

Versatility

BY JOE SAGE



Two statistics, straight away: Mercedes-Benz is number one in luxury sales in the US, and the E-Class represents 25 percent of their sales. If there's one thing you can be sure of, it's that they are going to do the E-Class right.

They are also going to do it comprehensively. As such, the E-Class is available variously as a sedan, coupe, wagon or cabriolet; with a gasoline or diesel or hybrid powertrain; with rear-wheel or 4MATIC all-wheel drive; with some available in Luxury or Sport trim; and in über potent AMG iterations, some as new S-Models. We flew to Portland to check out the new 2014 models.

Some of these had already been on sale for a few months; some were just shipping to showrooms as we arrived in Oregon (we happened to pass a loaded carrier earlier that day, on I-5 in Tacoma); and the rest will be arriving at dealers about the same time you read this, in September.

Specifically, if you wonder which 2014s you may have already seen, the gasoline sedan and wagon started arriving in April; the coupe, cabriolet and hybrid sedan in June; the AMG sedan and wagon in August; and the BlueTEC diesel will start arriving in September.

Household income for the typical E-Class buyer varies from \$187,000 a year for a coupe buyer, to \$352,000 for a wagon buyer. (For sedans, it's \$192,000; for cabriolets, \$263,000.) If that sounds like quite a range, it is, and if it sounds pretty healthy, we would agree.

We didn't notice the price so much on day one in Oregon, as our BlueTEC diesel 4MATIC had a base of \$53,900 and a total sticker of \$64,554. The biggest options on this were a Premium package with COMAND®, nav, voice control, audio upgrade, heated seats, power rear sunshade, rear camera and more; a parking assist package; a driver assistance package of electronic safety features we'll discuss; and a listed \$1234 destination charge. This car was a preproduction unit, so details may still change.

Our cabriolet made us look twice at price, though—out the door for \$81,615 (and this is final pricing). This was the E550 (there's also an E350 for \$7100 less). And it was full of add-ons—pretty much all that was on that BlueTEC, plus wood/leather steering wheel, ventilated front seats, keyless entry/start, rear deck spoiler, sport pedals and contoured seats. (Destination was \$925 on this one.)

Eighty-one-plus is a fair chunk of change, but we'd have to admit we completely loved our day

in the E550 cabriolet. We could have swapped off for anything else in the lineup, for our return drive from the Oregon coast to Portland, but it was an easy decision to hang onto that key and use this beauty for the round trip. (We kept the top down, too, despite about a 30-degree drop in temps from Portland to the ocean on our westbound run, to about 55, and despite of course being acclimated to August Arizona-style. It was too much fun—plus we had AirScarf and AirCap features, as well as heated seats, if things got tough. They didn't.)

The 2014 models are still the W212 generation—but E-Class product manager Dave Larsen avoids saying “mid-cycle refresh,” calling this instead “clearly a redesign.” The new cars can be quickly identified by their headlamps, which have merged multiple units into one, with LED daytime running lights (and a full-LED unit as an option). The popular Sport version of the sedan has a more aggressive fascia with a prominent three-pointed star in the center of the grille—as on the newest SL, CLS, CLA and other models—moved down from the hood. The Luxury sedan's hood-mounted emblem and grille remain much as before, though its headlamps and fascia are updated. The coupe and cabriolet already had this sportier grille-with-star, though the 2014 model is distinguished by a change from two bars to one across the grille (as well as similar headlight and fascia updates). There are new wheel options, and all models receive new LED taillamps.

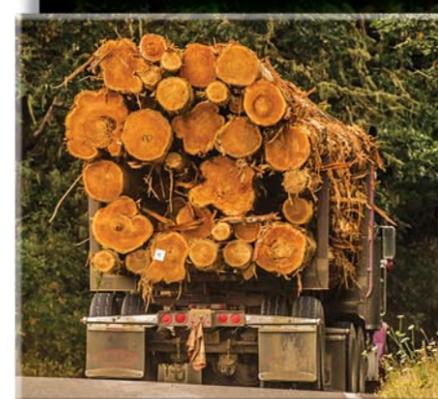
A way to quickly spot just the new sedans and wagons is by a rework of sheetmetal on their rear doors, with a crease running straight forward from the taillights and blending into that door, rather than forming the aggressive ponton that used to emphasize the rear wheels. On coupes and cabriolets, that ponton (which we liked—and which evokes the whole history of E-Class) remains.

