



Mid-Sized Luxury

In a Mercedes C-350

By Roger Witherspoon

The drive down the New England Thruway had been just the way a motorist likes it: fast, uneventful, on an uncrowded roan under a warm fall sun.

Jon Lucien was crooning his Caribbean brand of soul, and the eight speakers in the Harman /Kardon Logic-7 surround sound system was so all-consuming that you could almost hear the ocean surf and the soft hum of flying birds as the miles slid by. The sound was contained in the Mercedes C-350, a sleek, trim, low, mid-sized sedan with the understated styling of a Jaguar and the quiet, effortless power of a high priced sedan.

So as I merged onto the Cross Bronx Expressway – a two-lane, under-paved, overly patched roadway slicing through New York City which is often just a parking lot for cross country trucks – I was not expecting to be bum-rushed by a tired, double-hulled trucker in a hurry. But as the lanes merged, I realize there was only room for one vehicle, the Mercedes or the truck, but not both of us. And we were fast running out of roadway.

So I jammed the accelerator to the floor and, with a rumble from the twin chrome exhausts, the sedan with the thin, aggressive-looking grill, shot forward. In an instant, the speedometer seemingly skipped every number between 65 and 100 as the Mercedes leaped out of the way of the hustling trucker, and put plenty of daylight between the two of us. Then I went back to enjoying the road.

There are advantages to driving a well built car, particularly one which can double as either a commuting, go-anywhere sedan, or a sports car. While not the fastest vehicle on the planet, the 2009 Mercedes C-350 can cruise all day in triple digits – if you're in the wide open southwestern part of the country – or take you at a more sedate pace

through the more crowded eastern roads. Either way, you travel in comfort and quiet style.

Under the hood is a 3.5-liter V-6 engine cranking out 268 horsepower, more than enough to let this car mix with the front of the road running pack. It rolls on 18-inch, AMG, light aluminum, twin-spoke, alloy wheels which hold the road as if coated with rubber cement. Its independent front and rear suspensions soften patched highways and suburban gravel roads. It comes with a seven speed automatic transmission which switches gears instantly and applies power immediately. And for those who like hands-on control, there is a manual, sport mode using the chrome gear shift to slide from first to seventh gear.

This may be a sedan, but the front styling is all sports car, with a thin chrome grill containing the Mercedes circled star over a thin black radiator in a combination that looks like a grimace. The headlights slope back like a motorcycle rider's aviator glasses covering small, bi-Xenon headlights and fog lamps. The side mirrors have turning lights on them, so oncoming motorists know you are about to turn. The C-350 has a short, stubby rear which hides a large trunk that can be enhanced by laying down the rear seats.

Inside this quiet ride, the comfort starts on top with twin sunroofs to light the front and rear seats. Only the front sunroof opens, however. The interior décor is leather and maple wood trim, giving the C-350 the polish one would expect in a car carrying a price tag approaching \$50,000. There is also enough room in the back for my six-foot, five-inch neighbor to relax and not worry about bumping his knees or head.

It is packed with the electronics one would expect in a luxury vehicle. There is a seven-inch, color, LCD information screen which pops out of the dash board when the engine is turned on. That provides access to the navigation system, which is not touch screen activated, but still easy to use and intuitive. There is AM/ FM, Weather band, and Sirius satellite radio, as well as a six-disc, in-dash CD or DVD player, though the movie can only be shown when the car is still. If you don't like what is on the radio, the six gigabyte hard drive will hold about 1,500 of your favorite tunes. There is also an MP3 connection but not an iPod link. The 350 also has Bluetooth cell phone connections, and all of these can be activated and controlled by voice commands.

Are you in a strange town and have a taste for a pizza? No problem. Just tell the nice robot lady with the British accent that you want the nearest pizza restaurant and follow her turn by turn instructions to dinner. She'll also play your favorite tune along the way.

If there is a negative note or two, it's that the center posts are wide and, combined with high headrests, interfere with the sight lines for cars on either side of the vehicle. And the test car got about 14 miles per gallon, which is a drawback in this era of high gasoline prices. But the government also gave it five star crash test and four star rollover test ratings, making it one of the safest cars on the road.

But if you are looking for a, comfortable, safe, fast and sport set of wheels to go anywhere in style, the Mercedes C-350 isn't a bad set to travel on.



2009 Mercedes C350

MSRP:		\$47,685
EPA Mileage:	17 MPG City	25 MPG Highway
Top Speed:		130 MPH

Performance / Safety:

3.5-Liter DOHC aluminum V-6 engine producing 268 horsepower and 258 pound-feet of torque; 7-speed automatic transmission with electronic manual mode; rear wheel drive; independent front & rear suspension; 18" AMG 5 twin-spoke alloy wheels; sport suspension; 4-wheel ABS Disc brakes; electronic stability control; anti-slip regulation; bi-xenon headlamps with washers and cornering fog lamps; dual two stage front airbags; head protective curtains; side airbags.

Interior / Comfort:

AM/ FM/ Sirius satellite radio; 7-inch power retractable color LCDE display; Command navigation system; 6-disc, in-dash CD/DVD changer; 6-GB hard drive juke box; Harmon/Kardon LOGIC 7 surround sound system; leather wrapped, tilt and telescoping steering wheel with fingertip cruise, audio and phone controls; Bluetooth cell phone connection; power panoramic sunroof; black maple wood trim.