

# Road beat: Mazda 3 best in its class



The Mazda 3 has plenty of power. Photos/Larry Weitzman

**By Larry Weitzman**

A few months ago the Road Beat had a chance to test the best compact car in current production, the Mazda 3 2.5L hatchback, a virtual econo-rocket that combines excellent performance with phenomenal fuel economy, plus near sports car handling coupled with good ride quality. But that was a fully loaded Mazda 3 that stickered at \$500 shy of 30 large. But then again there are Priuses that sticker for well over \$30K.

What about the basic Mazda 3, a smaller engine (2.0L), automatic with no upgrades except for a sunroof and a “better” radio, how does it compare? Is it still a standout in its

class? The answer again is a resounding yes. First, the Mazda 3 is the best-looking econobox small sedan in the marketplace. Its Takeri derived exterior is simply a cut above all else out there. It is aggressive, clean and edgy. In fact, if you don't look close, it is difficult to tell the Mazda 6 and the Mazda 3 from one another. Coefficient of drag is a super low 0.26.



### **Specifications**

Price About \$19,000 to \$30,000

Engine

DOHC, 16 valve inline 2.0L four 155 hp @ 6,000 rpm

150 ft-lb of torque at 5,000 rpm

Transmission

Six Speed torque converter automatic,

Configuration

Transverse mounted front engine/front wheel drive

### **Dimensions**

Wheelbase 106.3 inches

Length 180.3 inches

Width 70.7 inches

Height 57.3 inches

Track (f/r) 61.2/61.4 inches

Ground clearance 6.1 inches

Weight 2,848 pounds  
Weight distribution (f/r)  
60/40%  
Fuel capacity 13.2 gallons  
Cargo capacity 12.4 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 16X6.5 inch alloys  
Tires 215/45X18 all season  
radials  
Co-efficient of drag  
(sedan/hatchback) 0.26/0.28

### **Performance**

0-60 mph 7.97seconds  
50-70 mph 4.46 seconds  
50-70 mph uphill 6.74  
seconds  
Top speed 130 mph  
electronically limited  
Fuel economy 30/41/34 mpg  
city/highway/combined.  
Expect 35 mpg in rural  
country driving and 41 mpg  
or more on a level highway  
at legal speeds.

Mazda 3's ride on a long 106.3 inch wheelbase with a body that extends 180 inches, which is fairly standard for all compacts. It stand a little wider at 71 inches with broad, well defined shoulders but maintains a sleek look with a height of 57 inches, made more remarkable with a ground clearance of 6 inches.

Buried beneath the bonnet is Mazda's 2.0L SkyActiv inline 4-cylinder engine with all the bells and whistles including direct injection with its remarkably high 13:1 compression. Of course its DOHC valve train and 24 valves create 155 hp at a relatively low 6,000 rpm plus 150 pounds of peak twist at 5,000 rpm. As econoboxes go, this is the most powerful standard engine in its class. It is connected to either a six-speed manual or torque converter automatic.

Performance is again at the top of the class with 0-60 mph elapsed time of 7.97 seconds, the only standard engine compact car that breaks the eight second mark. Passing times are also class leading with 50-70 mph times of 4.46 seconds on level ground and 6.74 seconds up a six percent grade. Times for the 2.5L version of the Mazda 3 are 7.08, 3.914 and 5.74 seconds, respectively.

While the performance benefits of the 2.5L engine are substantial, the fuel economy penalty for that extra moxie is minuscule. The 2.0L is rated again at a class high of 30/41/34 mpg city highway/combined. Overall in real driving conditions it averaged 35 mpg and at a steady 70 mph on a level highway the average for a two-way run was 43.1 mpg. The 200-pound heavier 2.5L engine five door hatchback averaged 33-34 mpg overall and 43.4 mpg at 70 mpg. If you are willing to spend a few bucks more for the extra fun and punch of the 2.5, fuel economy should not be a consideration as they are essentially the same and best in class. With the Mazda 3 with either engine, you get to have your cake, eat it too and still not get fat.

Changing directions in a Mazda 3 is a confidence inspiring experience. If you haven't heard it before, Mazda is the most raced car in the world and that's because they change directions so well. Can you say Miata? But the Mazda 3 is also heavily raced because of its inherently excellent handling. MacPherson struts reside up front and a multilink fully independent system holds up the rear. Most other compact cars

use a less sophisticated torsion beam in the rear. But it's all the other creds that make the Mazda 3 so good like a super quick electric rack that goes lock to lock in 2.57 turns. Its wide track of 61 inches is bookended with 16 x 6.5 inch alloys shod with 205/60 rubber, not exactly your everyday low profile track tire. But the reality is a fine handling sporty compact that do the twisties at a brisk pace that will surprise you. As compacts go, Mazda's crisper handling and feedback is a cut or two above the rest of the class except for maybe a Focus ST (which is a related car).

Ride quality is also sporty. No soft cush here, as the quality as with the other Mazda 3 can be best described as firm supple but slightly less firm than the 2.5L hatchback with the taller 18 inch wheels and lower profile tires. The base 3 is a quieter well controlled ride. On the highway the engine spins a low 2,000 rpm and is inaudible as a compact car can be. Coarse roads will bring out some road noise.

Braking is by four-wheel discs (front rotors are ventilated) that arrested forward progress from 40 mph in 43 feet with excellent control and a strong pedal. Of course ABS and all the other acronyms are standard equipment along with blind spot monitoring, a rear cross check traffic alert system and a rear view camera besides six airbags. Nice. Standard halogen headlights are also excellent. One point of note is to get cruise control you have to upgrade from the base model to the Sport model. The touring sedan as tested here is one grade above the Sport and adds even more standard equipment. Sport also gets a tach and trip computer, so in buying a Mazda 3 buy the Sport model or higher.



Handling is good with this sporty vehicle.

Inside are premium cloth seats that are six-way manually adjustable that are quite comfortable. Rear seating area is also good for two, but a pinch for three, sort of like the middle seat on a narrow body airliner. A couple of grips are in the too small tach and the radio systems control. Sticking up at the top of the center stack is a screen that looks like an after thought. If that isn't a bit hokey, then the knob located in front of the center console is. It is just too difficult to use. Whatever happened to a volume knob, tuning knob and buttons for presets and function? What a concept.

A well shaped trunk holds 12.4 cubic feet.

Pricing starts for the Mazda 3 Touring sedan is \$20, 645 plus \$795 for the boat train from Salamanca, Mexico where it is assembled. Also standard is a five-year 60,000 miles powertrain warranty plus the usual 36/36 bumper to bumper warranty. It is simply the best compact car on the market today having the best performance and highest mileage in the class.

*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.*