

FIRST
DRIVE

Mercedes-Benz A-Class

Featured model: long wheelbase



IT MUST HAVE BEEN DIFFICULT FOR Mercedes-Benz to decide how small to make its first truly small hatchback when, way back in 1993, it decided to go ahead with the A-Class project.

The arrival of other contenders of similar semi-MPV styling has since confirmed that the basic concept was right. However, it's 358cm overall length, with modest interior dimensions to match, made the A-Class package embarrassingly close to subsequently launched rivals costing half as much. And sure enough, the arrival of German rival Audi's A2 at 383cm long (the same as your average Fiesta/206 supermini) confirmed that the A-Class fell short of some potential owners' accommodation needs. Hence this additional long-wheelbase model.

In fact, minor frontal styling changes have caused the existing short-wheelbase car to grow by 3cm, but the elongation by a further 17cm for the LWB transforms interior occupant space.

The A-Class was already quite wide, so it now looks really spacious in all directions; the sliding two-piece back seats remain, but they have been remounted farther back, so that effectively, luggage space behind is the same as in the shorter version. However, this results in a massive improvement of rear leg-stretching space.

In practice, most users will be comfortable with this LWB version's back seats farther forward; indeed, legroom and kneeroom in the LWB, with the back seat fully forwards, is still greater than in the SWB with its seat set fully rearwards. The result: more "real life" usable cargo space.

There's one snag, though – the back seats' cushions, though mounted over 65cm from the ground (which can be a problem for the less agile or short), are still close to the rear footwells (unlike the A2's – the Audi has a lowered floor at the rear.) This results in less than ideal thigh support and cornering stability, due to the rear passengers' "knees-up" seating posture.

We drove the least and most powerful petrol-engined versions in a day's appraisal and found the 1.9 very lively, but the 1.4 sweeter-running and quieter, especially when revved. Both compare favourably with the 1.4 Audi A2 petrol version at higher speed, however, and the longer-wheelbase's ride seems more composed, as well. It still jibs at crosswinds, though.

Apart from the odd styling tweak, like new plastic headlamp "glasses" and anti-scoff plastic inserts in the bumpers, there are a host of detailed changes, including many that don't show, to improve the model's convenience and behaviour.

VERDICT

This isn't a cheap solution to small-car motoring and the long-wheelbase will add a further £900 to UK prices. However, we felt that in this new, elongated form, the A-Class is much more convincing in the way it accommodates and the way it performs. It has now matured and feels capable of fulfilling its promise – albeit at a price.

AT A GLANCE

considering size, price and rivals

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

VITAL STATISTICS (cm)

outside

length x width (folded mirrors) 378x172

height (no roof bars) 159

load sill (inside/outside) 9/61

inside

front - legroom 89-112

- headroom 90-97†

rear - typical leg/ 100-110*

kneeroom 77-87*

- headroom 92

- hiproom 130

load space (all seats in use)

(litres/cu ft) 332/11.7 – 278/9.8*

length 63-53*

width 99-114

height (floor to cover/ 51/

to top of aperture) 92

length – to front seats/facia 147/228

* seat forwards – rearwards

† with sunroof

THE A-CLASS LWB RANGE

type and size MPV style (premium priced) supermini hatch**trim levels** Classic, Elegance, Avantgarde**engines** petrol: 4 cylinder/1.4 litres/82bhp, 4/1.6/102, 4/1.9/125

diesel 4/1.7/95

drive front-wheel drive, 5-speed manual (clutchless manual option)**notable features** repositioned facia switchgear/heater controls, rigid load cover, "brake-assist" integral with ABS, humidity sensor within air con control, window airbags optional

LIKES ...

better position for radio

sill-less entry

bumper nudge strips

new facia vent volume controls

and GRIPES

not very cosy in the back seats

head restraints block rear view

seat height adjusts cushions only

seats heavy/awkward to remove