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Mercedes' road to redesign is usually paved with one part technological leap and one part style. The new E-Class continues that trend, yet brings its own unique blend of looks, gadgets and bobbles to the company's distinctly posh lineup.

To the uninitiated, the letters and numbers decorating the tails of these pricey German-built cars must seem like secret code. To the Faithful, however, they represent an exemplary degree of performance, features and status that make anything featuring the legendary three-pointed star something special.

The strength of most Mercedes-Benz cars is that they are among the most instantly recognizable vehicles on the road. Although other manufacturers make wholesale changes to their products on a continual basis, DaimlerChrysler's luxury division quietly revises its lineup in such a subtle and nearly imperceptible way that it's hard to tell when the previous model production ends and a new one begins.

The latest E-Class, which replaces the version first launched in 1995, completely supports this claim. Most Mercedes spotters, or anyone else for that matter, will easily pick this one out, even though the car has undergone significant change for 2003. Its arrival follows on the heels of the current S-Class and the starting-point C-Class cars that are sleeker, more technically advanced and deliver more get-up-and-go than their predecessors.

As Mercedes' most popular model, the E-Class has received a lot of attention for 2003. Overall styling has become more aggressive, with a lower front profile and taller rear deck. The roofline is also less formal, flowing rearward in a smooth arc. Also noticeable are the rear wheels that have been pushed further outward and encased in newly bulging fenders that seem to

struggle to contain the sharp-looking alloy wheels.

On the inside of the E-Class, it's obvious that Mercedes is moving away from its previous austere interiors, replacing them with an environment that is more people-friendly. Passengers are greeted with warmer color tones, wood trim and big, easy-to-use dials and switches.

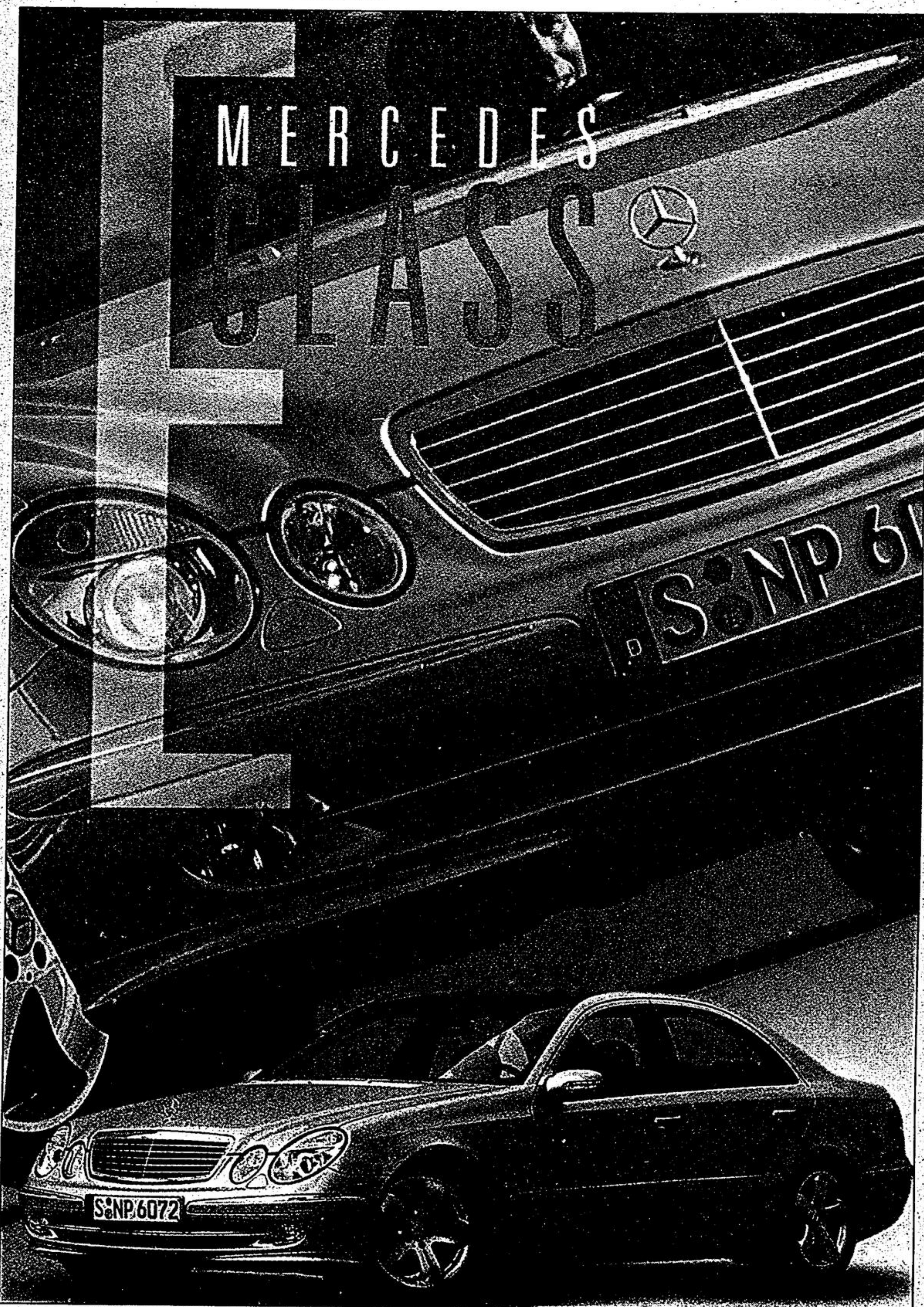
However, looks are only one facet of the E-Class experience. There are also leading-edge gizmos and safety features to consider, including an electronically controlled brake-by-wire system (the pedal is connected to a computer rather than the master cylinder). As well, the Airmatic suspension automatically adjusts spring rates to improve the ride and firm up the suspension in tight cornering manoeuvres.

Initially, two versions of the new E-Class will be available in North America. The E320 is equipped with a 215-horsepower SOHC 3.2-litre V6 that carries over from the '02 sedan. Drivers requiring more snap can opt for the E500, with its 5.0-litre SOHC V8 that puts out 302 horsepower and 339 lb.-ft. of torque. That represents a gain of 27 horsepower, and 44 lb.-ft. of torque over the previous E430's 4.3-litre V8.

Both engines are connected to five-speed automatic transmissions that incorporate Mercedes' shift-for-yourself Touch-Shift control.

Down the road, Mercedes-Benz will offer the E-Class in a wagon version as well as a sedan that will be tweaked by in-house tuners, AMG. Four-wheel-drive derivatives will also follow in about a year.

Given the significant improvements to the E-Class, including swoopy new sheetmetal, extra available horsepower and dressier interior appointments, Mercedes-Benz should have no trouble keeping this model as the leader of its well turned-out pack.



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