

Getting into game-changing technology

A radical, freestanding digital instrument cluster headlines the interior package of the fourth-generation of the Mercedes-Benz A-Class hatch, which will arrive in SA in the third quarter of 2018.



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In a fourth-generation car carefully crafted to address the shortcomings of its predecessor, the next A-Class will see enormous leaps in cabin comfort, interior space and luggage capacity, while introducing a raft of new technologies. It will introduce a new connection service that acts as an effective concierge, plus an augmented reality digital dialogue service, while shrinking the dashboard intrusion into the cabin.

The most notable boost in space comes from re-engineering the flawed MFA small-vehicle architecture, which was compromised by the need to fit in with Chrysler small cars.

The A-Class, which has been sold three million times, will be the first new car off the architecture, which will house eight new models compared with the five cars off the current car. Though the DaimlerChrysler divorce meant the US versions were never built, Mercedes' small cars were stuck with some of the cheaper US pieces.



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The most obvious of those was the fuel-filler location, which remains on the new A-Class, and the narrow opening for the hatch. That changes in the new generation, with all-new architecture giving a 200mm boost in the width of the loading area, while the luggage space itself rises 29l to 370l

While the standard rear seat remains a 60:40 split-fold unit, there is a 40:20:40 option that can tilt the rear seat forward to add to the luggage space, without having to drop the seats.

The luggage area's length is up another 115mm, too, and the cargo area is 225mm wider.

The rest of the interior has mostly added size, too, with the elbow room up 35mm in the front and 36mm in the rear, shoulder space is up 9mm and 22mm respectively, while headroom rises 7mm in the front seats and 8mm in the rear.

It also cleaned up the body-in-white engineering to allow 10% more visibility outside the car from the driver's seat, particularly improving in the over-the-shoulder rearward glance, which is a major bugbear of the current MFA cars, the A-Class, GLA and CLA.

Its owners will be able to unlock the car, along with opening its sunroof and windows, from a smartphone app, while there's an "in-car office" available that lets drivers pre-load phone numbers, meetings and even conference-call PINs so they don't need to look at their phones en route.



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It is capable of networking with the internet of things and cloud-based services from Google and Amazon's Alexa, though not yet Apple's Siri.

But it's the Ask Mercedes function that is expected to be the A-Class's most popular digital feature.

"Research shows most people are aware of about 20% of the features available to them from the products they buy," Sajjad Khan, Daimler's vice president for digital vehicle and mobility, says. "This makes it easier to understand what the products can do."

Combining artificial intelligence with augmented-reality chatbot

Ask Mercedes is claimed to help thereby combining artificial intelligence with an augmented-reality chatbot, so anybody inside the car can ask questions by typing them on a smartphone or using voice recognition. The E and S- Classes let people scan the car's buttons or controls on a smartphone's camera and then explaining what they do and how to use them. It can also be used away from the car via Facebook Messenger, Google Home or Amazon Echo.

"Customers can simply say: 'Alexa, ask Mercedes Me for the range' and they will be told how many kilometres they can drive before the next refuel," Kahn says.

Further functions cover the vehicle position or the option of starting or turning off the auxiliary heating.

Oddly, it's available in English first and in SA and Malaysia, rather than German or Chinese, and it can be retrofitted to cars built after 2014 with a Mercedes Me communication module.

It's not all good news, though, as the fourth-generation A-Class follows Volkswagen's Polo in refusing to offer overhead grab handles, though there are coat hooks on the inner handles of the hatch.

Leap in both technology and trim quality

But it's the leap in both technology and trim quality that will stand out, along with an ambient light show that includes 64 colours and even lighting on the inside of the air vents, which come from the E-Class coupe.

It has found a way to ditch the traditional cowl that shades the instrument cluster, keeping night-time reflections off the windscreen. The short, two-tier dashboard is topped by an instrument cluster that looks a lot like the S-Class's two conjoined screens, only without a cowl, making it stand free and look for all the world like it's the interior of a concept car.

Three versions of the system will be available, starting with two seven-inch screens, a seven-inch instrument cluster with a 10.25-inch infotainment unit in the centre or two 10.25inch units side by side.

They've used a louvred-style film on the screens to stop light reflecting off the windscreen and windows, and the simplicity of the look allows the two-tiered, sculpted dash itself to be symmetrical, reducing complexity and fussiness.

"The A-Class is the first series-production model to dispense completely with a classic cockpit shroud," Daimler's head of interior design, Hartmut Sinkwitz, says.

"This literally places the large widescreen cockpit, with its bonded glass technology, in the forefront. There is no longer a display in the air-conditioning control panel, as the visual representation is exclusively via the central display. This helped us to realise our clean, puristic and reduced design approach."

The biggest news is that Mercedes has bowed to buyer pressure and moved the cruise control switchgear onto the steering wheel after decades with its single lever behind the left side of the wheel.



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Its seating package has had a huge overhaul, too, with top-spec models including seat ventilation and massage functions.

"The interior of the new AClass is a major step towards the avant-garde and unique especially with respect to the open space architecture and the ultramodern display and control concept. It lends a new quality to the term modern luxury in the compact segment, and is an inner revolution," Sinkwitz says.

In a move to thwart an upwardly mobile Volkswagen Golf and an upcoming Audi A3, the A-Class also adopts materials like open-pore wood trims to justify a climb upmarket.

But with all that tech coming, few will be interested in the AClass because of its wood trim.

Source: Business Day

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