

BY JOE SAGE

Impossible but true

A brand new Mercedes-Benz for under \$30,000

There are two ways to conclude that a vehicle "does it all." one is the tour de force, such as the go-anywhere, do-anything Mercedes-Benz Geländewagen, or the luxury-and-features-hang-the-expense of S-Class. Either of those aims to deliver everything you dream of, though at quite a price. The other way to do it all is with a best-of-both-worlds synthesis. In today's lesson, this means delivering a Mercedes-Benz, in all its style, features and glory, in the \$20s. Meet the brand new Mercedes-Benz CLA-Class.

Perhaps you've already met. The CLA has been making a splash since last winter's Super Bowl, wherein a devilish enticement from Willem Dafoe led to Kate Upton and more, but was dismissed by our young hero, who found he could afford the car without signing away his soul—not by a long shot.

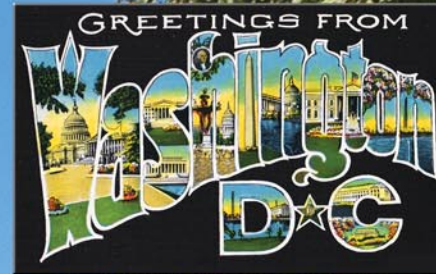
Mercedes-Benz VP of marketing Bernie Glaser tells us the purpose of the CLA is for the brand to reach out for "a new buyer, a different buyer—with a new car, at a new entry point." And so it is.

Try this for perspective: the C-Class evokes an E-Class—just a little smaller and so on—at a starting price of \$35,800, compared to the E-Class

starting price of \$51,400 (i.e. at about 70 percent of its cost). Stylewise, the new CLA-Class evokes if anything the even more rarified CLS, which starts at \$72,100. And yet the CLA starts at just \$29,900 (just 41.4 percent the cost of a CLS).

The risk of such a move, for the company, could be to lessen the panache of the CLS, or to cheapen the brand overall. Mercedes-Benz is the number one luxury brand in the US, with 17 percent market share. As the saying goes, it can take years to build a relationship and just seconds to ruin it. It can be much the same with a brand. That's a challenge the company tackles with this project, as much as the creation and delivery of the product itself.

At the same time, the company has not bet the farm on this. Mercedes tells us they will introduce a whopping 30 new cars over the next three years—an average of about one every three months. This daring CLA move will not have to redefine the brand. It simply creates a new access point. After all, conquests from other brands—who it is hoped will stick around and move up within the brand, if they like what they find—are a primary goal of every manufacturer, with every vehicle of conse-



quence they produce. Mercedes claims the highest loyalty rate in the business, so they simply seek to broaden their base. And that's where this product and its price point come into play. Not only will it go after the lowest-sticker luxe models from BMW and Audi and so on—the CLA is also intended to steer customers away from more middle-of-the-road offerings like Accord, Altima and Fusion, which can easily bump into the mid-\$30s. We see this all the time—a vehicle that will beg

KEEP RIGHT >>



• Our drive spanned two days on the byways of Virginia, through Washington DC and across Maryland (top to bottom at right). • The CLA 250 in Northern Lights Violet Metallic, above, starts at \$29,900, while the red CLA45 AMG at lower left starts at \$47,450.





Mercedes-Benz Concept A-Class
Revealed before the show at new Mercedes-Benz Manhattan

Nobody drives in Manhattan. Everybody knows that. But it's not really true. Or, if it is, they still buy and service cars there, to park at notoriously great expense for their forays into the hinterlands. Mercedes-Benz tells us some 22,000 customers buy and service vehicles in Manhattan. This it should be no surprise that their dealership there—the only company-owned US store—is one of the largest. And it's now becoming larger (and more convenient, as Mercedes-Benz Manhattan moves into its new 330,000-square-foot digs at 775 11th Avenue between 53rd and 54th Streets).

What better place to kick off the 2011 New York International Auto Show, and what better way than with a slick new concept that's certain to find its way to dealers' floors sooner than later.

Meet the Mercedes-Benz Concept A-Class. This name has been used before, for a small van-like vehicle that somewhat resembles an extended Smart car (and uses the same kind of engine-in-a-sandwich floor construction). In fact, as those have been sold in Mexico (as well as in Europe and other places around the globe), they have been a novel but not uncommon sight on the roads of Arizona. Forget all that. There is now a global (but not available here) B-Class, which carries the format and front-wheel drive of the old A-Class into the future, in a slightly larger size that evokes the big 7-Doorer B-Class.

