

2010 Mercedes E550
No Geezer Car...This one is “Just Right!”
By: David Ray, www.hookedondriving.com
For: The Wheel

Arriving at our doorstep, all clad in glistening white, the E550 makes a stunning, classy presentation. I anticipated this drive with gusto, as I'd had the chance for a very brief encounter with the 550's cousin, the E350 at our Western Journalists' Media Day, and frankly was non-plussed. While it was high risk to admit to a less than stellar impression, I did acknowledge a lust for exposure to its Mercedes cohorts. Voila, my wish was granted...the E550 appears, and with a full week to test rather than a 30 minute sprint on a bumpy country road.



The E550 sits on the fence between sport sedan and sporty, family luxury import. I give this body style an A+, as it has found a distinct personality that combines elegance, aggressiveness, and subtle athletic stance, all in one package. Also, this car is not going to be confused with any other marque, and it is guaranteed to be parked prominently toward the front row in the valet section of the parking lot.

I made negative remarks about the sharp-edged bolsters in the driver seats in the 350. Those comments were made after a rushed rough road trip, but I don't take them back. Now, having driven in the same seat for a week, I still believe that this is an area for improvement in this stellar car. I remember in the early 90's, my business partner and I considered stepping up to a 5 series BMW. But before we bought, I wanted to be sure, and took a very serious test drive in the

E300 of the day. One thing killed the deal for me. The front seats were “geezer” seats. Washboard sprung seat bottoms that were too firm and did not wrap, complimented with a seat back that seemed to try to compensate with bolstering, but that missed the mark by being too stiff. Today, while better, that same DNA has gone forward in these seats. You’d think that the seat designer of the early 90’s would have retired by now and that we’d see a more modern and sporting presentation, especially in a nearly 400HP sedan. But nope – they’re just passable – short of a reason to not buy, but a disappointment nonetheless. Fortunately, the seats (sorry – some say I am pre-occupied by seats – oh well) comprise the main complaint – ok not complaint – disappointment in this car.

The E550 is a dream car. For someone who appreciates fine engineering, design, performance and fun, and is in a position to step up to a \$68,000 car, the 550 must be considered. Imagine you just sold your practice, or you made the \$5 million club at the local real estate agency and you have the dough to pay cash, write it off legitimately, and carry your sales prospects in style. Or, you are retiring, but not quitting. And would like a car built to the highest standards that you know you’ll be proud of in 10 years. This is one of those cars. I recently drove a Lincoln MKS, a \$53,000 luxury car quasi-competitor. But any competition between these cars would be apples and cantaloupes. The Mercedes coach building, quality of materials, ergonomics, performance, and overall feel is just amazing. The Lincoln, with its Eco-boost turbo V6, and admittedly \$15K less (however, the E550 starts out under \$60K), was a car that would be one to lease for three years and turn in for the new model. The Mercedes, competing with its European neighbors, is going head to head in a titanic battle with other similarly competent rivals from BMW and Audi. And doing very well, thank you.

The drive in the Merc is a delight. With its Air-matic semi-active suspension, guiding you, the driver selects either comfort or sport settings to determine just how sporty or relaxed you want to be. On a long haul, there could be no better package. While comfort is the more common choice for a long trip, you have no sense of laziness under the chassis. The 5.5L DOHC V8 also is a pleasant diversion. Moving to the sport mode, we felt only a very subtle change in personality. At 381HP and 391 ft lbs of torque, this everyday-looking sedan is a screamer, achieving 0-60mph in a scant 5.2 seconds. That’s muscle car territory, and this is NOT an AMG hot rodded version! A concerted effort to find a side road filled with curves and bumps didn’t faze the 550. While the 4000lb car does roll, it just didn’t bother, as things were very controlled, predictable and crisp. This is a big car that handles very well and can be tossed freely about with confidence. One complaint about its driving behavior is a slightly over-boosted steering assist that makes the feel of the road a bit too light. It would be safe to say that it’s not a sports sedan in the truest sense due to lack of sport brakes, oversized wheel/tire combination, and those seats we spoke of. But if you’re in a hurry, the 550 won’t let you down....in fact, with the amazingly fast 7 speed automatic in sport shift mode, you’ll find yourself working hard and earning rewards.

Other general comments include our love of the monster, double-paned moonroof, the excellent access to the generous trunk, a great back seat for 3 real adults, and wonderful optional air-flow seats. But the cat’s meow was an option that provided a virtual chiropractic table to the driver. Imagine your mother’s rolling pin, wrapped in padding, on a vertical axis, rolling up and down your back while you drive....all the way from your coccyx, to the base of your soldier blades. This option is worth the price of admission, well almost. Put the heated seat option on, turn on

the back massager, and you will truly be relaxing your back as you drive. Of course, we'd not recommend this option being deployed during a Hooked On Driving track day at Thunderhill!

While we have mostly positive comments about switchgear, the great tilt/telescope steering wheel, and the touchscreen nav/media center, there is one thing that I believe they simply need to change immediately if not sooner. The speed control is on a stalk placed at 10 o'clock on the wheel and is very easy to bump, simply because it's where the blinker is in most cars, but even more – for those who are used to it, the system kicks on immediately with an accidental touch. Several times, I went for the blinker while slowing for a turn, hit the speed control and the throttle froze the speed as I approached traffic and or a stop sign/light! I'd suggest a complete re-think of this control in an otherwise well-thought out driver package.

While the geezer feel of the E350 worried us in a short term drive, and we loved the huge S class in its current iteration as a dream car, the E550, with its ample but not cavernous space, and excellent performance for a comfortable long-term driver seems, as a fair-haired lass once said, "Just right!"