

# Best understood in context BY JOE SAGE

When we drove the first subcompact executive size CLA four-door coupe at launch in 2013, one of their primary goals had been to bring it to market starting under \$30,000. And they did, with the base trim coming in at \$29,900 (just 41.1 percent the cost of their original four-door coupe, the Mercedes-Benz CLS). By 2020, the starting price had risen to \$36,650. As just \$100 would surpass that \$30k benchmark, anyway, that's not surprising. But more importantly, the car was a success and had by then firmly established itself. More importantly, a simple inflation calculation reveals that \$29,900 in 2013 dollars was equal to \$33,218 in 2020 dollars, anyway.

Today, the lineup starts at \$44,400—again not that far off the original benchmark, as the original

\$29,900 price would be \$40,324 in today's dollars.

You may notice that this base model has a four-cylinder engine. But in addition to it being a healthy mild-hybrid turbo, the entire CLA lineup now comprises four-cylinders, right up to a 416-hp handcrafted AMG 2.0-liter twin-scroll turbo-four in the top AMG version at \$81,195, good for zero-to-60 in just four seconds (see lineup in sidebar).

What carries through the years is its size. The best place to get a handle on Mercedes model-by-size nomenclature is the current SUV lineup, from full-size GLS, down through executive class (mid-size) GLE, to compact GLC, then a between-C-and-A-sized GLB, and finally the subcompact GLA.

The long-running S-E-C-A sedan family is less clear. It currently has no A Class; coupes and cabri-

olets are evolving to fall between—or combine—classes; and the four-door coupes are maybe trickiest of all to pigeonhole by category.

All this came to mind during our week with the CLA, which felt small to us. If you are tall, as we are, it will likely come to mind for you, too. The first impulse was to think, well, CLS is pricey, but going to CLE could work. But CLS was discontinued last year, and there has, perhaps surprisingly, never been a CLE four-door coupe. There is now only CLA.

It gets more complex because the three-digit (CLx) name has been migrating from its long-running use for four-door coupes, to now being applied to two-door coupe-cabriolet siblings. Such is the case with a new CLE, just coming to market.

Some small vehicles prove to be quite spacious once settled inside. Headroom and legroom in the CLA are not unusual, but the cabin did feel perhaps narrower than some subcompacts, and seat

adjustment (again, for a taller person) was an ongoing project. We imagine most anyone can get their seat just right over a bit more time, and cabin size will become familiar, maybe even convenient. But ingress and egress remained increasingly tight and frustrating, the more time went by.

Some things, of course, come in different sizes based on how much you need, or can afford—houses, for example. Others comes in sizes specifically based on your own physical size—pants or shirts, say. Vehicles come in different sizes for a variety of reasons. In most cases, it's the how-much-you-need formula. But in others, your own size may be just as important. It's something that can be overlooked—or rationalized—in, say, a little sports roadster. Less so in a sedan equivalent.

As for the car itself, power and handling were fine from our first go, as was the transmission—even with modest numbers, plenty more seemed to always be on tap (its industry-influencing mild hybrid assist component surely a factor).

The ride can be quite firm, picking up every detail even on a smooth road with few visible de-

tails. Switching between comfort and dynamic gave essentially the same experience. The firm ride was not harsh, however—with normal speed and attitude adjustment, we breezed right over benchmark familiar large rain troughs on our test routes.

Fundamentally, the CLA's existence can be seen two ways. As an A-size alternative to the CLS, it is downsized. Or as a four-door coupe alternative to an A Class sedan, it's more stylized.

With one of the most complex lineups in the business, Mercedes can't build every possibility. But if you are still wishing for a four-door coupe in a larger size, there are also an AMG GT 4-Door Coupe (at about \$100k) or two somewhat similarly styled EQ EV sedans, the EQE or EQS (\$75k, \$105k). You could seek a prior-year CLS still in inventory, some \$30-35,000 higher than CLA, or perhaps at a premium. Or you're shopping used.

Taller people do know how to adapt. Or pass. Try the CLA on for size. If it fits, you're all set. If not, the Mercedes-Benz gasoline lineup still has the regular sedan family or the new CLE two-door coupe (or cabriolet) at hand. ■



## SPECIFICATIONS

ASSEMBLY	.....Kecskemet, Hungary
ENGINE/TRANS BUILD	.....Germany / Germany
PARTS CONTENT	.....Germany 25% / Hungary 10% / US-Canada 0%
ENGINE	.....2.0L inline-4 turbo, mild hybrid drive, diecast alloy block/head
HP/TORQUE	.....221 hp / 258 lb-ft
COMPRESSION RATIO	.....10.5:1
TRANSMISSION	.....8G-DCT 8-spd auto
DRIVETRAIN	.....4MATIC AWD
0-TO-60 MPH	.....6.3 sec
SUSPENSION	.....4-whl indep: F: MacPherson strut/wishbone; R: multi-link
STEERING	.....rack & pinion w/ electromechanical power-assist
BRAKES	.....na
WHEELS	.....18x7.5J multispoke
TIRES	.....225/45R18, a/s run-flats
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	.....184.6 / 107.4 in
GROUND CLEARANCE	.....na
TURNING CIRCLE	.....36.1 ft
HEADRM (F/R)	.....38.5 / 35.7 in
LEGROOM (F/R)	.....41.8 / 33.9 in
CARGO CAPACITY	.....11.6 cu.ft
WEIGHT	.....3616 lb
FUEL / CAPACITY	.....prem unl / 13.5 gal
MPG	.....25/35/28 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE	.....\$45,200
PAINT: MANUFAKTUR Patagonia Red	.....1750
Metallic	.....1450
GREY/BLACK LEATHER	.....4000
PREMIUM PLUS PKG	.....3150
AMG NIGHT PKG: AMG body styling, AMG diamond-block grille, high-gloss black elements (grille trim, mirrors, window trim)	.....620
AUDIO: Burmester surround sound	.....250
WINTER PKG: washer system	.....899
WHEELS: 19-in AMG multi-spoke black	.....300
TRAFFIC SIGN ASSIST	.....500
HEATED FRONT SEATS	.....1700
DRIVER ASSIST PKG: active brake assist, cross-traffic function, active distance DISTRONIC, active steering, active blind spot, active lane keeping, active lane change, active speed limit, active emergency stop, evasive steering, PRE-SAFE PLUS, route-based speed adaptation, extended restart in stop-and-go traffic	.....1150
DESTINATION CHARGE	.....\$61,370
TOTAL	.....\$61,370

## 2024 MERCEDES CLA LINEUP

MERCEDES-BENZ	.....FWD	.....AWD
CLA 250 Coupe	.....44,400	
CLA 250 Coupe 4MATIC	.....▼ 46,400	
2.0L inline-4 turbo mild hybrid: 221 hp, 258 lb-ft, 0-60 6.3 sec		
MERCEDES-AMG	.....AWD	
AMG CLA 35 Coupe 4MATIC	.....56,100	
AMG-enhanced 2.0L inl-4 turbo w hybrid assist: 302 hp, 295 lb-ft, 0-60 4.8 sec		
AMG CLA 45 S Coupe 4MATIC+	.....65,400	
AMG CLA 45 S Edition 1 4MATIC+	.....81,195	
Handcrafted AMG 2.0L inline-4 twin-scroll turbo: 416 hp, 369 lb-ft, 0-60 4.0 sec		