The new A-Class aims at a different spot, or at least aims to make that spot appealing to the US market.

front-wheel drive in concept form, the Concept A-Class revealed to us in New York is lower to the ground and decidedly more carlike. It's also more elegant. As interest in smaller and more fuel-efficient cars grows, savvy manufacturers are working hard to deliver something that will appeal to a premium market buyer (and that can deliver profit). The midsize Mercedes-Benz E-Class has had a style and feature renaissance over the past two years, and the C-Class has caught up with it just this year. The whole lineup now appeals in style and grace, as well as offering a broad range of function—and price.

The Concept A-Class is more than a shakedown study. Under the hood is a 210-horsepower turbocharged four-cylinder gasoline engine (a 2-liter version from the new M270 series) with a dual-clutch 7-speed transmission. The transmission, a three-shaft setup, shifts automatically and smoothly, promising a sporty, comfortable and economic ride. The Concept A-Class carries cutting-edge electronics from cars higher in the lineup, such as a radar-based collision warning system with adaptive brake assist. The concept also includes a high level of smartphone integration. Park your phone in the car and all functions are synchronized with the COMAND interface, including audio plus email and social networks.

Impossible to miss at the reveal was the grille, with a striking deep-dish radiating pattern. This is reflected in the high-performance full-LED head- and tail-lamp DRLs. We look forward to this

- The Mercedes-Benz CLA 250's chrome-spangled grille (second from top at far right) is very faithful to the dazzling Concept A-Class show car revealed at the New York Auto Show in spring 2011 (at left).
- After Labor Day, things get nice and quiet in a Maryland beach town (bottom left). Sadly, most of the pizza and soft ice cream are gone by then, too.

The CLA was developed on much the same timeline as a new S-Class, which starts in the \$90s and can quickly top \$135,000. This would offer the team plenty of opportunity to compare notes and seek some trickle-down features.

It also helped them keep their eye on their goal that the new Mercedes-Benz CLA must be “every bit a Mercedes-Benz, and nothing less than that.” Bart Herring, general manager for product management, identifies an edge: “we wanted to build a bad-ass car,” he admits. The Concept A-Class, introduced at the New York International Auto Show in spring 2011, had given us our first glimpse of what was in store. As Herring says, it was a cool design that spoke a universal language (he notes that both his niece and his retirement-age dad love it).

We are pleased to see so much of that show car make it into production. And it's interesting to note the final name is not A-Class, surely a nod to the fact they don't want buyers themselves to feel (or look) as though they are on the bottom rung.

One car they don't see the CLA eating into is the C-Class. They are similar sizes—the CLA is about an inch and a half larger in key dimensions, but the C-Class will be all new within a few months, too. But style alone takes the CLA somewhere different, just as with the CLS versus the S-Class above it or the E-Class below. Ultimately, there is its raisin d'être, price: the CLA is almost \$6000 less expensive than a C-Class.

The CLA 250 bears a brand-new, fourth-generation 2.0-liter turbo, generating 208 hp and 258 lb-ft of torque through a 7-speed dual-clutch transmission. That torque is a big factor in the car's performance, but so is its weight—just 3264 pounds—combining to deliver a zero-to-60 time of 6.9 seconds. At the same time, the car delivers a tough-to-beat 38 MPG on the highway (26/38/30 city/highway/combined).

The CLA 250 you can buy today is a front-wheel-drive model, which is one of the most surprising deviations for a Mercedes-Benz. There will be a 4MATIC all-wheel-driver in spring 2014. (The AMG variant is only all-wheel-drive and should be available by about the time you read this.) Because of the front-drive basis, the CLA's 4MATIC system is all new (and 25 percent lighter). It can distribute drive force 50-50, front and rear, but can send all torque to the front wheels.

- (At right) the Mercedes-Benz CLA 250 and CLA45 AMG are recognizable any number of ways, though many are subtle. There is badging on the rear decklid (plus a Turbo badge on the front fender of the AMG). The first column at right shows the AMG, as does the top right photo. The balance of the second column shows the CLA 250. Interiors vary, so this is not the definitive spotter's guide. But the flat-bottom, race-inspired steering wheel is an AMG dead giveaway. Wheels also vary, with some similar styles available between the two models, but you'll spot AMG brake calipers (though not always red). The engines are easy to tell apart, under the hood or on the road. A black chainlink grille differentiates the AMG, as well its lower spoiler lip and air intakes.

