

Open-air cocoon

E-Class blows its top...
and Mercedes-Benz
hopes you hardly notice

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When we wrote about the stunning restyling and extensive reengineering of the Mercedes-Benz E-Class at its sedan and coupe launch in 2009 (see July/August 2009 *Arizona Driver*), we compared it to the quiet middle sister who was suddenly all grown up.

There are two ways to look at E-Class evolution, partly consolidation and partly expansion. Mercedes-Benz has long had a wide and deep array of models, but they had developed an increasingly complex alphabet soup to identify them all. C-Class, E-Class, S-Class—that breakdown is

simple enough to comprehend (officially, these are compact, executive and luxury classes.) But CLK, CLS and others required a broader familiarity with the whole lineup, including history, evolution and cross-pollination. This has been begging for simplification. And with a pecking-order-conscious customer base, why risk identifying a model with a lower stratum (e.g. having a midmarket CLK start with “C”)?

At the same time, Mercedes-Benz has been giving the E-Class a lot of attention, in its own right and in terms of its position in the lineup. The result last year was the integration of the former CLK coupe into the E-Class group as an E-Class Coupe, complementing the all-new E-Class Sedan, both of which were introduced last year in both 350 and 550 configurations, followed by AMG models.

This year, the twain meet again, as the CLK Cabriolet is now replaced by the new

E-Class Cabriolet. At the heart of the newly developed E-Class Cabriolet is the E-Class Coupe, which itself is more C-derived than E-derived, with the 108.7-inch wheelbase of the C-Class and a track that almost matches it (within a couple of tenths of an inch, about 2” narrower than the E-Class Sedan). The Cabriolet matches the Coupe in basic model lineup: an E350 with a 24-valve V6 generating 268 hp, and an E550 with a 32-valve V8 generating 382 hp. All feature 7-speed automatics with Touch Shift manual shift control, ESP stability control, advanced suspension front and rear, and speed-sensitive rack-and-pinion power steering. They carry the same dual-circuit four-wheel power brakes with ABS and emergency-sensing Brake Assist, though the Cabriolet is a little heavier thus a touch less quick: 0-to-60 times are 6.2 seconds for the E350 Coupe but 6.7 for the E350

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TENN-NC TRAVEL NOTES

With hubs in both Phoenix and Charlotte, US Airways has taken us to North Carolina quite a few times. Sort of. The Mercedes-Benz E-Class Cabriolet launch represented our first actual boots on the ground there. And no Charlotte airport this trip: we flew via Houston eastbound to Knoxville TN (and headed to Detroit after this event).

Siting a vehicle launch is pretty challenging, when you think about it. The manufacturer needs a locale with an inspired, carefully researched and mapped course, with decent travel access for media people



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from all points, they need to transport significant numbers of vehicles in and out, and they have to pin down lodging and a bite to eat. The Mercedes team pulled it all off, and the lodging and bite to eat were superb.

On 4200 acres near Walland, Tennessee (in turn 18 miles outside Knoxville), Blackberry Farm comprises just 62 units (31 primo duplex cabins) and lots and lots of open space. There are ponds, woods, tennis, and a working farm from which they derive salads, fruits, vegetables, lamb's milk yogurt, and, well, lamb. The farmhouses, restaurants and barns combine modern furnishings with classic country charm. This is a family operation and labor of love; and it doesn't hurt that wine is a particular area of their interest: there are 180,000 bot-



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tles of wine on premises (or about 3000 bottles per unit). We were told some of our dinner offerings were \$600 bottles.

The road course included challenging top-flight two-lanes, wide-open interstates, cultural highlights (don't miss the casinos and pancake houses of Dollywood's strip), phenomenal Smoky Mountain scenery, lunch at Cucina 24 in lively Asheville NC—and ideal elevation, temperature and speed variations for this vehicle's attributes.

For more information, call 800-648-4252 or visit www.blackberryfarm.com.



Blackberry Farm, near Walland TN, was home base for the E-Class Cabriolet launch. The windshield-topping AIRCAP, rear seat wind block, and AIRSCARF, which feeds a warm breeze to the front occupants' head and neck, are all easily operated from the instrument panel, as are the four windows.



Cabriolet, and 5.0 for the E550 Coupe with a darn close 5.1 for the E550 Cabriolet. (The Cabriolet adds 265 pounds to the vehicle's weight, and the V8 weighs in 100 pounds above the V6. The E550 Cabriolet tops out at 4048 pounds.)

The E-Class Cabriolet has a number of special features that bring a higher-than-ever degree of closed-top comfort to an open car. These include the AIRCAP, new with the introduction of the E-Class Cabriolet, and the AIRSCARF, which we were first exposed to at the launch of the newest SL, two years ago. The AIRCAP controls airflow over the windshield and passenger compartment, and the AIRSCARF provides warming flow around the headrest. We arrived in Tennessee a day after torrential rains (which had given quite a different top-down experience to a previous media group). Our weather was sunny but just a little bit chilly in the morning at higher altitudes: perfect demo weather for this car.

