



Mercedes-Benz Concept A-Class

Revealed before the show at new Mercedes-Benz Manhattan

Nobody drives in Manhattan. Everybody knows that. But it's not really true. Or, if it is, they still buy and service cars there, to park at notoriously great expense for their forays into the hinterlands. Mercedes-Benz tells us some 27,000 customers buy and service vehicles in Manhattan. Thus it should be no surprise that their dealership there—the only company-owned US store—is one of the largest. And it's now becoming larger (and more convenient), as Mercedes-Benz Manhattan moves into its new 330,000-square-foot digs at 770 11th Avenue between 53rd and 54th Streets.

What better place to kick off the 2011 New York International Auto Show, and what better way than with a slick new concept that's certain to find its way to dealers' floors sooner than later.

Meet the Mercedes-Benz Concept A-Class. This name has been used before, for a small van-like vehicle that somewhat resembles an extended Smart car (and uses the same kind of engine-in-a-sandwich floor construction). In fact, as those have been sold in Mexico (as well as in Europe and other places around the globe), they have been a novel but not uncommon sight on the roads of Arizona. Forget all that. There is now a global (but not available here) B-Class, which carries the format and front-wheel drivetrain of the old A-Class into the future, in a slightly larger size that's evocative of the big 7-seater R-Class.

The new A-Class aims at a different spot, or at least aims to make that spot appealing to the US buyer. Though slightly echoing the hatchback shape of the little A-Class MPV, and maintaining

front-wheel drive in concept form, the Concept A-Class revealed to us in New York is lower to the ground and decidedly more carlike. It's also more elegant. As interest in smaller and more fuel-efficient cars grows, savvy manufacturers are working hard to deliver something that will appeal to a premium market buyer (and that can deliver profits). The midsize Mercedes-Benz E-Class has had a style and feature renaissance over the past two years, and the C-Class has caught up with it just this year. The whole lineup now appeals in style and grace, as well as offering a broad range of function—and price.

The Concept A-Class is more than a sheetmetal study. Under the hood is a 210-horsepower turbocharged four-cylinder gasoline engine (a 2-liter version from the new M270 series) with a dual-clutch 7-speed transmission. The transmission, a three-shaft setup, shifts automatically and smoothly, promising a sporty, comfortable and economic ride. The Concept A-Class carries cutting edge electronics from cars higher in the lineup, such as a radar-based collision warning system with adaptive brake assist. The concept also includes a high level of smartphone integration. Park your phone in the car and all functions are synchronized with the COMAND interface, including audio plus email and social networks.

Impossible to miss at the reveal was the grille, with a striking deep-dish radiating pattern. This is reflected in the high-performance full-LED headlights and fiber-optic DRLs. We look forward to this one coming to market. ■



Small is big

Amid big ticket vehicles with big horsepower were these gems delivering much in small packages

LEMAY—AMERICA'S CAR MUSEUM

Our first stop was the Lower Level of Javits Center, where the LeMay Museum had taken over 22,000 square feet for "the smallest display" at the show: Le Petit Concours, a collection of mini- and micro-cars owned by enthusiasts and club members in the greater New York area. This stunning collection from the past set the stage for noticing some of the cooler small cars on the main show floor.

HYUNDAI VELOSTER

We came back to look at this more than once. It's a knockout. This three-door coupe from Hyundai debuted at the Detroit show in January and is coming to market as a 2012 model. Spy photos have revealed a turbo version. The driver has a wide door, while the passenger side has doors front and rear. Loaded with entertainment and other electronic features, the Veloster is powered by a new 1.6-liter direct-injected four-cylinder engine mated to the company's first EcoShift™ dual-clutch transmission.

TOYOTA PRIUS C

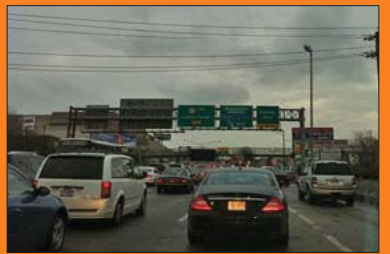
You've probably heard that Toyota has declared the plural of Prius will be the Latin, "Prii" (pre-eye), based on results of almost 2 million votes from customers and fans. The company is developing an expanded lineup of four models, with the Prius v joining the classic Prius and its Hybrid version next. At the show we had our eye on this Prius c concept, a sporty, low-slung hatchback. This is the smallest of the group, an urban car aimed at eco-sensitive young singles and couples who want a fun-to-drive Prius. The name may or may not change, but it should come to market in 2012 promising the highest MPG of any non-plug-in hybrid.

