

We start at the Maine Coast and conquer Mt. Washington, as the new Mercedes-Benz C-Class aims to conquer a segment

BY JOE SAGE

The introduction of a new Mercedes-Benz C-Class is a combination of big news and simple evolution. But even the elements of simple evolution add up to big news. The smaller the vehicle size, the more the segment is on fire these days, between fuel prices and the economy in general, so news in the Mercedes-Benz compact executive class is guaranteed to be significant. And there is lots of news.

A new two-door C-Class coupe marks the first time Mercedes-Benz has offered a traditional coupe (a three-box, not a hatchback) in this segment, and it makes a splash with AMG-based styling and a standard "panorama" sunroof. The company figures the new C-Class coupe will cannibalize its competitors, not their own sedan sales. The sedan has also been highly restyled, bringing cues from the E-Class and even the S-Class to

this affordable yet potent niche. The new C-Class has some 2,000 new parts, including new bumpers, headlights, grille, an aluminum hood, LED taillights and a new interior with new-generation telematics.

MEET THE C-CLASS LINEUP

There are many variations within the new C-Class lineup, but they form a simple matrix. First, the powertrains:

The C-Class coupe and sedan are each available in four different versions based on engine: the C250, powered by a new direct-injection 1.8-liter four-cylinder turbo (201 hp, 229 lb-ft of torque); the C350, with a new direct-injection 3.5-liter V6 (302 hp, 273 lb-ft); and the high-performance C63 AMG with a normally aspirated 6.3-liter V8 (451 hp, 443 lb-ft, plus MCT multi-clutch transmission; or with an optional AMG Development



**THIS CAR CLIMBED
MT. WASHINGTON**



A sampling of the 2012 C-Class lineup (right, top) reveals clues to its variables: the two sedans (left two cars) are Sport and Luxury, identifiable by the more aggressive two-bar grille and flat emblem on the Sport versus the more elegant three-bar grille and standing emblem on Luxury. Note also the AMG rocker panel on Sport, plus a wider air intake in the lower front fascia. These Sport elements are all present in all C-Class coupes (right two), with the AMG receiving a single-bar grille and an immediately recognizable AMG hood with creased bulges.



Package, the C63 AMG jumps to 481 hp).

The C-Class sedan (but not the coupe) is also available in a fourth configuration: the C300 4MATIC, with standard all-wheel drive and a carryover of its familiar 3.0-liter V6 engine (228 hp, 221 lb-ft).

C250 and C300 sedans have an option of Luxury or Sport trim (recognizable by their grilles and front emblems, their interiors, and the Sport's staggered-width, five-spoke 17-inch wheels). The coupes are all Sport. Sport models include firmer shocks, springs and stabilizer bars, with over a half-inch reduction in ride height, as well as standard AMG styling, with deeper front and rear aprons and sculpted rocker panels. Inside, Sport models are equipped with a flat-bottomed three-spoke steering wheel and metallic trim, while Luxury models come with a four-spoke steering wheel, comfort headrests, Nappa leather and burled walnut trim. (Luxury models have standard body styling and equal-width tires, front and rear.)

Fuel mileage for the new engines approaches 30 mpg (28-29 highway) for the V6 and surpasses it (31 highway) in the 4-cylinder turbo. The carryover engine in the C300 4MATIC hits 25 mpg on the highway. The performance C63 AMG is rated at 19 mpg highway and 13 mpg city, while the others are all in the 18-21 mpg range, city.

ON THE ROAD IN NEW ENGLAND

Decisions, decisions. We had a couple of dozen shiny new C-Class alternatives to choose among: sedans or coupes, Sport or Luxury, 4-, 6- or 8-cylinder C250, C350 or C63 AMG versions, as well as the AWD C300.

With so much momentum in the marketplace for not only smaller models but smaller engines—with economical but potent new 4-cylinders replacing V6s and sixes replacing V8s from many manufacturers—and eager to learn how Mercedes-Benz has tackled this challenge, we were intrigued by the new turbo 4. So we opted for the C250, the one with the new 4-cylinder powerplant. Again, the C350 with its V6 delivers 50 percent more horsepower, at a loss of only one or two miles per gallon, but that slight difference puts the C250 in "thirtysomething mpg" territory versus "twentysomething" for the C350 (21/31 city/highway for the C250 in either body style, 20/29 for the C350 sedan, 19/28 for the C350 coupe). Anyone who is hard set on shopping for over 30 mpg will want to try to new C250. We had no passengers or packages, and we latched right on to the AMG styling and Sport trim touches of the coupes. (In sedans, with Sport or Luxury as options, Sport has represented 90 percent of US sales, which has suggested to