The test route Mercedes-Benz laid out for this launch was ideal for the mission: we started on the Tennessee side and headed through Great Smoky Mountains National Park, achieving a 5048-foot elevation at Newfound Gap on the Tennessee-North Carolina state line. Spring was in the air, and the change from leafy green to not-quite-budding trees as we climbed reflected the change in temperatures. Winding mountain roads were perfect for experiencing the sporting nature of the cars, and the temperature variance was perfect for testing the interior cocoon features.

We drove the V8-powered (and highly

featured) E550 Cabriolet from Tennessee through the Smokies to Asheville NC, then the V6 E350 back to Tennessee, mostly at lower elevations, with some four-lane highways, but still with plenty of enthusiast twists and turns along mountain creeks. As we'd learned last year—driving the E-Class Sedan and E-Class Coupe up into the mountains outside Las Vegas to Spring Mountain Motorsports Ranch—these trim and powerful sport-oriented cars are tops in handling and performance.

The AIRCAP is a clever feature, tackling head-on an issue common to any open car, but which has never been tackled so head-on before. The benefits are especially suited to a four-seater convertible: if you've ever been a rear-seat passenger in an open-top car, you'll know it usually borders on punishment. With the AIRCAP deflectors (and the side windows) raised, the difference in airflow is pronounced, benefitting front-seat driver and passenger quite a bit, but back-seat passengers profoundly.

When there's a chill in the air, the AIRSCARF will spoil you for all time. This generates a warm flow of air from the base of the headrest, around your neck, hardly noticeable in terms of blow and flow but profoundly noticeable in comfort. Heated seats add their usual benefits, too, of course. These features can extend convertible season considerably.

That settles things for cooler times of year, which may be easy for forget about as you read this in Arizona in midsum-

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Mercedes-Benz E-Class Cabriolets in both E350 and E550 trim are ready to drop their tops. Green mountain highways and Dolly Parton ruled the day on our superlative test route. When the AIRCAP is deployed, the AIRSCARF is on and the windows are up, convertible comfort reaches a new high.



mer, but what about the hot months? Does the cocoonlike effect, with windows up and AIRCAP deployed, help provide an air-conditioned open cabin with the top down? Do the AIRSCARF and active-ventilated seats cool as well as heat?

We drove from Asheville back to Tennessee in the E350, ready to test out the chill factor. Unfortunately, our E350 was not optioned at the same level as the E550 had been, with among other things no cooled seats. (The seats were also lacking the solid bolstering we'd had in the E550.) So we inquired with one of the Mercedes-Benz engineers on hand.

"Using the active ventilated cooling in the seats, you are pulling cooler air from the bottom of the seat, which actually maintains a really nice, very comfortable level and keeps you dry in the seat," he said. So there's airflow, and if there were indeed cool air down there, that would help. But in an Arizona summer? "We don't use a cold function," he continued, "because it really can be detrimental to your back. You can actually cause overall muscle fatigue by cooling muscle down, so it's something that we're very careful about. Just using a ventilated seat makes a lot more sense, to keep you dry on a really hot day. Think of those days when your shirt's always sticking to the seat and your back is wet; this is something that keeps that from happening. It's really comfortable." Even when it's 117°, we asked. "Even when it's 117," he replied, though his answer faded into a laugh. Apparently there is still no miracle cure for convertible use in a maximum Sonoran

summer. But overall, even here, comfort and usable season are increased.

Some may wonder why Mercedes-Benz didn't opt for a retractable hardtop, especially in light of the other open-top mitigations in the E-Class Cabriolet. Hard tops (and their mechanisms) can add weight, though the E-Class can handle it (with fuel economy also in play). And they add complexity, although Mercedes engineers laugh in the face of such a challenge. (The E-Class is already a technological tour de force that at this stage may even exceed the S-Class.) A retractable hard top also gobbles up considerable trunk space, and that is nearly impossible to mitigate (though the E-Class Cabriolet's trunk loses a fair amount of space to the top, anyway, since it withdraws fully under a flush hard panel). In short, a nice, watertight, sound-proofed soft top wins the day, not only mitigating all of the above, but also remaining consistent with the rest of the lineup—short of the SL and SLK, which have had retractable hard tops for years.

As for driving both the E350 and E550, we had much the same opinions as our co-driver. We were of course spoiled by driving the E550 first. And it was a little unfair that the E350 wasn't as highly optioned. Both of us, for example, struggled for the first 25-30 miles to get our seats really comfortably adjusted in the E350. However, either set of seats can be had in either model, so that's a separate comparison. (Multicontour front seats are part of an Appearance Package, which also adds a 3-spoke sport steering wheel [V8 only], shift paddles [already standard on the V8], Agility Control Sport Suspension [an add-on for the V6], 18" AMG twin 5-spoke alloy wheels, cross-drilled brake rotors [again already on the V8] and rubber-studded pedals. Since what's added from standard varies between the V6 and V8, this package ranges from \$1270 to \$1990; we'd recommend it for either.)

