



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 2001 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 vanlike 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-topic DRLs. We look forward to this one coming to market. ■