

NEW BASELINE BENZ

BY JOE SAGE

We had a Mercedes-AMG GLA 45 in this slot on our schedule originally, until a last-minute rescheduling brought us this non-AMG GLA 250, instead. With an AMG GLB 35 also in this cycle, we had figured there'd be some dead-on comparison, though even that would not have been quite the case; both the AMGs are top of their line, but only because there is no AMG GLB 45, at least not yet. (The AMG GLA 35 and GLB 35 have a 302-hp "AMG-enhanced" engine; the AMG GLA 45 has a 382-hp "AMG handcrafted" engine.)

Instead of two top AMG compacts, this issue includes the base GLA (the least pricey of the less expensive two-row GLA) and the top GLB (the priciest of the more expensive three-row GLB), though for lack of a GLB 45, the GLA 45 is priciest of them all.

Most of all, this pairing lets us focus on the fact that the 2021 GLA is a completely new vehicle.

The prior GLA was unusual in that it was, beneath its skin, the same as the Infiniti QX30. For the two manufacturers, both of whom generally build on rear-drive-based platforms, the pair were also a

departure as being front-drive-based, though most GLA (and GLB) models are 4MATIC all-wheel-drive, with front-drive an option on the non-AMG model.

The GLA 250 remains the least expensive of not only this combined compact set, but of the entire 29-vehicle Mercedes utility lineup (reportedly soon to be thinned out, in line with a companywide and industrywide simplification trend).

The prior GLA was more like a European sport-back or shooting brake than an SUV. The new GLA has a completely new shape, more akin to the GLC and GLE (notwithstanding Coupe versions of some of those), which makes more sense.

The lineup also includes the big GLS, which has its own distinctive styling, as does the GLB, with its compact form accommodating three rows.

The GLE, GLC and now the new GLA tend more toward a papa-mama-baby bear style group. The E and C have had enough family resemblance to often make us check their badges in traffic, and the new A likely will, too. But it's a good move, as the overall set is so well executed and recognizable.

MERCEDES-BENZ & AMG GLA-GLB LINEUP

GLA (two-row compact)	
Mercedes-Benz GLA 250 (FWD)	221 hp\$ 36,230
Mercedes-Benz GLA 250\$ 38,230
Mercedes-AMG GLA 35	302 hp\$ 47,550
Mercedes-AMG GLA 45	382 hp\$ 54,500
GLB (three-row compact)	
Mercedes-Benz GLB 250 (FWD)	221 hp\$ 38,050
Mercedes-Benz GLB 250\$ 40,050
Mercedes-AMG GLB 35	302 hp\$ 49,500

All are 4MATIC unless noted as FWD

The new GLA, about three inches taller than the prior model, provides both a higher seating position and more headroom. It's a half inch shorter in length, yet adds rear legroom, while also increasing both rear seatback and cargo flexibility.

Starting at just \$36,230, we liked its relative simplicity. Even in a less expensive size, there's no Mercedes-Benz that's any slouch in quality, features and finishes (all of which exceed much pricier models from any brand not that long ago).

The value equation continues with lower than expected prices on options and packages. The premium package (see sidebar) is a great example, notably including dual-10.25-inch displays (binna-cle info and center stack functions, integrated into one clean, superwide panel overall)—a setup in-



Prior GLA



GLC



GLE

troduced on larger Benzes a few years ago with larger screens, here scaled down impressively.

Maybe we had our appetite set for the 382-hp AMG 45, but the GLA 250's 221 horses did not seem all that powerful in aggressive situations. Modes are simple—eco, comfort, sport and individual, each adjusting variables for engine, steering and electronic stability control. We popped it into sport, as we often do, which seemed to tighten up handling and gave the engine and exhaust a bit more growl, though power seemed the same.

Our sample's 18-inch wheels are smaller than many these days, meaning they have taller sidewalls, which traditionally would lead to a more compliant ride—except that these are run-flats (common in smaller vehicles, as even space-saver spares take up space). We felt bumps and seams in the pavement more firmly than expected, in any

drive mode, but suspect tires could change this.

Regardless of modes or settings, the GLA turns on a dime, a specification that always puts a smile on our face, feeling easily five feet tighter than its stated 37.4 feet (which it may well be, as that's a wall-to-wall rather than curb-to-curb spec).

Each of the four GLA models makes its mission clear through the pricing stairstep: start with the simplest; add two grand for AWD; then a choice of two levels of higher performance and build in two AMG models. And if you like the AMG for style, but can't budget its performance, there is also an AMG Line package for the GLA 250.

The lineup's alphabet continues from there, and the sky's the limit. But right here at the start of the chart, this small model delivers deep and complete Mercedes-Benz look, feel and features, and that has plenty of appeal. We liked it. ■

SPECIFICATIONS

ASSEMBLY	Rastatt, Germany
ENGINE/TRANSMISSION	Germany
ENGINE	2.0L inline-4 turbo 16v alum alloy
COMPRESSION RATIO	10.5:1
HP/TORQUE	221 hp / 258 lb-ft
ZERO-TO-60 / TOP SPEED	6.8 sec / 130 mph
DRIVETRAIN	FWD (AWD avail, \$2k)
TRANSMISSION	8G-DCT 8-spd dual-clutch
SUSPENSION	F: indep MacPherson strut w coils, dbl-tube shocks & tubular torsion bar; R: indep trailing link w coils, dbl-tube shocks & tubular torsion bar; rear axle mounted to isolated subframe
STEERING	speed-dependent electro-mechanical rack & pinion
BRAKES	hydraulic dual-circuit X-config, adaptive brake control, rear axle combines floating caliper w elec parking brake (other info tba)
WHEELS	std 6.5x18 5-twin-spoke, black
TIRES	215 / 65 R18
ROWS / SEATS	2-row / 5-passenger
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	173.6 / 107.4 in
TURNING CIRCLE	(wall to wall) 37.4 ft
HEADROOM (F/R)	39.0 / 38.0 in
LEGROOM (F/R)	41.0 / 38.0 in
CARGO CAPACITY	15.4 / 50.5 cu.ft
GROUND CLEARANCE	5.2 in
WEIGHT	3384 lb
FUEL CAPACITY	12.7 gal
MPG	25/34/28 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE \$36,230

INCLUDES:	power front seats w/ lumbar & memory, split-fold rear seats, rain-sense wipers, keyless start, dual-zone auto climate, Apple/Android, Bluetooth, Mercedes me connect services w free trial, LED headlamps & taillamps, power liftgate.....included
HEATED FRONT SEATS	500
PREMIUM PKG:	10.25" center display, 10.25" digital instrument cluster, keyless-go, auto-dim rearview and driver's side mirrors w power fold-in.....1750
INTERIOR AMBIENT LIGHTING,	64-color.....310
MULTIMEDIA PKG:	nav, nav services incl map updates for 3 years, MBUX augmented reality for nav, speed limit assist.....1295
SIRIUSXM with free trial period	460
USB-C ADAPTER CABLE	25
DESTINATION CHARGE	1050

TOTAL \$41,620

Mercedes-Benz GLA and its family evolution: at left, the new GLA (2021 GLA 250); above, left to right, the prior GLA (2015 GLA 250), current GLC (2020 GLC 300) and GLE (2020 GLE 450).

New 2021 Mercedes-Benz GLA 250

