

Mercedes E-Class solid, quick, nimble - and pricey

by Mark Maynard

The Mercedes-Benz E-Class is one of those cars that continues to get better with evolution and age -- the age of the driver and the evolutionary improvements of the car.

This is Mercedes' golden goose, with monthly sales pushing 5,000 cars. The sleek body style debuted in 1996 and was redesigned for 2003. It gets a few tweaks for 2007, including a revised grille treatment and more features.

The midsize E-Class is sold in sedan and wagon, rear or all-wheel drive and in four levels of performance.

MERCEDES E350 - The interior of the nimble and accommodating 2007 Mercedes E350 has been retooled to make long commutes more comfortable. CNS Photo courtesy of DaimlerChrysler. The base 268-horsepower E350 V-6 runs about \$58,000 with a few desirable options. The new E320 BlueTec diesel starts at \$52,325 and the high-performance AMG E63 with 507 hp V-8 starts at \$85,375 and easily hits \$90,000 with extras.

Perhaps it's my baby-boomer age creeping up, but I rather like the fitness and economy of the V-6. Roll on the power and the engine gives a satisfying roar and sharp response. The seven-speed automatic transmission makes fluid changes among the gears to extract the most economy and performance.

The styling is attractive but not demonstrative. The 18-inch wheels, lowered suspension and dual exhaust tips of the optional Sport package are a sip from the fountain of youth.

Interior design is contemporary and functional, not superficial. It's a place where kids could scuff and I wouldn't cringe.

It used to be that these German cars were built with hard seats and heavy steering for control at autobahn speeds. But that strictness has been modified for an American duty cycle of long commutes -- with softer but supportive seats -- and steering force that allows two-finger tooling and maneuverability in high-density parking garages.

A full suite of safety features includes the Pre-Safe anticipatory safety system, which was added for '07 from the top-line S-Class.

Pre-Safe is activated in the event of imminent crash. Seat belts are cinched, seat backs are moved to the upright position and the sunroof and windows are closed. Then anti-lock brakes, Brake Assist, traction control and Electronic Stability Program are energized for immediate action.

The E350 was a nimble and accommodating escort on a recent drive from San Diego to the Los Angeles auto show and around the city for various news conferences. It was a drive of more than 300 miles. Fuel mileage was a bit more than the EPA-certified 26 miles per gallon on the highway. I left San Diego with not quite a full tank and returned with just more than a quarter-tank.

The navigation system is simple to program and, unlike some systems, I was able to make changes while the vehicle is in motion. Most American marques don't allow nav-system input when the vehicle is moving.

And at long last, the electronic driver assists have been refined to allow performance without scolding the user. In previous generations, the electronic networking of traction control, stability system and anti-lock brakes would engage with heavy-handed intervention to keep the car on the straight and narrow, thwarting all efforts for athletic driving even when appropriate.

I've reached an age that my ideal vehicle centers on how I see the world through the windshield -- not how the world sees me. I judge a car by how I fit behind the wheel and how I enjoy the driving experience. Styling can be overlooked if performance and personal preferences are all satisfied.

And such preferences can be achieved for less money than a Mercedes E-Class. The Hyundai Azera, for example, has as much interior room, a commanding set of safety features and costs half as much.

But there is something about a car that is built to be driven 150 mph on an autobahn -- and when the wipers are switched on, they don't blow off the car. This car exudes that type of engineering.

Sixty thousand is a lot to pay for a car, but the E350 could be the last car you'd want to buy.

Copley News Service SPECS

2007 Mercedes-Benz E350

Body style: Midsize, five-passenger, rear-wheel-drive sedan

Engine: Aluminum, 268-horsepower, 3.5-liter, 24-valve V-6 with 258 foot-pounds of torque

Transmission: driver-adaptive seven-speed automatic with SportShift

Acceleration: 0 to 60 mph, 6.5 seconds

EPA fuel economy estimates: 19 mpg city, 26 highway; 91 octane recommended

Fuel capacity: 21.1 gallons

Trunk space: 15.9 cubic feet

Curb weight: 3,740 pounds

FEATURES

Standard equipment includes: dual-zone automatic air conditioning, 10-way power-adjustable front seats with three-position memory, multifunction steering with tilt and telescopic adjustment, cruise control, Harman/Kardon Logic7 digital surround audio system with six-disc CD, power tilt-sliding sunroof, power windows-locks-mirrors, auto-dimming rearview mirror and driver side mirror

New for 2007:

- New front bumper, lower air dam, grille, headlights and taillights
- Standard equipment adds sunroof, six-disc CD changer and Harman/Kardon sound system
- E550 (382 horsepower) replaces the 302-hp E500
- High-performance, 507-hp, E63 AMG replaces the 469-hp E55 AMG
- E320 BlueTec diesel (208 hp) replaces 201-hp E320 CDI diesel

PRICING

Base: \$51,325, including \$775 freight charge; price as tested, \$57,885

Options on test car: Iridium Silver paint, \$700; black-cognac two-tone leather upholstery, \$1,540; Premium II package, \$4,290, includes DVD navigation, Sirius satellite radio, heated front seats, power rear window sunshade, hands-free phone system, Keyless Go, bi-xenon headlights with active curve illumination, headlight washers; Sport package (included with Premium II package), includes 18-inch twin-spoke alloy wheels, sport rear bumper with dual exhaust tips, lowered suspension, black bird's-eye maple wood trim, matte chrome surrounding white-gauged instrument cluster

PLUSES: Power, finesse, comfort and presence in a \$60,000 car you may never have to replace. Compact turning circle of 37.4 feet.

MINUSES: Auto-dimming driver-side mirror is too dark; optional iPod integration kit adds \$425

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