Interiors look and feel familiar, but are revised overall, with a new steering wheel, updated buttons, gauges and vents, and an analog clock atop the center stack. (It's a small but smart move—we benefit from having a clock that's easily distinguished from all the operational digital readouts.)

Diesel is a Mercedes-Benz forte, with their BlueTEC models outselling any of their nearest competitors (BMW, Porsche, Audi) roughly threefold. BlueTEC is available in their E-Class and S-Class passenger cars and in GL, GLK and M-Class utilities. A few years ago, buying diesel was a win-win inasmuch as the fuel cost less and your MPG would be better, although its lower-volume technology tended to make the purchase price higher. Then, about five years ago, diesel pump prices flipped the equation and climbed higher

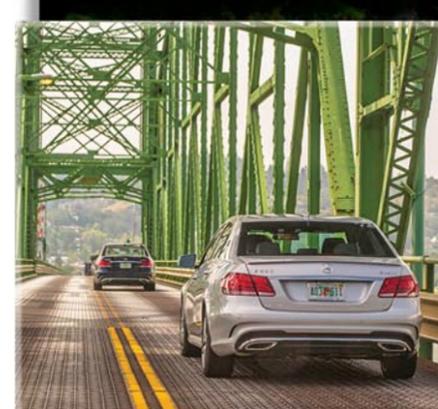


Day one took us from PDX airport north across the Columbia River into Washington state, then east along the river on state highway 14, over a few bridges and through a few tunnels (lower right), then across the Hood River Bridge (bottom right) to Hood River, Oregon. From there we headed inland to the high country highways looping around Mt Hood (facing page). • On day two, we drove west from Portland, across the coastal mountains to the Pacific Ocean. The route included one of the finest roads we've ever driven (above)—miles and miles of smooth pavement, curvy and hilly, with the power of the E550 Cabriolet on tap. It was so narrow, we weren't sure whether it was a one-way road, until we noticed a few pavement markings facing in both directions. But one key note of caution on this stretch—fast, fully laden oncoming logging trucks.



than gasoline—partly from overall fuel price volatility at the time and partly from the welcome changeover to ultra-low-sulfur “clean diesel”—but at least fuel mileage was still better, though the vehicles still tended to cost more. Now, diesel prices are about the same as the lower end of premium gasoline. And fuel mileage is still an advantage. (Our BlueTEC at this event was pre-production, so did not have EPA ratings yet. They optimistically read as 99-99-99 on its Monroney, clearly stamped over with “not final.”) But here's a surprise twist: the Mercedes-Benz E250 BlueTEC diesel is now the least expensive E-Class.

Last year's BlueTEC E-Class was a six-cylinder E350, but this year there is big news: an E250 BlueTEC with an entirely new four-cylinder diesel powerplant. Take the traditional 20-40 percent fuel savings of a diesel over a comparable gasoline engine, multiply by the savings of a potent and efficient new four-cylinder over a six-cylinder—a huge industry trend, regardless of fuel—and we have a recipe for the purchase-pump-mileage



KEEP RIGHT >>

trifecta—a “formula for best-in-class diesel,” as Dave Larsen puts it.

Consumers are rapidly learning that engine torque is at least as important as the horsepower numbers everyone focused on for decades. The new four-cylinder BlueTEC diesel in the E250 delivers 195 horsepower and 369 lb-ft of torque—“V8 torque,” all available from an incredibly low 1800 rpm. Dig in, and rock and roll.

