

THE GREAT ESTATE

MERCEDES C - CLASS ESTATE (1996 - 2001)



(6.5 out of 10)

REVIEW DATE: 11 Okt 2005

Models Covered: C180, C200, C230, C230 Kompressor, C240, C280, AMG C36/C43, C220/220CDi diesel, C250 turbo diesel



MERCEDES C - CLASS ESTATE (1996 - 2001) USED CAR MODEL GUIDE

If you're looking for a dependable estate that doesn't need to shout its merits too loudly, the quietly stylish Mercedes C-class could well be just about perfect. If you need a budget option, take a look at the C200 Classic, the C280 Sport is the best choice for those who are looking for a bit of go, and the C250TD Elegance will be a willing partner if you're looking for long-term commitment. Whatever model you choose, you can't go that far wrong. Just don't expect to be the last word in urban cool.

They're everywhere. You might not notice them at first, but a covert invasion has been waged by those cunning Germans at Mercedes Benz. The executive estate market has been thoroughly infiltrated by the Mercedes C-class Estate. Keep your eyes open on the way to work tomorrow and you'll realise just what a success this premium estate has been during its five years on sale in the UK. Sure, the BMW 3 Series Touring may be more glamorous, the Alfa 156 Sportwagon more dynamic and the Audi A4 Estate significantly cooler, but the little Benz has consistently clocked up enough sales to keep the others on their toes. The reason the C-class Estate makes such a good used buy is the same as why the S-Class feels so bulletproof five, ten even fifteen years down the road. This was a car that brought new standards of quality and build integrity to the compact executive sector of the luxury market. It was assembled just like an S-class and felt just as good to drive - which is why many clever buyers are now snapping these cars up on the used market. You won't find a bargain basement C-class but find a well looked after example and it will run forever. Quarter of a million miles on the clock? Barely run in. That depth of engineering is why you're never far from a C-class Estate.

MERCEDES BENZ C CLASS HISTORY

Whilst the C-class' predecessor, the Mercedes 190 was undeniably popular, the glaring lack of an estate option was remedied by the introduction of the C-class estate back in October 1996. Breaking from the rather basic trim levels of the 190 series, the C-class featured a rather unique portfolio of trim packages which enabled the buyer to tailor each car to his or her own individual lifestyle. The surprisingly well appointed entry-level package was badged Classic, while those in search of brighter colours and a more youthful appearance could opt for similarly-priced Esprit models. If it was luxury you were after, it was possible to pay a premium to specify cars in wood and chrome-trimmed Elegance form. Those of sporting inclination meanwhile, were encouraged to opt for the Sport package, with its distinctive trim, attractive wheels and stiffened suspension. This formula was an instant success, coupled as it was with the usual wide selection of engines. Buyers chose between 1.8, 2.0, 2.3 Kompressor (supercharged), 2.4 or 2.8-litre petrol units or opted for 2.2-litre diesel (C220CDi) or 2.5-litre turbo-diesel power (the C250). In February 1998, the range was completed with the addition of the high performance C43 AMG estate. ASR anti-skid control was added to the standard specification at this point, with the ESP traction control system also incorporated into the standard specification a year later. In September 2000, an all-new C-class saloon range was launched with a new range of engines. The old-shape estate continued into 2001 however, and to keep buyers of that car happy, Mercedes fitted the new C200 Kompressor saloon's supercharged engine to the C200 estate model.

WHAT DO I GET FOR MY MONEY?

Equipment levels are probably higher than you might expect for an affordable Mercedes-Benz. Power steering, central locking, retractable rear head restraints, anti-lock brakes, a driver's airbag and front electric windows are standard on most models. The revised cars that appeared for the 1998 model year featured Mercedes' 'Brake Assist' automatic braking system, as well as the new plastic computerised ignition 'key'. Air conditioning, cruise control and rear electric windows became standard on most models, too.

WHAT PRICE AM I LOOKING AT?

Whilst the Mercedes C-class estate may be popular, don't confuse that with being inexpensive. You'll need to budget at least £5,500 for a 1996 P-registered C180 Classic automatic although if you want your estate to haul loads you may find this a trifle underpowered. If you choose to opt for a 1997 P-plate C200 Classic, you'll pay around £5,050, although you may find the £700 or so premium for the automatic model well worth paying: the manual box isn't the greatest. The strong C230 Kompressor estates start at £5,800 for an automatic Elegance model on a 1998 R plate, with more recent Sport trims at around £8,075 for a 2000 V registered example. For the mid-range 2.4-litre petrol car, expect to budget £6,350 (Classic), £6,650 (Elegance) or £6,675 (Sport) for automatic 1997 R-registered cars. If you're in this part of the market, you may well find it cost effective to fork out another £700 and get the 2.8-litre engine (not available in Classic trim). The racy C43 AMG estate starts at £11,500 for a 1998 R registered car. If you want diesel power, you've the

RATING OUT OF 10

For C-CLASS EST (96-01) RANGE

Performance	★★★★★	5
Comfort	★★★★★★	7
Handling	★★★★★	5
Economy	★★★★★★	7
Space / Versatility	★★★★★★	7
Styling	★★★★★★	7
Equipment	★★★★★	6
Build	★★★★★★	8
Depreciation	★★★★★★	8
Insurance	★★★★★	6
Value	★★★★★	6

OVERALL 6.5 OUT OF 10

GET A PRICE QUOTE

choice of 2.2-litre normally aspirated or 2.5 turbo diesel. The C220CDI Classic opens at £8,275 for a 1999 S registered car, and be prepared to budget another £800 for an automatic. The torquey 250TD is a great buy at £6,150 for a 1997 P registered Classic or Elegance automatic; even a X-registered C250TD Sport can be yours for less than £10,000.

WHAT SHOULD I LOOK OUT FOR?

Trade experts reckon these cars are most desirable when specified in an attractive metallic colour with automatic transmission, air conditioning and leather upholstery. You might bear that in mind when choosing a car as the right specification will make selling on easier. Unlike the saloon cars, Classic and Esprit models in dull non-metallic colours still sell pretty well, although auto boxes are similarly prized. A complete service history is absolutely essential. Check that all the accessories work - particularly air conditioning, which is expensive to put right. Cosmetic damage can be expensive to correct too. Watch out for signs of wheel kerbing and accident damage, and inspect the load bay for signs of damage. Ask too whether the exhaust system is Mercedes' own; non-Mercedes systems are noisier. Leather upholstery blemishes are pricey to repair.

HOW DOES IT DRIVE?

On the road, there's a feeling of inherent rightness about the way the car conducts itself which is matched by no other competitor. Stability and damping are almost flawless, though the tauter response offered by the lower suspension that's standard in Esprit specification is generally preferred by enthusiast drivers. Fortunately, that doesn't appreciably detract from the C-class's strongest suit; its ride quality. This is the best car of any in the sector to ride in; BMW, Saab and Audi, take note. Passengers will quickly forget that they're travelling in a compact car, so easily are bumpy or uneven surfaces dispatched without interior disturbance.

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PARTS INFORMATION

(approx. Based on C220 diesel estate model) Allow around £45 for front brake pads and £20 for the rear, and about £340 for a full Mercedes exhaust system (or around £1,200 in the case of the AMG system used in the C36). A full clutch system would cost around £220, a radiator is about £140 whilst a starter motor can be up to £470. An alternator should be in the region of £415 (exchange) and a front headlamp is around £165.