

Road beat: Mazda 3 top of its class



The Mazda 3 stands out in its class of cars. Photos/Larry Weitzman

By Larry Weitzman

Mazda has always made edgy, tight cars with class leading performance and handling. And with the all-new Mazda 3, Mazda has now combined those two qualities with class leading design.

While not the most powerful compact car, the 2.5L Mazda 3 now provides the best balance of performance and fuel economy of perhaps any car in current production. I understand that is a huge statement, but you will see it backed up with loads of data.

Mazda 3's stunning styling is derived directly from a recent show car called the Takeri. From its clean, aggressive front end to its sculptured character lines, Mazda 3 speaks of an exhilarating driving experience once the lucky driver takes his place in the superbly designed driver's seat. It is a few inches shorter than your average compact at just 176 inches, but its low, wide hood line and well proportioned cabin give the Mazda 3 the impression of having a sleek long powerful front end found on classics from the 1930s. Mazda's coefficient of drag is a very low 0.28 for the 5-door hatchback and just 0.26 for the sedan, numbers which contribute to its excellent highway fuel economy.



Specifications

Engine

DOHC, 16 valve inline 2.5L
four 184 hp @ 5,700 rpm
185 ft-lb of torque at 3,250 rpm

Transmission

Six Speed torque converter
automatic, with paddle
shifters

Configuration

Transverse mounted front
engine/front wheel drive

Dimensions

Wheelbase 106.3 inches
Length 175.6 inches

Width 70.7 inches
Height 57.3 inches
Track (f/r) 61.2/61.4 inches
Ground clearance 6.1 inches
Weight 3,002 pounds
Weight distribution (f/r)
60/40%
Fuel capacity 13.2 gallons
Cargo capacity (rear seats
up/down) 20.2/47.1 cubic
feet
Steering lock to lock 2.57
turns
Turning circle (curb to
curb) 34.78 feet
Turning circle (wall to
wall) 37.07 feet
Wheels 18X7 inch alloys
Tires 215/45X18 all season
radials
Co-efficient of drag
(sedan/hatchback) 0.26/0.28

Performance

0-60 mph 7.08 seconds
50-70 mph 3.91 seconds
50-70 mph uphill 5.74
seconds
Top speed 130 mph
electronically limited
Fuel economy 28/38/32 mpg
city/highway/combined.
Expect 33-34 mpg in rural
country driving and over 40
mpg on a level highway at
legal speeds.

Matching its slick design and under the hood is a 2.5L DOHC,

16 valve normally aspirated inline four which pumps out 184 hp at a low 5,700 rpm plus 185 pounds of twist at a very low 3,250 rpm. Of course it is warm butter smooth. Its hooked up to a six-speed auto cog swapper (only choice, no manual offered with the 2.5L, but you can get a manual six-speed with the 155 hp 2.0L) that has real paddle shifters that do let you control what's happening if you so desire. Some other 2.5L fours make maybe 10 more hp, but none of them make 184 hp at a low 5,700 rpm meaning the Mazda gets to its hp quicker than other 2.5L inline fours and that equates to better performance especially in everyday driving.

Where most compacts struggle to get to 60 mph is less than 9 seconds, this Mazda 3 will run 0-60 mph in just 7.08 seconds and it will light 'em up with ease if you stab the go pedal. It down right rocks. Passing times are also extremely quick with a 50-70 mph run taking just 3.91 seconds and a steep grade will only slow that time to 5.74 seconds making this the quickest, normally aspirated compact ever tested by the Road Beat and on average by a good margin and it is quicker than some compacts that are turbocharged.

But high performance need not mean that you can't have excellent fuel economy. At a steady 70 mph on a level highway this Mazda 3 will return 43.4 mpg. Overall it averaged 33-34 mpg and on a trip from Placerville to South Lake Tahoe (a climb of 5,500 feet) and back it averaged 38.6 mpg and that included at least half a dozen full throttle passes on Highway 50. EPA says that you should expect 28/38/32 city/highway/combined. As with most every other compact car, the fuel tank is a modest 13.2 gallons. It must be an industry standard as Honda, Nissan and Toyota share the same fuel capacity. Hyundai and Ford compacts have even less tankage.