Speaking of fuel economy, there is also an E400 Hybrid sedan. Its fuel economy is about the same as the prior V6 diesel, or even a little less. And it costs more than the diesel—\$5300 more in rear-wheel-drive (the only way the hybrid comes), or \$2800 more than even the upgraded BlueTEC 4MATIC all-wheel-drive version. To us, this makes the diesel a win-win-win... better price, better fuel economy, and available 4MATIC. The hybrid’s horsepower is 302—higher than the diesel—but its torque is lower: 273 lb-ft. Add 27 hp and 184 lb-ft, respectively, when the electric is participating (which varies), and it may or may not at times be competitive with the diesel’s full-range grunt. If fuel economy and range are your goals, decide first whether you want 4MATIC. And check your budget. If those are not factors, then drive them

both. (We did not have a chance to drive the hybrid at this launch event. But we drove the diesel all day, along the Columbia River and through Mt Hood National Forest, and loved it.)

Speaking still of horsepower and torque, the lineup is not complete without its AMG versions. As it has been for the past couple of years, the new AMG is built entirely by AMG, and it again comes with just one engine—which, despite being badged as E63 is a 5.5-liter biturbo V8. No need to quibble about whether those numbers align—the E63 AMG (all are 4MATICs) delivers 550 hp (and 531 lb-ft), or in new S-Model trim (an option on the AMG sedan and the only form of the AMG wagon) 577 hp and 590 lb-ft of torque. Zero-to-60 times are 3.5 seconds, or 3.6 for the non-S-Model RWD sedan. As Larsen says, the E63 AMG delivers “supercar performance—and you can take four of your best friends with you.”

The S-Model is new this year, and to a degree it echoes an industry trend, or at least a German industry trend. You can get an S-Line Audi—mostly a style and feature upgrade, not to be confused with their actual S or RS performance models—and you can get various M add-ons for BMW—also no match for an actual M. Mercedes-Benz is

introducing the S-Model in the new E-Class, for now just in two of three AMG models—and applied to these, it’s obviously not just a mimic of performance models. It does include a bump in power, so for Mercedes it’s not just about style. Its boost comes from modifications to the engine management system, increased peak injection pressure and a hike in maximum biturbo boost pressure. Both AMG S-Models are paired with 4MATIC all-wheel drive—a win-win by our standards, if you can swing the cost of entry—coming in \$7 grand higher than the rear-drive non-S AMG sedan, plus another \$2600 for the wagon, which tops the E-Class range at a base price over \$100k (\$48,770 higher than the standard E350 wagon).

One place the E-Class lineup really demonstrates its value is in electronics and advanced safety features. Because it represents such volume, it’s a great platform for the introduction of all the latest—as we had experienced four years earlier at the launch of this generation (see July/August 2009). A 2014 S-Class was introduced just a couple of months prior to our Oregon event, and it’s a good thing it got a head start, because for many dollars less, the E-Class really starts to close the gap in this department. While not bumping its

head on the S, you can expect the E-Class to pretty well lead the industry in new features, even as the competition’s followup time gets tighter.

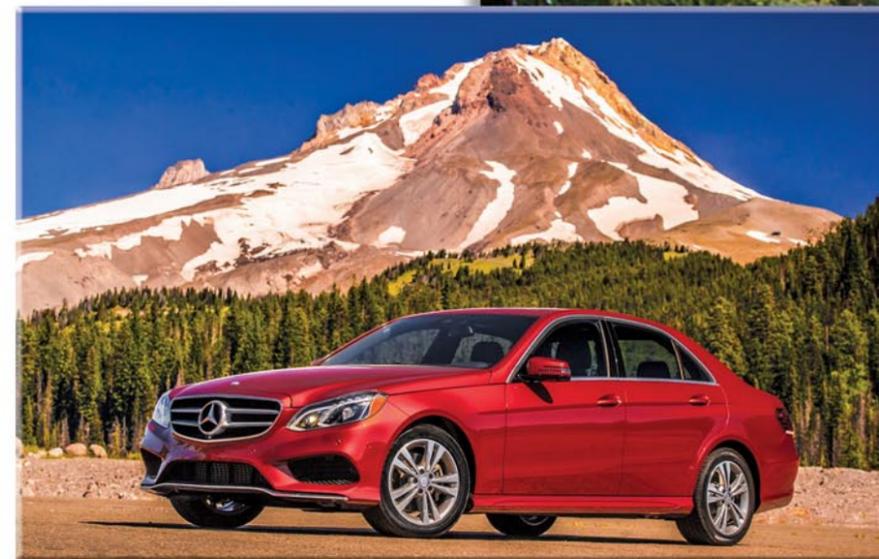
Collectively known as Intelligent Drive, there are over 30 systems in the car, of which eleven are all-new or newly enhanced for 2014. If the car seems as though it’s coming to life, it’s close. “We’ve given the vehicle senses,” says Larsen.

