

MULTIPLE AWARD WINNER COMES IN MANY SHAPES AND SIZES

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E-CLASS REVISITED

Covered at launch in Las Vegas and surrounding mountains and deserts (see July-August issue), we now spend a week with the Mercedes-Benz E350 Coupe in Arizona.

We drove the E-Class when the new model lineup was launched earlier this year, in coupe and sedan form, Luxury and Sport form, and E350 and E550 form. The coupe itself represented both an expansion and a consolidation: the E-Class lineup was expanded to include a coupe, while the alphabet-jammed Mercedes-Benz lineup overall eliminated the CLK coupe.

Mercedes product people told us at launch that “the new E-Class is a milestone, the most important launch of the year; everything we know has been put into this, and it is the most technologically advanced automobile on the planet.” At the time, we called the E-Class a “near-S technological tour de force.” And the story continues, with a steady stream of news that boils down to two impressive areas: the E-Class has [a] garnished its lineup with more models and forms, and [b] garnered one award after another.

AWARDS

Here are a few of the non-stop awards bestowed upon the E-Class just in the past few weeks as we go to press:

- A jury of 400 EuroCarBody Conference delegates and board members voted the E-Class the “EuroCarBody Award 2009,” as the car with the best bodyshell.



- *Diners Club Magazine* said the E-Class has the “best power-to-economy ratio.”
- Readers of *Auto Zeitung* voted E-Class the best saloon in the luxury class.
- The Austrian Automobile Association “2009 Car of the Year” award went to the E-Class, as Austria’s favorite premium car.
- The E-Class (and also the GLK and C-Class) achieved the highest rating of five stars in stringent EuroNCAP safety tests.
- 50,000 *Auto Bild SportsCars* readers voted the E63 AMG “Sports Car of the Year” as best sports saloon. Its 32.3 percent vote beat second place by 11 percent.
- The new E-Class Estate (wagon) was named best business class car in voting by 150 international motoring journalists for Motorinformationsdienst (Motor Vehicle Information Service), from among 80 passenger cars in eight categories.

MODELS

We would encourage you to visit mbusa.com to absorb the full range of offerings, but the fundamental start where they started last spring: there are E350 and E550 models, with two sizes of V6 and V8 engine. There is the sedan, and now there is the coupe (replacing the prior CLK). There are Luxury models, recognizable in traffic by the stand-up tri-star logo atop the hood and a refined many-slat grille, and Sport models, with the two-bar grille and large integrated tri-star of our test car. And now there will be more. Start with the long-anticipated E63 AMG, first on sale (somewhat surprisingly) as a sedan. Watch for an AMG coupe. Upcoming is a model year 2010 E-Class BlueTEC diesel sedan, offering 600 miles

of range on a single fill-up. And for 2011, the awarding-winning E-Class Wagon will arrive on our shores. We’re still watching for a convertible, as well as 4MATIC all-wheel-drive versions of the sedan and wagon, as well as perhaps the coupe.

E350 pricing starts at just over \$48,000 (the coupe is a little lower than the sedan). The E550 rings in at \$55-56,000, and the E63 AMG jumps to just under \$86,000. Our E350 Coupe test vehicle had a base price of \$48,050 but stickered at \$54,245, including destination charge of \$875, but most of it in the \$3950 Premium Package including voice-activated navigation and satellite audio plus rearview camera in the dash, as well as heated seats and rear power window shade.

Our bottom line is that this is as solid a mainstream car as you could find, straightforward for use as a daily driver, yet brimming with technology. The trophy presenters have also found plenty to like. ■

E350C LOGBOOK NOTES

- We feel at home in it the second we get in. We note that it looks keyless, but it’s not—the key is just a little stub, but you still have to push a button to open the door, and you still have to stick it in the dash and turn it to start the car.
- We remind ourselves of the safety technology that’s packed into this car, including: Adaptive Highbeam Assist, Night View Assist Plus, Distronic Plus with Pre-Safe Brake, Lane Keeping Assist, 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. For more information, see the writeup in our July-August issue, or visit www.mbusa.com.
- We reach for the turn signal and get the cruise control instead, almost every time. We’ve checked with other test drivers and owners, and it seems if you have hands at 10-2, or if you have your elbow on the open window base, and/or if you’re tall, the arc of your hand reaches both equally, but will reach cruise first. If you have hands at 8-4, or your elbow on the armrest, and/or are “fun-size,” you will reach the turn signal as intended. This is a layout shared with other M-B models we’ve driven, and we think it needs a rework. There are potential risks of setting cruise without intending to, or at a minimum not signaling when you do intend to.
- The analog clock is a classy touch.
- The door handle seems either too tight or too light, either way not the feel we’d like.
- Drive-by-wire can produce a different feel even in simple maneuvers like a freeway lane change, which were a bit abrupt.
- We love a firm ride in a driver-oriented car but noted this was harsher than expected. This coupe ran Continentals on 17” wheels.
- We had a cold snap at the time, and we appreciated the one-button-takes-you-to-max switch for the seat heaters, an approach taken by BMW for some time, not by Audi, but starting to catch on. When you know you need ‘em, start at the top.
- Backup camera implementations vary quite a bit, with different indicators, and with varying image quality. This unit was generally fine, but we could only use it if we had the audio on. (On the plus side, we suppose this makes it harder for a teen to slip out with mom and pop’s E-Class at 3am.) We could turn the audio down, but sonofagun if the audio doesn’t start creeping back up, bit by bit. We never did find a way to solve this.
- The logbook shows a paradoxical entry indicating that as we started to get the fundamentals down on the music/nav/backup interface, enough to make it intuitive, that’s when we really gave up on mastering it.