DISCOBALL SMART CAR

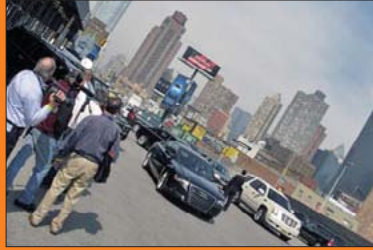
We heard someone say the Discoball Smart Car was evidence that smart had nothing else new to show. But we dug it. The car belongs to Apparattjik, a Euro electro band who perform in giant transparent cubes, in costumes made of mirrors. Fragile as that sounds and this car looks, they call their style "combat-disco." The Discoball is an electric drive smart fortwo with thousands of mirrors hand-glued to the exterior. It took seven craftsmen three days to build, just in time to open a Berlin exhibition honoring famed German architect Mies van der Rohe.

KEEP RIGHT >>

NYIAS TRAVEL NOTES



We flew to Newark, took the monorail to our car and drove 14 miles to the river in over two rainy hours. E-ZPass did not work. The Weehawken ferry is familiar from the Capt. Sullenberger river story. Other days, NJ Transit took us through the Meadowlands from the 'burbs, to Amtrak in to Penn Station. Lodging was in NY state just across the line from the NJ headquarters of BMW, Mercedes, Rolls-Royce, Volvo and others.



SCION iQ

You already thought Scion built small cars? Well, get a look at this. The iQ “premium micro-subcompact” is just 120.1 inches long, but seats four and has very compelling design and features. It actually seats what they call “3+1,” with an adult seat behind the front passenger and room for a child (or package or pet) behind the driver. Its 1.3-liter 90+-hp four-cylinder is mated to a CVT. Safety technologies abound, from electronically distributed ABS to vehicle stability and traction controls. Ten airbags include the world’s first rear window curtain airbag. Rated an Ultra Low Emission Vehicle (ULEV-II), the Scion iQ aims for MPG in the high 30s. Six-speaker audio rocks your little world.



VOLKSWAGEN BEETLE, BULLI CONCEPT

It’s hard to say which generated more interest: the new VW Beetle, which is going straight to production, or the Bulli microbus, for now just a concept. The Beetle is subject to more scrutiny, as people debate whether it’s true to the spirit of the original car (most seem to think it does a better job than the preceding New Beetle) and whether it has more appeal to male buyers, with its lower, wider stance. The Bulli concept (Bulli being the name for the VW Bus in Germany) pulls forward more spirit of the original microbus than prior concepts, and its electric drivetrain might arrive at the right time, if it were to be built.



LOTUS EVORA S AND EVORA IPS

Lotus Advisory Council Member and legendary car guy Bob Lutz opened the press conference for Lotus, showing off the new Evora S and the Evora IPS (which stands for Intelligent Precision Shift). The Evora S has the same 3.5-liter V6 engine as the standard Evora, but is supercharged, producing 345 horsepower and hitting 0-to-60 in 4.6 seconds. The Evora IPS adds an automatic transmission, with the option of manual paddle shifting or fully automatic modes.



MINI COUNTRYMAN

There was no ice on the streets of New York, and there’s likely none in your driveway, but the MINI Cooper S Countryman ALL4 is ready, should the need arise, as demonstrated at the show by its impressive wall-clinging grip. This version brings a combination of performance, capacity and four-wheel-drive grip to the lineup, all in one model. The subtext here is that MINI displayed four Countryman versions with KISS-inspired designs at the show, which band members introduced and autographed. The four (cars) were then put up for auction on eBay, with proceeds benefiting UNICEF to help children in Japan and emergencies around the globe. If you’re a big KISS fan, you can immediately recognize which car is which. Yes? ■

