

Mercedes rewards C300 drivers with manual transmission

by Mark_Maynard

I have never driven a Mercedes-Benz as aggressively as I have the new C300 Sport. And I've never enjoyed a Mercedes more.

For the first time in a long time, Mercedes has put a manual transmission in its entry-level C-class, or any sedan.

MERCEDES-BENZ C300 - A manual transmission in an entry-level Mercedes-Benz C300 is one way to make the car less expensive, but it also makes it more fun to drive. CNS Photo courtesy of Mercedes-Benz. The C-class is new this year with Sport and Luxury models. The midsize sedan is sold in three trim levels with two V-6 engines, a six-speed manual or seven-speed automatic transmission, and rear-wheel or all-wheel drive.

The C63 AMG will debut this spring with a 451-horsepower, 6.3-liter V-8.

The manual transmission may be a price-point gimmick, but it also throws down the driver's glove to challenge BMW and Audi. Mercedes-Benz can build a driver's car, too.

The C300 has a starting price of \$31,975, which includes a 228-horsepower, 3.0-liter V-6 with standard manual transmission or optional seven-speed Touch Shift automatic, which is the only choice for the Luxury model.

The C350 Sport (\$37,275) has a 268-hp, 3.5-liter V-6 and seven-speed Touch Shift automatic transmission.

Sure, a 451-hp, V-8 Mercedes makes a statement, but for less than half the price, I liked the simple driver involvement of the C300 with the six-speed. And it was a risk for Mercedes to offer a manual.

If it fell short of the manual BMW 3-series, the race would be over before it started as far as critics were concerned. But Mercedes got it right.

I wasn't expecting much but found myself cranking up the music and pushing hard on the throttle. The shift points match seamlessly. The engine torque and gear ratios have plenty of range to lug along in traffic then move right back up to speed without choking. It's possible to get by with minimal shifting in traffic.

And there are no worries when starting out on an incline. The electronic hill-start assist holds the car for a couple of seconds as the driver lifts from the brake to the accelerator.

The steering mimics the BMW rack-and-pinion system, but steering force feels lighter at all speeds.

The engine begins to sound interested at 4,500 rpm. Then lift off for the next turn, heel-toe shift with a big push on the accelerator for the gear change, and let it wing through the turn.

Fuel economy isn't bad, either, at 18/26 mpg manual, 18/25 automatic or 17/25 for the C350, all using 91 octane.

The new C-class is 3.9 inches longer and 1.7 inches wider. The wheelbase, 108.7 inches, is 1.8 inches longer for a smoother ride.

The Lexus IS 250 with a 107.5-inch wheelbase can be jumpy and jiggly on some sections of concrete expressway highway. On those same stretches of highway in the C300, the ride was smooth.

Noting the differences between the Sport and Luxury models isn't difficult. The Sport gets the larger three-pointed star in the front grille, not a hood ornament.

The exterior styling is still somewhat formal to punch up a Sport image, but aerodynamic AMG body panels help at the front, rear and under-door rocker panels. Twin-spoke, 17-inch wheels are staggered width front to rear. Sport shock absorbers, springs and stabilizer bars add firmness, not harshness, and lower the ride height by a half-inch.

Inside, there is a three-spoke wheel instead of four. Trim accents are aluminum, with Birdseye maple reserved for the Luxury model.

Standard equipment in either model includes a power sunroof, eight-way power front seats with lumbar support, two-zone automatic climate control, 17-inch wheels, Bluetooth connectivity, a central controller and LCD display screen.

Driver controls are ergonomic, and the car is comfortable to rest an elbow out the window without painful wind buffeting in the cabin. And this is one of the few cars that can be driven at interstate speeds with the sunroof wide open without turbulence.

But there were a few annoyances. The black leatherette on the door side armrest and center console is coarse and rubbed at my elbows, leaving scuff marks. The piercing, nuclear-alert tone of the seat-belt minder is too

much. Driver foot room could be increased by getting rid of the foot brake for an electronic brake, actuated from the center console. And back-seat space is not as luxurious or functional as in the new Honda Accord EX.

But much will be forgiven because this car makes driving fun. The Sport has a pulse that isn't felt in Mercedes' ultra-expensive, ultra-fast AMG cars. SPECS

2008 Mercedes-Benz C300

Body style: four-door, five-passenger sedan; steel unibody with aluminum front fenders, doors, hood and trunk lid

Engine: aluminum 3.0-liter DOHC, 24-valve V-6

Horsepower: 228 at 6,000 rpm

Torque: 221 foot-pounds at 2,700 to 5,000 rpm

Transmission: six-speed, short-throw manual

EPA fuel economy estimates: 18 mpg city, 26 highway; 91 octane recommended

DIMENSIONS

Trunk space: 12.4 cubic feet

Front head/leg/shoulder room: 37.1/41.7/54.7 inches

Length/wheelbase: 182.3/108.7 inches

Curb weight: 3,527 pounds

FEATURES

Standard equipment includes: remote locking, power sunroof, dual-zone climate control with dust filter, eight-way power front seats with lumbar support, eight-speaker single disc CD/MP3 audio system with weatherband radio, Bluetooth phone service, central controller with 5-inch display screen, leather-wrapped multifunction steering wheel, cruise control, power windows and mirrors

Sport package: AMG-designed lower-body moldings, Mercedes-Benz star in grille, 17-inch staggered-width alloy wheels with all-season tires, sport suspension and braking, sport interior, aluminum trim

Safety features include: dual-stage front air bags, seat-mounted side bags, head-protection curtains, four-wheel anti-lock brakes with brake assist, electronic stability and anti-slip regulation, tilt-telescopic steering wheel

PRICING

Base: \$31,975, including \$775 freight charge; price as tested, \$34,410

Options on test car: Palladium silver paint, \$710; iPod integration kit, \$375; Premium 1 package, \$1,400, includes Sirius satellite radio, heated front seats, garage door opener, rain-sensing wipers, autodimming and power-folding mirrors; multimedia package, \$2,950, includes 7-inch power retractable color display, COMAND hard-drive based navigation system, six-disc CD/DVD changer, harman/kardon Logic 7 multichannel surround-sound audio, voice control

PLUSES: Spirited, entry-level sport sedan.

MINUSES: Charging \$375 for an iPod integration kit. Back seat space appears cheap.

Mercedes rewards C300 drivers with manual transmission by Mark_Maynard