Probably their proudest new achievement—the one they showed us immediately, in the airport parking lot, before we hit the road—is a new stereo multipurpose camera (see inset at left), with which the car “almost sees in 6D,” as they put it. It combines long-range radar, short-range radar, ultrasonic sensors, rear view cameras, surround cameras and multi-mode rear radar. Signals can be bounced below the car in front of you, giving the car an important advantage by factoring in what the person two cars up may be doing. With this optional system in place, the car can identify other cars, pedestrians and cyclists, then factor in their direction of travel and their speed. Vectoring all that information for you—in some ways as complex as docking a spacecraft to the International Space Station—the car will sometimes autonomously brake, if conditions warrant it.

Other systems include Distronic Plus, which now adds Steering Assist, so if you start to wander out of your marked lane, the car will actively correct this, rather than just vibrate as in the past. This works on straight roads and gentle bends, but not indefinitely—our attempts to do a look-no-hands demo worked great but only relatively briefly. PRE-SAFE Brake with Pedestrian Detection still boosts your brake pressure at the first sign of trouble, in preparation for a sudden stop, but can now actively fully stop you in certain conditions. Brake Assist Plus adds lateral reading of cross traffic. In an exceedingly courteous—and of course safe—vein, if you are going to be rear-ended while stopped, the car will apply more brake pressure, to try to keep you grounded rather than be pushed into a car or pedestrian in front of you. Attention Assist adds more levels of warning as it detects you’re drowsy, plus integrates with nav to let you know where a handy rest area is.

Active driver types always have an obvious question: is the car starting to drive *FOR* me? The answer is that all systems have been excruciatingly carefully engineered with thresholds that “know that you know better”—but can be ready to intervene if your skills seriously lapse.

The lineup covers quite a spread, and prices do, as well. E-Class of course falls between the entry-lux C-Class and flagship S-Class, which have base prices of \$35,800 and \$92,350, respectively. That’s quite a gap to fill (although there are



You could be forgiven for thinking all the E-Class models you see on the road comprise more than one lineup. Basic body forms include the Cabriolet (facing page), Sedan (red, above), Coupe (center right) and Wagon (bottom right). The AMG performance treatment can be had in sedan or wagon form (black car, front shot, lower right). • The interior is essentially the same on all. • Note that the sheetmetal retains its ponton, the pronounced haunch over the rear wheels, on the cabriolet and coupe, while this has been straightened out on the sedan and wagon. • Models with the new stereo camera feature can be spotted by dual openings astride the rear-view mirror (inset, facing page).



CLA, CLS and CL coupes, plus roadsters, plus SUVs also in the mix)—so it’s no surprise that you can find your E-Class just about anywhere in between. A base E-Class is about where you’d expect it: \$51,900. The best surprise is that the advanced technology and fuel-saving advantages of the E250 BlueTEC diesel are now actually coming in lowest of all, at \$51,400—a serious win-win breakthrough in this category.

Not counting the AMG models—always in a stratospheric realm of their own—the top E-Class sedan is an all-wheel-drive E550 Sport 4MATIC, at \$61,400 base. The E550 Cabriolet (rear-wheel-drive) tops that, at \$67,300.

As for the AMGs, they run \$92,770 for an E63 4MATIC sedan—or \$99,770 for an S-Model of that—up to \$102,370 as the base price for an E63 AMG S-Model 4MATIC wagon. That’s right, this E-Class costs some \$10 grand more than a base S-Class, but it is an AMG.

One reminder: although the top-top E-Class overall is a wagon—the AMG—a corresponding non-AMG wagon comes in lower than the top sedan, because though a 4MATIC, it’s an E350.

The one hybrid falls right in the middle of the non-AMG range: an E400 HYBRID Sport (rear-wheel-drive) has a base price of \$56,700. ■