KEEP RIGHT >>

MAINE TRAVEL NOTES AND MOUNT WASHINGTON AUTO ROAD

It's an old punchline in these parts: "Well... you can't get theah from heah." Our destination was Kennebunkport, on the lower coast of Maine. (Or maybe that's the upper coast, when you're Down East, one of those tricks to reveal the outsider, like upper and lower Cape Cod) You could fly nonstop to Boston and start driving north. Or you could fly to very convenient (to Kennebunkport) Portland ME, but from Phoenix that involves a connection—in our case, O'Hare eastbound and Newark on the return. (We were due in Portland, Oregon, the next day—see LeMay Museum in this issue—but resisted a big temptation to fly Portland-to-Portland, opting instead for a luggage change in Phoenix overnight.) Flights were on United, but via the Star Alliance, we were able to post our miles to US Airways, use the express security lane, and even park at the less expensive Terminal 2 without needing the shuttle to 4—good things to know for Arizona frequent flyers. With flight time, connections and three hours on the clock, it does take all day. Not a problem, except that we missed lunch at the Lobster Shack on the Maine coast the first day.

Lodging was at Hidden Pond, a resort campus of individual cabins on 60 wooded acres, thoroughly modern though offering a second outdoor shower—along with a big stone fireplace to warm up and dry out after that.

Hidden Pond's official vehicle is a handsomely restored 1956 Ford Country Sedan 8-passenger station wagon. We mentioned to the owner that we had—surprisingly—seen not one, not two but three more very clean '56 Fords for sale along the roadside, and he confirmed that indeed someone in the area specializes in restoring them. ■

Opened in 1861—when Lincoln was president, there were 34 states, and electricity was well in the future, not to mention the internal combustion engine—the Mt. Washington Auto Road (originally known as Mt. Washington Carriage Road) is "America's Oldest Manmade Tourist Attraction." We were fortunate enough to ascend it during its 150th birthday. Mt. Washington is the highest peak in the northeastern US, at 6288 feet and, as such, has always attracted the adventuresome: the oldest auto race in the US, the Mt. Washington Hillclimb Auto Race, was first hosted on the auto road in 1904.

Today's travelers experience not only the area's scenery and history, but also Mt. Washington's famously wild weather—often extreme and always unpredictable. As we approached through a variety of normal early fall weather—sunshine, a bit of rain, moderate temperatures—we were aware that things were supposed to change around this mystical mountain, and change they did. As we approached lunch at the base lodge, heavy clouds loomed overhead. The gate to the Auto Road itself reported 40-degree temps (we had left 103-degree Phoenix the day before), 41-mph winds and visibility of 50 feet. The higher we climbed, the narrower the road became, the steeper the drop-offs, pavement came and went—and visibility dropped. By the time we reached the summit, 50-foot visibility seemed to be a matter of what you count as visibility. ■

the brand that they increasingly pursue a youthful demographic, which reportedly has been asking the dealers for such a car for a long time.) Put it all together, and the C250 Coupe was our first choice for tackling the roads.

Our route from Kennebunkport, Maine, to the base of Mt. Washington, in New Hampshire, took us along a variety of great two-lane roads. We zig-zagged across the state line many times (gaining altitude as we went). The difference in road surface quality between the two states is striking in spots, and we hit some serious patches of rain. But the traction and stability features of the rear-drive C-Class always came through. Come wintertime, we might think about the 4MATIC, of course (and we'd be keeping one eye open for a probable newer version at some point, with the newer engines.)

The buzz as we go to press is all about Apple's new iPhone 4S, with Siri, its voice-response system. We got a kick out of the C-Class's nav, though, as it said, "Please turn right in 500 feet, at the end of the road onto River Street"—it seems we had Dr. Seuss on board.

After lunch at the highway summit—the base of the Mt. Washington Auto Road—we had a vehicle change. The V6 offers 302 hp to the C250's 201. The C350 also costs some six or seven grand more than the C250, of course, which starts bringing its price closer to the mid-grade E-Class. And if it's power we want, the AMG weighs in at 451 hp. The AMG models, though, were already spoken for (and crawling up the mountain). We also knew we'd be required to lock the car into first gear on the climb. So we took another C250 coupe, moving from red to white, still in Sport trim (as with all coupes), but with some Luxury options, notably its burled walnut interior.

The Mt. Washington Auto Road starts like many a mountain park—smooth, narrow, winding and steep. But as we continued, the mountain's reputation for weather kicked in, with conditions becoming foggy to

the point of near-zero visibility. In the thick of this, the road became narrower, turned to dirt and started to feature some extreme dropoffs—and there were a couple of dozen C-Classes on the road, as well as innocent tourists, including one Alabama motorcyclist soaking it all in on a Suzuki V-Strom. The dirt stretch included some really rough beyond-washboard conditions, but the C-Class suspension—as on some of the rougher paved roads, earlier—was superb: smooth, solid, flat in the turns, with great feel for the road surface while delivering total comfort—everything you would want.