Perhaps helping its phenomenal performance is Mazda's SKYACTIV-G technology and its i-EL00P regenerative engine braking system. SKYACTIV-G relates to engine design (combustion technology and design) and direct injection.

Mazda, because of its design and direct injection where fuel is injected directly into the cylinder (instead of behind the intake valve at the intake port), has a very high compression ratio of 13:1 on regular fuel which makes the engine more efficient and powerful. I-EL00P regen braking isn't a hybrid but reduces engine drag of a conventional alternator with a variable charging alternator by capturing electrical energy from braking in a capacitor which is then used for some of the Mazda's electrical power needs instead of requiring the alternator to provide power and recharge the battery. You cannot feel it work, but it is there.

According to the EPA, i-EL00P should give you one more mpg in the Hatchback five-door model. In the sedan EPA numbers are the same that leaves this writer with the question if the expense of the i-EL00P system is worth the extra cost. If it improves, your fuel economy of 35 mpg by a half mpg and you drive 15,000 miles a year it might save you 6 gallons of gas or about \$24. Mazda would not reveal the cost of the system, but you can bet it adds at least \$300 to the cost of the car.

Aside from this nitpicking, Mazda also shows itself off with class leading handling. It comes with state of the art MacPherson struts up front and a multilink system in the rear and while other manufacturers may have a similar system, Mazda seems to have done it better. You can say the same thing about the steering with its electric power rack, not only is it tuned to perfection; it is the quickest of just about any car tested by the Road Beat, never mind any compact vehicle. It is just 2.57 turns lock to lock. And with the 3 S model you also get 18x7 inch alloys shod with wide 215/45 rubber.



Leather seats add to the comfort.

With its aforementioned superbly balanced suspension, super quick steering with natural feeling and feedback and extremely wide track of over 61 inches, not many cars change directions with the aplomb of a Mazda 3. In fact, on the track, it might give its MX-5 Miata sibling a good run for the money even with 500 extra pounds (The 3 S weighs 3,002 pounds). No other compact, except for perhaps a VW GTI, a Honda Si or a Focus ST can match the Mazda 3 when the road bends. The Mazda 3 is about as much fun as you can have while seated. If you have a mind like mine, the rear cargo area with the rear seats folded flat has over 47 cubes for Home Depot trips or camping.

Ride quality can best be described as firm supple. It is quiet on all but the coarsest roads when some road noise will intrude into the cabin. There is no wind noise. The engine spins a low 2,000 rpm at 70 mph. It is a terrific road car with superb ride control.

Braking with four-wheel discs, front ventilated, with about every acronym is excellent arresting forward progress from 40 mph in a benchmark 40 feet. It has blind spot monitoring and rear cross traffic alert plus stability and traction control and a host of other safety features and the usual inventory of airbags. Standard headlights were adaptive HID with a bright wide spread and sharp cut off but they could have used a bit more distance when on low beam.

Not letting anything go without refinement, the quality Mazda 3 interior is near perfect with great looking leather seats that give you long haul comfort and perfect support and positioning. This loaded Mazda came with a heads-up display for the speedo plus a large central tach with another digital speedo located in the lower right quadrant of the tach. Quality abounds on every surface with sublime, soft touch materials. About the only personal knock is the central mounted, stand up screen for operating the GPS, radio and other systems. It just kind of sticks out from the top of the center of the instrument panel. You might think it would retract into the panel, but it doesn't. One other nitpick is that the awesome sound system was hard to use, especially pre-selecting radio stations. Maybe there is a learning curve.

My top of the line tester stickered for \$26,495, plus \$795 for destination. It had the \$1,800 technology package that included the i-EL00P regen system that also included the Smart City Braking System, a boon for those who do other things while driving. I would take a pass. However, there is no question the new Mazda 3 is now at the top of the class for all compacts even if you purchased the \$16,945 2.0L. No other compact offers the driving enjoyment and world class looks, notwithstanding its top of the class performance and fuel economy. It is the most rocking compact you can buy while being about as stable as you can get. The answer to the initial question is a resounding yes.

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.