Overall, the yin-yang of the V6 and V8 were a familiar comparison. When we got in the V6, our second car, we were soon on the interstate and found ourselves in a position where we had to punch it on a hill to pass a semi in a pretty tight spot. It responded very well, and we asked ourselves why you would need an 8. However, that was about the last of that thinking. Again, we suffered from the lack of options, which tainted our comparison,



Cockpits of the E550 Cabriolet (top left) and E350 Cabriolet are equally inviting, when similarly equipped. Both the E550's V8 (upper right) and the E350's V6 are strong and capable. The V8 appealed to us more.

yet overall, based on stance, handling and even the finer points of styling detail and prestige, we were surprised to remind ourselves that only 20 percent of sales are the V8. For just a few thousand dollars more, even with the V8's gas guzzler tax (and not much of a fuel mileage deficit, considering), we'd go for the V8 in a heartbeat.

As the E-Class has been broadened and consolidated, there are now 15 models, and prices range from a base of \$48,925 for the E350 Coupe to \$59,675 for the E550 4MATIC (awd) Sport Sedan. There is also an E63 AMG Sedan for \$86,625. (The lineup is also expected to expand a bit more, with a "shooting brake" coupelike wagon likely to follow, based on the Shooting Break [sic] Concept revealed at the recent Beijing auto show.

Note that almost all the 2010 E-Class prices are lower than 2009, as much as 8 percent lower. And note that the Cabriolets are 2011 models. The E-Class Coupe and E-Class Cabriolet replace the CLK, so in their case, prices are either about the same for the E350 (Coupe down \$50, Cabriolet up \$750), about 4 percent lower for the E550 Coupe versus its CLK predecessor, and exactly the same for the E550 Cabriolet compared to the CLK. These prices are achieved despite a fairly staggering increase in technology and creature comforts from 2009 to 2010/11, and the inherent brand value added by moving its designation from CLK to E-Class.

Specifically, the E350 Cabriolet has a

base of \$57,725, while the E550 Cabriolet has a base of \$65,675. In addition to the aforementioned Appearance Package, there is a \$4000 Premium 1 Package that includes the AIRSCARF, heated front seats, and electronics including the Mercedes-Benz COMAND system with hard-drive navigation, rearview camera, Sirius satellite radio, iPod/MP3 interface and a harman/kardon Surround-Sound System. Bump it to \$6450 and you have the Premium 2 Package, upgrading the front seats to heated and active-ventilated, plus adding a bi-xenon lighting package and KEYLESS-GO door and ignition system. To make the most of the E-Class's dazzling new technologies, for \$2650 you can add the DISTRONIC PLUS package, including PRE-SAFE® braking and PARKTRONIC with Parking Guidance. More conventional add-ons include a wood trim package for \$760, and standalones such as rear side airbags, rear spoiler, metallic paint, premium leather, and heated seats for \$750 if you didn't already opt for the Premium Packages.

Despite the gas guzzler threshold being exceeded in the E550 (accordingly taxed), fuel mileage is pretty close: 17/26/20 mpg (city/highway/combined) for the V6 E350 and 15/23/18 mpg for the V8 E550 (EPA estimates). If your budget allows, and if you find the overall math close enough, you may be one of the people who nudges that 20 percent V8 sales figure a bit higher this year. ■

E-CLASS HIGHLIGHTS

SHOOTING BREAK CONCEPT

The Shooting Break [sic] concept, which premiered at Auto China 2010, is evocative of the CLS (and perhaps Dodge Magnum). The concept shows a likely evolution and



merger of the four-door coupe and a sporty Euro-style "shooting brake" into another probable E-Class model—its new wagon or an additional derivative. Wide and flat, the Shooting Break has a roof, high beltline and low windows extending its full length, with a dramatic character line sweeping toward powerful rear wheel arches.

INITIAL QUALITY WINNERS

Mercedes-Benz achieved marked improvement over 2009 in the Initial Quality Study by J.D. Power and Associates for the US market, rising by three places to 3rd place overall. This is their best IQS result since 1990. C-Class took first place in its segment, S-Class took second in its, and the new E-Class secured second place for both the sedan and coupe versions.

OWNER SATISFACTION

Mercedes-Benz took first place among all car brands in a large-scale owner satisfaction survey conducted in Germany by market research institute J.D. Power and Associates. The C-Class and CLK (now part of the E-Class) headed their respective categories. 16,330 respondents had to drive their current model for around two years, covering about 20,000 miles (a cumulative driving experience of over 300 million miles). Assessed were quality, reliability, attractiveness, service and maintenance costs.

HOLLYWOOD

If you saw "Sex and the City 2," you noted that in addition to the Mercedes-Benz S400 HYBRID, Mr. Big was also one of the first to



drive through the streets of New York in the new E-Class Cabriolet. (Samantha also drives the offroad G-Class, while chauffeurs drive luxurious Maybach sedans.)