Road Beat: Mazda CX-5, again the class leader

By Larry Weitzman

Compact CUVs are one of the hottest selling segments in the market and the competition is stiff, real stiff. I understand the CX-5 is not the biggest selling CUV, brand T and H are followed by brand N and they are good CUVs.

Mazda is an outlier brand, the big Japanese manufacturers have referred to Mazda as “cowboys,” doing things a little different. But I like different. I own an RX-8 rotary with 112,000 miles on it and I love that car. It is a phenomenal ride in so many ways. And it was the Wankel rotary engine that originally separated Mazda from other brands. And that is a good thing.

The prior generation CX-5 was the top of its class with world class looks following the Mazda Kodo-Soul of Motion design ethos. With the new 2017 generation, while similar looking to the previous model, the new body is bolder, sharper and smoother all at the same time. You can see it in the more defined grille, the slimmer, sleeker headlights, shapelier flanks and a more attractive and proportional window line.

Every dimension has changed by as little as a tenth of an inch to about half an inch, demonstrating that the 2017 CX-5 is a new design. Wheelbase, length and width are 106 x 179 x 73 inches putting it in the category of a smaller compact CUV.

Powering the new CX-5 is a choice of one engine, Mazda’s 2.5L SkyActiv DOHC, 16 valve, inline four, which has the ability to run in a more efficient Atkinson cycle when flank speed is not called for. In its new iteration horsepower is up by three to 187 at 6,000 rpm and torque remains at 185 pounds at 4,000 rpm in this AWD model. With FWD, peak torque drops to a low 3,250

rpm. Redline is 6,500 rpm. All four wheels are driven all the time via a six speed extremely smooth torque converter auto cog-swapper. Adaptation of the Mazda low pressure turbo in the CX-9 as an option would be welcomed, especially operating at high altitudes.

AWD models adds about 128 pounds to the CX-5. My performance numbers suffered slightly from my last CX-5 test, which was an FWD unit. Zero to 60 mph arrived in 8.35 seconds or marginally slower than my prior CX-5 FWD test from 2015. Passing times were also marginally slower as 50-70 mph arrive in 4.47 and 7.99 seconds respectively in a level and uphill 50-70 mph passing simulation. The weight difference should not account for this so I have no explanation. However, the performance of the new CX-5 is still very good. It feels very responsive.

Specifications
Price $24,985 to about $34,380
Engine
2.5L inline four 16 valve, DOHC 187 hp @ 6,000 rpm
185 ft-lb of torque @ 4,000 rpm
Transmission
Six speed torque converter automatic
Configuration

Transverse front engine/ FWD/AWD

Dimensions

Wheelbase 106.2 inches
Length 179.1 inches
Width 72.5 inches
Height 65.3 inches
Track (f/r) 62.8/62.8 inches
Ground clearance 7.6 inches
Weight 3,655 pounds
GVWR 4,643 pounds
Steering lock to lock 2.7 turns
Turning circle (wall to wall) 38.7 feet
Wheels 19X7 inch alloys
Tires 225/55X19
Cargo capacity (second row up/down) 30.9/56.6 cubic feet
Fuel capacity 15.3 gallons
Co-efficient of drag 0.33

Performance

0-60 mph 8.35 seconds
50-70 mph 4.47 seconds
50-70 mph uphill 7.99 seconds
Top speed (mfg) 127 mph
Fuel economy EPA rated 23/29/26 mpg city/highway/combined. Expect 25-26 mpg in rural country driving. 33 mpg on a level highway at legal speeds.

Photo/Larry Weitzman

Fuel economy is EPA rated at 23/29/26 mpg city/highway/combined. Highway mileage actually improved with a two-way run at 70 mph averaging 33.7 mpg and overall about 26 mpg. In a round trip to Carson City the CX-5 averaged 28.5 mpg in aggressive driving with full throttle passing in all of the 20 or so passing zones on Highway 50. More normal applications of the go pedal may have improved that number by an mpg or two.

While the new CX-5 may share similar dimensions to the prior generation, its structure and build quality is significantly improved. Of course, suspension is state of the art four-wheel independent with one of the best electric power steering racks and 19 x 7 inch alloys shod with wide 225/55 series rubber all add up to precise, benign handling, handling of a good sports sedan (like a Mazda 6), safe, accurate and secure with great grip. CX-5 will straighten out the best pretzels easily. It maintains a flat attitude when pushed hard and understeer is mild. And the stiffer construction and chassis just add to the equation of making CX-5 top of the class in drivability.

And the ride is smoother, more refined and quieter and that's with the engine spinning a moderate 2,350 rpm at 70 mph. The engine only becomes slightly intrusive at high rpms during a full tilt boogie. But it's the new ride quality that really stands out, certainly best in class and then some controlling pitch motions perfectly while absorbing road punishment like a world class heavyweight champion. There is no wind, engine and tire noise except as noted above.

Then there is the new, highly refined, gorgeous interior. It falls in the category of a near luxury car. Soft touch and leather abounds. Seats are sublime and in the GT with the Premium Package (a bargain at $1,830) you get heated rear seats, heated steering wheel, a slick heads up display, power passenger seat and even windshield wiper deicers.

Instrumentation is all business with all the proper precision like instrumentation, complete trip meter and that superb heads up display. Dash is of course soft touch. The only negative is the radio/nav system and the mini-mouse. After a few weeks, I can use it with decent proficiency, but it still requires too many steps. It is flat out too complicated. It as if they are trying to outdo the infotainment system in a BMW. Maybe they have succeeded in that goal, too.

Safety is another high spot for the CX-5. Standard LED headlights are fabulous and all the acronyms are standard plus automatic braking. Adding to that safety factor is Mazda's exemplary handling. Nearly 1-foot four-wheel disc brakes are powerful.

Pricing for the CX-5 starts at $24,045 for the Sport FWD. Add $1,300 for AWD. My top of the line tester AWD stickered for $30,695 and $1,830 for the Premium pack. My tester was painted in a deep Soul Red Crystal for an additional $595 and when you add on the boat ride from Hiroshima, Japan ($940) the sticker totals $34,380 for the best in class compact SUV. It is the leader of the pack. And on top of that you get world class looks. Maybe the other manufacturers should learn how to ride horses and work cows, too.

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.