

Raison d'être recalibrated

BY JOE SAGE

Mercedes-Benz introduced the CLA in 2013 as a 2014 model—a new entry-level machine in their stable, very purposefully kept under \$30 grand (\$29,900), yet styled in the vein of the very desirable (and pricey) CLS, the car that had started the whole luxury “four-door coupe” craze in 2004.

The CLA is built to a solid formula of Mercedes-Benz quality and styling, competitive against more affordable brands with a similar layout, as well as against more expensive models in its own lineup. Its power-to-weight formula proves satisfying, and its suspension, steering and handling are so solid we doublechecked the decklid *and* the sticker, as this is a (rare for Mercedes) front-driver, yet hugs about as well as all-wheel drive (three other available models of CLA are indeed 4MATICs).

If price point was a key factor in the CLA's introduction, it must be noted that its base price is now 22.6 percent higher. The consumer price index has risen just 10.2 percent over the same span. We actually don't see a problem with this. They know

their costs and margins, and aiming for a lower-cost buyer may have been a goal that wasn't worth it—they have badge panache to protect (for their own sake and for the sake of buyers themselves). It only took the first three-tenths-of-one-percent CPI rise to breach that \$30k ceiling, anyway, a great time to rethink the car's goals.

In an era where top quality can come in all sizes—where small does not have to mean cheap—it's arguably a good thing to let the CLA buyer bask in the same glory as the \$69,950-and-up CLS buyer, simply actively preferring the smaller size (and sure, saving a few bucks, just icing on the cake).

Building the CLA in the form of the CLS makes it competitive against much more expensive cars.

Yet if you want to buy “the Mercedes-Benz of” a widely popular more affordable segment, you can. You'll now pay accordingly, but still come out on top. That seems more than reasonable. ■

Nitpicks? It has keyless start (probably more economical to build the same ignition switch in all), yet no keyless entry—common in cars at \$15-20 grand but missing here at \$36-42 grand (and an annoyance all day every day).

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE.....	2.0L inline-4 alum alloy 16v turbo
HP/TORQUE	221 hp / 258 lb-ft
DRIVETRAIN	FWD (avail AWD)
TRANSMISSION	7-spd dual clutch (DCT)
SUSPENSION	F: indep McPherson strut w coils, dbl-tube shocks & tubular torsion bar; R: indep multi-link w coils, single-tube shocks & tubular torsion bar
STEERING	speed-dep electro-mech rack & pinion
0-TO-60 / TOP SPEED	6.2 sec / 130 mph (lim)
BRAKES	F: 13.0; R: 12.6 (no further info)
WHEELS / TIRES	8x17 / 225/45R18
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	184.6 / 107.4 in
TURNING CIRCLE	(wall to wall) 36.1 ft
GROUND CLEARANCE	4.3 in
HEADROOM (F/R).....	38.5 / 35.7 in
LEGROOM (F/R).....	41.8 / 33.9 in
CARGO CAPACITY	11.6 cu.ft
WEIGHT.....	(FWD) 3362 lb
FUEL CAPACITY.....	13.2 gal
MPG.....	25/35/28 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE	\$36,650
MULTIMEDIA PKG: MB nav, nav services 3 yrs, MBUX augmented reality nav, speed limit assist	1150
PREMIUM PKG: 10.25" center display, 10.25" digital cluster, auto-dim mirrors, power fold-in side mirrors	1100
OPTIONS: 18" 5-spoke wheels (200), blind spot assist (550), SiriusXM w trial (460), heated front seats (580), 64-color interior ambient lighting (310), wireless chg (200).....	2300
DESTINATION CHARGE	995
TOTAL	\$42,195

CLA 250	221 hp	\$36,650
CLA 250 4MATIC	221 hp	38,650
AMG CLA 35 4MATIC	302 hp	46,900
AMG CLA 45 4MATIC	375 hp	53,100

