Road beat: Mitsubishi a responsive AWD



Mitsubishi’s Lancer SE AWC is worth the money. Photos/Larry Weitzman

By Larry Weitzman

Mitsubishi isn’t the biggest player in the automobile market, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t deserve a hard look when choosing a small car or an SUV. The Lancer SE AWC is a solid reason why. AWC is another way of saying all wheel drive as AWC means all wheel control.

It’s an electronic system meaning it is fully selectable from economical front two-wheel drive, automatic all wheel drive and a locking system as well – all at the push of a button.

Trick, sophisticated stuff. Only the small rear badge lets you know this Lancer has AWC.

Outside Lancer uses the same Concept-X shark nose design concept which is still fresh, sporty and edgy. The lines are clean and purposeful except for the rear window line hump which looks out of context in this otherwise outstanding design. While compact cars have been injected with growth hormones, Mitsu has maintained its compact industry standard of a 180 inch overall length on a 104-inch wheelbase. An original BMW 5 series sedan had an inch shorter wheelbase and was only an inch longer. Now the current 5 Series rides on a 117-inch wheelbase and is 193-inches long.

Width is an average 69.4 inches and height is a somewhat tall 58 inches.



Power is by a world class 2.4L DOHC, 16 valve inline four cylinder engine that was jointly developed by Chrysler, Hyundai and Mitsubishi sometimes known as the Global Engine Alliance. It is still used in various forms by all three companies. In Mitsu form, it develops 168 hp at a low 6,000 rpm and 167 pounds of twist at an even lower 4,100 rpm. While it may not develop the highest peak hp of the family, it probably is the most flexible with a broad flat torque band actually making it feel peppier. Who drives around at 6,500 rpm anyway, unless you are racing SCCA. Most people will find their engines operating between

Specifications:
Engine
2.4L DOHC, 16 valve inline four cylinder 168 hp @ 6,000 rpm
167 ft.-lbs. of torque @ 4,100 rpm
Transmission
CVT
Configuration
Transverse mounted front engine/AWD
Dimensions
Wheelbase 103.7 inches
Length 180 inches
Width 69.4 inches
Height 58.7 inches

2,000 and 4,000 rpm and 4,100 is where the Mitsu operates at peak volumetric efficiency.

Performance is a bit behind the Lancer GT as the GT operates in front-wheel drive only and therefore weighs in at about 125 pounds less, but the times are very close. Zero to 60 mph stopped the watch at 7.61 seconds with commensurate passing times of 4.61 and 7.27 seconds in 50 to 70 mph simulated passing times on level ground and up a 6 percent grade. The Lancer GT times were 7.54, 4.37 and 6.12 seconds, respectively.

But fuel economy, which by the EPA ratings says that the AWC model will pay a 1 mpg penalty, did not materialize. EPA rates the Lancer AWC at 22/25/29 MPG city/highway/combined. Overall in varied driving the Lancer averaged between 26-29 mpg with almost no time on the highway. But once on a level highway at 70 mph it averaged between 34 and 35 mpg, about 1 mpg better than the GT. Fuel capacity is a large 14.5 gallons for a compact.

Track (f/r) 60.2/60.2 inches
Ground clearance 5.8 inches
Weight 3,142 pounds
Weight distribution (f/r) 59/41percent
Fuel tank 14.5 gallons
Trunk capacity 12.3 cubic feet
Wheels 16×7 inch alloys
Tires 205/60×16 all season
Steering lock to lock 3.16 turns
Turning circle 32.8 feet

Performance

0-60 mph 7.61 seconds
50-70 mph 4.61 seconds
50-70 mph uphill 7.27 seconds
Top speed: Don’t even consider finding out unless on a race track.
Fuel economy EPA rated at 22/29/25 mpg city/highway combined. Expect 34-35 mpg on the highway at legal speeds and about 27-28 mpg overall.

As with the GT, the Lancer makes enough power to induce torque steer at low speeds, but with the AWC in AWD, there is none. The hydraulic power steering rack is reasonably quick at 3.16 turns lock to lock, close to the 3.0 or less that I look for.

The rest of the Lancer underpinnings are a fairly standard MacPherson struts up front with a multilink fully independent system out back. This is an upgrade over most compacts that use a semi-independent torsion beam out back. Wheels are stylish 16 inch alloys with 205/60 series tires. Not exactly racetrack rubber, but still quick sticky. Consequently the handling with the AWD engaged is fairly benign and powerful. It has no vices, just the ability to go where it's pointed with good feedback. Turn-in is crisp in spite of the tall 60 series rubber and off and on center feel if very good. It is an easy car to drive aggressively. And as a bonus the turning circle is less than 33 feet.

Ride quality is firm, but still quite compliant. Those taller tires certainly help. About the only issue is road noise from coarse roads, otherwise its ride compares well to other compacts but it is preferable to this writer. Engine speed is a low 2,250 rpm at 70 mph and it is inaudible. With the tranny being a CVT , it only improves the overall smoothness of the Lancer experience.

Braking is done by four-wheel disc brakes, something that is not standard on all compact cars with ABD, EBD and BA. The system had a strong pedal and arrested forward progress from 40 mph in 43-44 feet. Other features enhance safety like stability and traction control, TPMS, seven airbags plus the Mitsu RISE body system in case of collision.

Inside the Lancer is a quality interior done with cloth seats that are surprisingly comfortable and manually adjustable in three axis. Instrumentation is routine with a large tach and speedo flanking a center information center with a trip computer and graphic ancillary gauges. A touch screen is used to control the excellent standard sound system. While not the biggest compact car with 93 cubic feet of interior volume and a 12 cubic foot trunk, it still has ample room for a couple of 6 footers in the rear. Three big guys would be doable as long as I am riding shotgun in front.

Pricing for this nicely equipped Lancer SE AWC with the CVT and 2.4L engine starts at $20,995 plus $810 for the boat from Kurashiki, Japan. The only option on my tester was Premium package for $1,700 that added a moon roof, an upgraded 710-watt Rockford Fosgate sound system, fast key entry system (nice feature) and some leather on the steering wheel and shift knob. If you want or need a responsive AWD small car, this is it. As an added bonus, all Mitsubishis come with substantial piece of mind in a 5 year/60,000 mile bumper to bumper warranty plus a 10 year/100,000 mile power train warranty.

Larry Weitzman has been into cars since he was 5 years old. At 8 he could recite from memory the hp of every car made in the U.S. He has put in thousands of laps on racetracks all over the Western United States.