Heading back to the Maine coast after a very full day of driving, we found we were in the comfort zone. Looking across the C-Class interior, we had the simultaneous feeling that it is a little bit smaller than the E-Class, which we've been in quite a bit, while at the same time confirming that, all in all, it felt more than ever like the E-Class, which in turn has felt for a couple of years now more and more like the S-Class. The DNA is definitely flowing down the lineup (though not at the expense of models upstream—the mission is to expand the brand overall). The full Mercedes-Benz lineup is in fine shape for your choice based on size, budget, fuel mileage needs and general urges—but not at the expense of style, features or general prestige.

EXPANDED STANDARD INCLUSIONS

When the new E-Class was introduced in late 2009, it brought technical inclusions exceeding an S-Class of just a year or two earlier, but at half the price. The new C-Class continues this evolution, bringing most of the same into its new models, at less than the E-Class's price (or compare to the S to really get the point).

The 2012 C-Class includes thirteen new standard equipment features and five new safety systems. Attention Assist warns drivers when they get drowsy; a HOLD feature for the Adaptive Brake system lets you

remove your foot from the brake pedal at a stop; optional Blind Spot Assist provides lane-to-lane warning on the freeway (when you signal); Lane Keeping Assist alerts you if you drift from your lane (without the turn signal on); the PARKTRONIC system can find right-size parking spaces and guide maneuvers in the instrument panel. Adaptive Highbeam Assist uses video to sense headlights and taillights, gently transitioning between high and low beams to avoid blinding other drivers (and the headlights' range can be varied from 220 up to 1,000 feet. Agility Control provides benefits of both soft and stiff shock absorbers: each twin-tube shock has a hydraulic by-pass piston to dampen normal road noise and vibration, while on rough roads this is bypassed for the steering and handling response of a stiffer shock absorber.

All 2012 C-Class models (except the C63 AMG) feature a new seven-speed automatic with an advanced torque converter lock-up clutch for better fuel mileage, more responsive driving, quieter operation and increased durability. New planetary gears, bearings and internal seals work with the latest low-viscosity ATF transmission fluid (blue instead of red), to create less friction, improving fuel mileage.

The interior has had what Mercedes-Benz calls a "transformation," with its new wheels, soft touch materials, redesigned vents, a new 5.8-inch color display at the top of the console, Bluetooth interface for audio streaming and hands-free phone, an FM phase-diversity twin tuner, HD/AM/weatherband radio, an MP3-compatible CD drive and a USB port in the center console.

GATEWAY? OR A GREAT DESTINATION?

Todd Grieco, C-Class Product Manager, says this car is the "gateway to the brand" (and responsible for major sales volume in the US). The C-Class does make a great first impression, but it's also perfectly suitable as an end-all-be-all. This is a very complete machine.

Pricing for the 2012 C-Class is almost unchanged from 2011, despite the many upgrades it receives. Models that carry over (the C300 4MATIC, C350 sedan and C63 AMG sedan) are only a few hundred dollars higher than last year. Prices range from \$35,675 (including \$875 destination charge) for the new C250 Sport sedan to \$43,245 for the C350 coupe, or all the way to \$62,305 for the C63 AMG coupe.

For perspective, a C350 sedan starts at \$41,450, compared to \$51,365 for an E350 sedan. However, the C250 Sport sedan, at \$35,675, is a full 30 percent less expensive than that lowest E350. The C63 AMG sedan is 33.3 percent less expensive than the E63 AMG sedan (\$59,805 vs \$89,775). There are many reasons for choosing vehicle size, beyond price, so if you have some of those in mind, the C-Class is a big win-win. If you don't have those reasons, but just seek bang for the buck, the C-Class remains a solid win.

Given what you can get in the new Mercedes-Benz C-Class—AMG styling almost across the board, Sport styling and features across the board in the C-Class coupe, and a choice of efficient engines—as well as favorable pricing—while including so many features of its larger siblings and becoming visually hard to distinguish, for the average layman—we find the new Mercedes-Benz C-Class a highly motivating option. ■

C63 AMG BLACK SERIES

If the fact you can get a C-Class coupe or Sport sedan with much of the style and form of the AMG makes you feel slighted as a potential C63 AMG customer, fear not: the same 6.3-liter V8 engine that produces 451 hp in the C63 AMG (or 481 hp with the AMG Development Package) will be boosted to 510 hp in the 2012 Mercedes-Benz C63 AMG Coupe Black Series, making it the most powerful C-Class of all time, capable of doing 0-to-60 mph in under four seconds. The engine is backed by the same high-performance AMG Speedshift MCT-7 transmission driving the rear wheels. The body is low, wide and muscular. It's underpinned by an adjustable AMG coil-over sports suspension and AMG high-performance composite brakes. The C63 AMG Coupe Black Series features outstanding driving dynamics, along with a full complement of excellent active and passive safety equipment. The C63 AMG Coupe Black Series debuted at the Formula 1 German Grand Prix on the Nurburgring in July and will have its US launch during early 2012. Pricing will be announced closer to the launch date. ■

