud of themselves for their selection. ■

SAFETY TECHNOLOGY

Safety has always been a priority for Mercedes-Benz. To say the E-Class is no exception would understate the case. Basically, every idea they currently have is incorporated into this vehicle. There are nine airbags including driver's knees and two pelvic bags, plus pre-tensioning seatbelts. Instrument layout, brakes and suspension are highly developed. But electronics and automation are where the real magic lies. (In a quick text search of the E-Class technical overview document, the word "automatic" came up 31 times.) Here are some of the systems:

ADAPTIVE HIGHBEAM ASSIST goes well beyond the traditional up/down feature of any and all vehicles, providing a low beam that extends from 200 feet to 1000 feet in range, intended to give a full 5 seconds' additional view of a pedestrian, deer or other challenge.

NIGHT VIEW ASSIST PLUS hails straight from the S-Class, using two active infrared beams and a camera, factored through a computer algorithm, to provide a crystal clear black and white image of nighttime obstacles that have never before been visible until it's too late.

DISTRONICS PLUS WITH PRE-SAFE BRAKE is the Mercedes implementation in which not only is distance controlled via adaptive cruise control, but in the event of an impending collision, action is taken by the vehicle. Some manufacturers have opted for an automated full stop, which can be a stiff promise with stiff results for the occupants. The Mercedes system works through several zones of impending disaster to warn and to respond, but ultimately only to the point of mitigating—not promising to avoid—a collision, reducing damage and the potential for injury. Mercedes engineering staff variously describes this as "following on an invisible rubber band" or having an "electronic crumple zone." The system does everything it can to prevent an accident, while mitigating impact should it occur.

LANE KEEPING ASSIST analyzes lines on well-marked freeways and highways. Whereas some makers have implemented systems that fight the driver for control of the wheel, attempting to bring the car back in line (even perhaps when this is not the best solution), Mercedes technology simply gives the driver rapid vibrations through the wheel, much like running over Botts dots on a California freeway. We found this to be extremely effective while not intrusive and not overruling the driver's own judgment. The system can even distinguish between solid and dotted lines, providing varying feedback levels.

Other safety technologies in the new E-Class include: Blind Spot Assist, Parktronic with Parking Guidance, Attention Assist, Neck-Pro Headrests, ES, ABS, BAS, EBD, brake priming, brake drying, HOLD braking and much more.

Does this seem like a lot of technology to understand and use? Mercedes engineers say that "after getting used to it, they aren't distracting at all. It takes an hour or two, like getting used to a new mirror." That may be optimistic, given the number of features we never fully master in a typical weeklong test drive, but it's a comforting thought.