

Take everything you remember about diesel-engine cars, tap the auto-down feature on your driver's side window, and toss it out. This newest generation diesel from Mercedes is a marvel of quiet, smooth, abundant power.

Observing a low profile, the diesel version appears to be a typical E320 rear-drive four-door sedan. Only the "CDI" badge on the trunk lid tells those in the know what's under the hood. Redesigned for the 2003 model year, its exterior design conveys a smooth, solid, confident, upscale look. Conservative, yes, but handsome as well.

Inside, materials and design continue the refined look and feel. With quality leather on the seats, burl walnut trim, plus an attractive instrument panel, there is quiet elegance here, in keeping with the high expectations of Mercedes Benz owners.

Front seats proved to be most comfortable and properly supportive, with no noticeable discomfort after 90-minute stints behind the wheel. In fact, those who rode in the car with my wife and I—two different couples and a friend—whether in front or back, all commented on how comfortable the seats were, and how much they liked the look of the interior.

Whether playing rock or classical music, the stereo sounded first class. Combined with a quiet ride, you can fully enjoy your favorites with a level of sound quality sure to please. Other welcome touches included a tilt/telescoping steering wheel and 3-position memory for front seats, steering wheel and outside mirrors.

My only nits to pick originated from the interior. One cold morning I looked for the heated seats control only to find none. With some lesser cars beginning to make this standard, I expected it here, but discovered it is optional. Also, to my highly trained right foot, the return spring on the gas pedal seemed overly robust, making me press harder than usual to maintain a steady speed.

Safety features abound, and besides front airbags include front and rear side airbags and head curtain airbags. For safer handling, you'll also find a standard Electronic Stability Program



PHOTO BY PAUL H. SMITH



2005 Mercedes E320 CDI Diesel-Powered Surprise Package

and anti-lock brakes with electronic brake assist to help make sure you get maximum braking power during an emergency stop.

Diesel engine cars used to be plagued with rather sluggish acceleration. Not this one. No sir! The CDI's 3.2 Liter DOHC 4-valve Intercooled Turbocharged straight 6-cylinder engine gives you satisfying punch off the line. A whopping 369 foot-pounds of torque beginning at a low 1800 rpm along with 201 horsepower will do that. CDI, by the way, stands for Common-rail Direct Injection—an extremely high-pressure, precise, electronic fuel injection system that contributes to lower emissions and greater power. Mercedes claims 0–60 acceleration of about 6.6 seconds, and my seat-of-the-pants timer tends to agree. Even with four on board, acceleration was impressive thanks to that omni-present, locomotive-level torque.

Handling was also praiseworthy for a mid-size car with such a comfortable ride. Body lean in tight curves was well controlled and the handling felt highly stable right up to tire squeal time, signaling the end of available grip. You can carve up a twisty road with considerable haste and most owners should be well

pleased with the car's handling abilities.

I was intrigued by the standard 5-speed automatic transmission with Touch Shift. Without having to move the lever to another position, you can downshift and upshift by simply moving the lever to the left or right while it's in the "D" position. Every manufacturer's sport-shift type transmission should be so inviting to use. I also liked the fact that the transmission interacted with the cruise control to downshift if needed on descent in order to hold the speed setting.

My test unit with optional sun roof, 6-disc CD and metallic paint totaled \$52,445 including destination fees. The Mercedes Benz E320 CDI is EPA rated at 27-city, 37-highway mileage. In my usual driving mix of freeways, city streets and winding mountain roads I got a stellar 29.6 mpg. While the CDI is not yet offered for sale in California, that should change when cleaner (lower sulfur) diesel fuel soon becomes available. In the meantime, that shouldn't stop you from calling your out-of-state relatives and telling them to put this model on their "must see" list. If they drive one, they'll thank you for the tip. ⚡

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