



Mercedes-Benz C-Class



MERCEDES-BENZ'S C-CLASS, which succeeded the 190, has become firmly established as a favourite for buyers who aspire to a better-built saloon of modest size, albeit at a price premium compared with equivalent sized upper-medium, mass-market contenders.

BMW's 3-Series is its deadliest rival and both have prospered by being rear-wheel-driven, by being German and being "executive class", with all that that cachet implies. The Honda Accord's rock-solid reliability, the Rover 75's elegant traditionalism and the Alfa Romeo 156's exhilarating road manners are available for less outlay, yet this Teutonic twosome is likely to remain supreme.

But how good is that new prestige offering? The latest C-Class bristles with constructional and safety features; details such as dual types of side airbag, front ones that inflate only as much as is needed (and not at all if the child seat is in use), automatic headlamps with switch-off, "see-you-home" delay, brakes that stop quicker if you press the pedal suddenly, are all there.

Up front, the whole body assembly is bolted together rather than welded, and a "crash-box" construction achieves progressive impact deformation which enhances survivability and lowers repair expense. Inside, only the rear centre seatbelt lacks height adjustment and self-tensioning with force limiters –

indeed, injury-prevention is state of the art.

The six-engined choice ranges from a 2.0 petrol (confusingly called C180) through to a 3.2 V6. We drove the C200 (2.0 litre/163bhp supercharged four cylinder) petrol and the diesel alternative, with 2.2 litres but 20bhp less.

The petrol auto felt smooth and evenly responsive from as low an engine speed as the 'box would permit – superchargers don't have any lag before the benefit is felt. The diesel, with the standard manual six-speed gearbox, is the one that made the most favourable impression, however; it's a lovely engine that's free of uncouth noise or lower-speed vibes that beset the BMW 320D.

The modified suspension still disappoints over secondary roads because, despite its road-shock free and totally fret-free response to ruts and ridges, it tends to flounce and rock over undulations – as if the dampers don't exert firm control; the new rack and pinion steering lacks an Alfa's pin-sharp responses, too. Back seat room is better, though the cushion is too short for proper thigh support and, up front, the electric rake and legroom adjustments aren't accompanied by any lumbar resetting – some people might need more. Generous, thoughtful oddments stowage all round, with the option of a split/folding back seat, makes the new C more adaptable.

AT A GLANCE

considering size, price and rivals

Controls/displays	★★★★○
Handling/steering	★★★★○
Comfort	★★★★○
Space/practicality	★★○○○

THE C-CLASS RANGE

body upper medium 4 door saloon, estate car later

trim levels Classic, Elegance, Avantgarde - trim and equipment, not mechanical differences

engines petrol: 4cyl 2.0litre/129bhp (C180): 4cyl 2.0 S/charged/163 (C200K): V6 2.6/170 (C240): V6 3.2/218 (C320) diesel: Di turbo 4cyl 2.15/143 (C220CDi): 5cyl 2.7/170 (C270 CDI)

drive rear-wheel drive with six-speed manual gearbox on all except C240 and C320 - 5-speed torque converter auto with Tiptronic manual select either optional or standard on all

notable standard features (on all) airbags/belts adapt to impact, integrated door release, fuel cut-off, hazard warning; ABS with "brake-assist" and ESP (cornering control); headlamp-assist; steering wheel communications controls; Speedtronic top speed limiter; under-floor aerodynamic/protection panels; window air-curtain 'bags; rear ventilation outlets; use-related "service-due" display

LIKES AND GRIPES

diffuse flow from facia-top ventilator "three-wink" lane-change indicator stalk - tell tales built into door mirrors, too auto wipe and headlamp control

no scuffproof bumper protectors foot-operated parking brake manual override on gear selector confusing split/fold back seat not standard

VERDICT

This new C-Class is the best yet; the completely equipped Classic means one can avoid hidden extra costs, and all the reassurance of living with the brand comes as standard, too. In truth, its road manners and accommodation exude dignity rather than excitement, but if past experience is repeated, ownership costs and residual value will justify the initial extra outlay.