

Road Beat: 2018 Mazda 3 Grand Touring – still impressive



The 2018 Mazda 3 Grand Touring, five door is still the best of the best. Photos/Larry Weitzman

By Larry Weitzman

They are cowboys, but they sure can breed them right and ride them the best. I am not talking about cows or horses, but the car company from Japan that the other major manufacturers refer to sometimes as cowboys. With their swagger and panache, you would think they were an American company with 500 hp V-8s, but no, the biggest engine they produce is a 2.5L inline four and in a turbo version it produces a maximum of 250 hp. Normally aspirated, that number drops to either 187 or 184 depending on the installation. How could a car company whose biggest engine is a 2.5L four and 250 hp be called a cowboy?

If you are Mazda, that's what the others call you, and for good reasons.

First, is the out of the box styling, Mazda calls it Kodo, but it is the result of a concept car called the Takeri. Mazdas are bold, aggressive and beautifully proportioned with each line creating a new shapely delight in the body. It starts with the best front end in motordom, aggressive and strong with character lines moving rearward shaping an almost "coke bottle" look that was created by NASA in about 1954 which was the result of the discovery of the "area boundary rule" that allowed air force fighter jets to easily exceed the speed of sound. Look at the fuselage of an early F-102 Delta Dagger and a later F102A or the very similar F-106 Delta Dart. With essentially the same engine, top speed was nearly doubled in the F-106 over the original F-102. Later F-102s were modified with the area boundary rule fuselage allowing them to go supersonic.

The bottom line is that the Mazda3 five door is the best looking compact in the business. Size-wise, the Mazda3 five door (meaning hatchback wagon) is a minuscule 176-inches long by 71-inches wide and 57-inches tall, which makes it slightly shorter than the compact car rule of 180 inches. That's a bonus as its internal dimensions are not compromised.



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

Six speed manual

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 3,046 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 6.92 seconds
50-70 mph 3.43 seconds
50-70 mph uphill 5.31 seconds
Top speed 130 mph electronically limited
Fuel economy 26/35/30 mpg city/highway/combined.
Expect 32 mpg in rural country driving and over 37 mpg on a level highway at legal speeds.

Under hood is, you guessed it, Mazda's 2.5L Skyactiv DOHC, 16 valve inline four that creates 184 hp at 5,700 rpm at full boil. Redline extends to about 6,500 rpm. Torque of 185 pounds of twist is developed at a low 3,250 rpm meaning this is a strong down low engine and its performance numbers demonstrate that power. Skyactiv's most significant feature is direct injection.

Zero to 60 mph arrives in under 7 seconds at 6.92 seconds. Passing performance is also outstanding with 50-70 mph acceleration taking 3.43 seconds and the same run up a steep grade (6-7 percent) just slowing that time to 5.31 seconds. Fifteen to 20 years ago a 5-second run on level ground was considered good. In other words, the Mazda3 with the 2.5 engine is the strongest performer in the compact class save for a couple of the new turbo Hondas which in the Si model is a bit quicker.

In comparison to the six-speed manual Mazda3 five door GT, the automatic is quicker as the manual posted numbers a year ago as follows: 6.98, 3.95 and 6.12, respectively, for the same three performance parameters. Go with the six-speed torque converter automatic which comes with paddle shifters as well. It is responsive and super smooth. This Mazda3 will push you

well back in the seat even with part throttle. It feels powerful and that makes it lots of fun.

Fuel economy as rated by the EPA cycle is 26/35/30 mpg. Mazda has the title as the most fuel efficient company, followed closely by Honda. In real life at 70 mph on a level highway and making a 20-mile two-way run, the Mazda3 returned 37.3 mpg. Overall 30-32 was the averaged for 600 miles and in a 200-mile run from Placerville to Carson City over the Sierra on Highway 50 in aggressive driving the Mazda3 averaged 36.9 mpg. The speed limit is 55 mph on Highway 50, but there were more than a dozen full throttle passes. Amazing economy considering its very high performance, or even not considering the Mazda3's amazing performance as a compact.

Suspenders are state of the art independent, no torsion beam rear axle. It's a true independent, which makes a difference when pushing the vehicle hard at maximum performance. And this Mazda3 can be pushed in the twisties. It's no wonder that more Mazdas are raced than any other brand, especially Mazda3s and Miatas.

We have a huge Miata champion right here in El Dorado County in the form of Mark Hoover who races a highly modified Miata and consistently wins at the national level. He is a Mazda expert. Just drop by European Performance where he is preparing his Miata for the upcoming season. He will also tell you when it comes to grooving corners, Mazdas do them best. Steering, tracking and roll control are as close to perfect as you can get. Mazda3 gets it done.

On the flip side, the Mazda3 rides on the firm side of the equation, smoothing out road imperfections with aplomb. It is smooth and quiet with little road noise; no wind noise and the engine is silent as it turns a low 2,000 rpm at 70 mph and has a pleasant growl when you get your foot into it.

Safety is not compromised as all the acronyms are present and

includes a rear back up camera. Brakes a very strong with large four-wheel discs and air bags abound. Special mention needs to be made about the LED headlights with standard auto high beam and AFS that track with steering. The auto dim and tracking are part of the \$1,600 Premium package that also gets you lane departure warning, lane keep assist, radar cruise, smart braking and more. It's a bargain.

Interior quality is magnificent, with contrasting, comfortable, leather bucket seats, great instrument panel, heads up display and a center stack that I now use as if second nature. It's as nice inside as it is outside.

Pricing is set at \$24,975, plus \$875 for the boat from Hofu, Japan. With the Premium package, Appearance package (\$1,750), go fast Soul Red metallic paint (\$300) and a few other items brought the total to \$29,770. Mazda3 is the best of the best in this highly competitive compact category. End of story.

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.