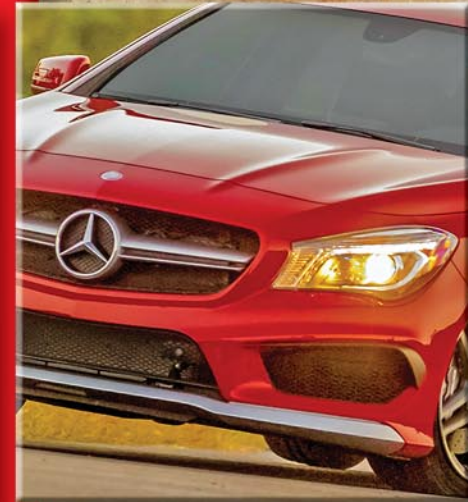
So if the point of the CLA 250 is a Mercedes-Benz in the \$20s, where does the CLA45 AMG come in? This version has an expected base price of \$47,450. Well, a C63 AMG starts in the \$60s, an E63 AMG in the \$90s. How about an SLS AMG, starting at \$201,500? Or a CL65 AMG at \$215,500 base? When it comes to the high-ticket, high-potency AMG performance lineup, CLA is still the best of both worlds—an affordable AMG.

The CLA45 is the first four-cylinder AMG. It surely will not be the last. This is said to be the most powerful four-cylinder engine in the world. Based on the same 2.0L, the AMG is tweaked—an understatement—to 355 hp and 332 lb-ft of torque. The car's zero-to-60 time is 4.5 seconds. Fuel mileage numbers were not yet published for the AMG, but they've given it a larger gas tank: 14.8 gallons, compared to 13.2 in the CLA 250.

The first day, we drove deep into Virginia, grabbing lunch in wine country we didn't know existed, and returning via the ridge-capping highway through Shenandoah National Park. Virginia is one of those states where you had best drive 53 in a 55. Police would stop us (in parking lots, at least) just to tell us not to get any ideas. Beautiful cars and beautiful roads, but acceleration and speed testing were limited. Winding, hilly, curvy mountain terrain was not, however, and we are pleased to report a completely neutral and solid, directly connected feel to the steering and front-drive handling in the CLA. Those who think they can't live with a front-drive Mercedes owe it to themselves to give this a spin.

Day two was a dash across Maryland and up the Chesapeake Bay shoreline. Our codriver was a DC-area local, from the Maryland side, and he knew where we could drive, and how. We took the AMG, and he drove—and how.

Lots of fun on the highway, pleasant and manageable while passing through small towns, easy to park at the beach, stylish wherever they went, while also delivering a firm but not overdone burble to fulfill the bad-ass requirement, the CLA 250 and CLA45 AMG both delivered.



At one point, we pulled in and parked in a row of CLAs that had one stray Ford Fusion mixed in. The Ford did not look half bad, even in that exclusive company. We are reminded that “brand is a substitute for knowledge.” We are also reminded that, “hey, this is a Mercedes-Benz.” The market leader's name does speak for itself.



In some parts of the country, there is some shyness about buying a higher-end brand. This is generally not the case in most of Arizona. If that's the tie-breaker, then count on it: we expect to see a lot of Mercedes-Benz CLAs on the roads here. There are plenty of other tie-breakers, too, from fit and finish to power and handling.



A luxury brand cannot simply build a cheap car and survive and thrive. Cadillac famously spent decades (successfully) living down the Cimarron. That, of course, was just a rebadged starter level Chevrolet. The Mercedes-Benz CLA is a completely new Mercedes-Benz through and through: engineered, conceived, sourced, built, outfitted—everything but priced—in every way you are used to. The price is the surprise, and let it be nothing but a pleasant one. And yes, dealers will have some stock at exactly \$29,900. ■



to be optioned up, quickly crossing into the price range of the next model up, even within its own brand, which in turn may beg fewer options.

The idea here is that it won't take much for the shopper of a less-inspired brand to note, “I could be driving a Mercedes-Benz.” Will the strategy work? We don't see why not. Will the affordable Benz always win the nod? That's harder to say. Feature-by-feature comparisons can get complex. But brand is a powerful thing. So far, we see little to suggest that an under-\$30k car will cheapen the three-pointed star's brand, and everything to suggest the brand will demonstrate inherent value and prestige to the under-\$30k car.

