

Road beat: Mazda 6 tops the mid-size market



The Mazda 6 is setting the standard for what a mid-size car should be. Photos/Larry Weitzman

By Larry Weitzman

Mazda isn't the biggest car company in the world, now selling about 30,000 units a month in the U.S., up about 25 percent from the same period last year and for good reason. They design and build some of the best cars in the world. A recent Road Beat test of the Mazda 3 hatchback ranked it as the best compact car currently on the market, a position they could hold solely on its looks, closely based on its recent Takeri show car. But its top of class handling, ride, fuel economy and performance only sealed the deal.

Mazda 6 is an obvious Mazda 3 sibling. Looks wise it's hard to tell them apart giving the Mazda 6 the title of the best looking mid-size car on the market. Its long, flat, yet shapely hood and aggressive front end sets the tone that this car means business. Even better is its profile, slick, lean and muscular with a window line that accentuates its length and sleekness. Its coefficient of drag is a remarkably low 0.26 which pays big dividends as you will see later. If there were a perfect design, this is it.



Specifications

Price \$21,985 to about \$33,000

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 111.4 inches
Length 191.5 inches

Width 72.4 inches
Height 57.1 inches
Track (f/r) 62.8/62.4 inches
Ground clearance 6.7 inches
Weight 3,232 pounds
Weight distribution (f/r)
58/42%
Fuel capacity 16.4 gallons
Cargo capacity 16.4 cubic
feet
Steering lock to lock 2.81
turns
Turning circle (curb to
curb) 36.7 feet
Wheels 19X7.5 inch alloys
Tires 225/45X19 all season
radials
Co-efficient of drag 0.26

Performance

0-60 mph 7.32 seconds
50-70 mph 3.92 seconds
50-70 mph uphill 5.81
seconds
Top speed 140 mph
electronically limited
Fuel economy 28/40/32 mpg
city/highway/combined.
Expect 31-32 mpg in rural
country driving and over 40
mpg on a level highway at
legal speeds.

Mazda 6 looks longer, lower and wider than it actually is, although its wheelbase, length and width reveal it is a couple of inches bigger than other mid-size vehicles with a wheelbase of 111.4 inches, a length of 191.5 inches and a width of 72.4 inches. While it stands 57 inches tall, which is about average

for this class, it looks much lower because of its design.

Under the hood is a choice of one engine, a 2.5L super trick, SKYACTIV, 16 valve, inline DOHC four that produces a peak of 184 hp at 5,700 rpm and peak torque of 185 pounds at an exceedingly low 3,250 rpm. This engine also sports an astronomically high compression ratio of 13:1. One of the technologies of SKYACTIV is direct injection which allows such power producing compression while still running fine on 87 octane regular gas.

With peak power and torque being made at such low rpm, it means the Mazda 6 makes more power at the rpms you actually use in your driving, 2,000-4,000 rpm. Consequently, the Mazda performs far beyond its numbers would indicate with 0-60 mph arriving in just 7.32 seconds. Simulated passing tests also show off its muscle with 50-70 mph on level ground stopping the clocks in 3.92 seconds and the same test up a 6 percent grade only slowing that time to 5.91 seconds. Those numbers certainly put the new Mazda 6 at or near the top of the class for four cylinder mid-size sedans and are almost identical to the numbers produced by the Mazda 3 Road Beat test which uses the exact same powertrain but weighed in at about 230 pounds less. Only the 0-60 mph time was different by about a quarter second.

The six speed auto cog-swapper is a willing participant in achieving the 6's outstanding responsiveness as the paddle shifters really do act like an automated manual with quick, smooth shifts, up or down. Nice, or you can leave it in drive and forget about it. This is a high performance automobile that doesn't stop with just straight-line performance.

High performance also extends to fuel economy which the EPA rates at 28/40/32 mpg city/highway combined. Overall I averaged 31-32 mpg in very aggressive driving (hey, this ride begs to be driven as you will see why). If I slowed it down a bit, that number would go up by a couple of mpg. When you

cruise down a level highway at 70 mph you can expect 42-43 mpg. No, that is not a misprint, 40 plus mpg on the highway is a no brainer and with its 16.4-gallon fuel tank, the Mazda 6's tank will definitely out last yours. The Mazda 6 test vehicle did have the Mazda i-Eloop electric regen system which takes some alternator load off the engine thereby marginally improving fuel economy. The EPA numbers with i-Eloop are two mpg better across the board over the non i-Eloop model. Engine performance is otherwise identical.

More high performance is apparent when you change directions. Suspenders consist of the usual state of the art MacPherson struts up front and a multilink system in the rear with coils and twin tube shocks in all four corners and stabilizer bars at both ends. And does it ever work. Adding to this marvelous equation is a speed sensitive electric power rack that is only 2.8 turns lock to lock. My tester also had the optional gorgeous 19 x 7.5 inch alloys shod with wide 225/45 rubber (standard rubber is no slouch either at 225/55x17). Additionally, Mazda sports a wide 63-inch track front and rear. It changes direction better than water in a hose. It doesn't matter what you do as it goes where you point it with a natural aplomb while maintaining an incredibly flat attitude. Turning circle is almost 37 feet. It is the best handling mid-size car I have ever driven and that is among some pretty good competition.

Ride quality is firmer/supple; perfectly smooth on the highway and super quiet as the engine spins a slow 1,950 rpm at 70 mph. Is there a negative? Yes, on coarse roads you get more road and tire noise. It handles both small and large road imperfections well and there is absolutely no float or jiggle. I appreciate this quality ride, but we are not done yet.

Braking, of course, is by front ventilated four-wheel discs with ABS and all the other braking acronyms. Performance is right at the benchmark stopping in 40 feet from 40 mph. The pedal is strong, firm and linear. The rest of the safety not

left up to the all important driver consists of stability control, traction control, hill launch assist, a plethora of airbags, Mazda's SKYACTIV body ring structure and even a rear cross traffic alert. Also deserving special mention are the fabulous Bi-xenon headlights with standard AFS.



Plenty of room in the back for tall friends.

Inside is a fabulous interior that puts this Mazda Grand Touring into the near luxury class. Seating is perfect for my shape, some of the best I ever sat in. And their tasteful design only adds to the leather luxury. Of course in this full boat ride, they are heated, full power with lumbar and have a two position memory. Rear seating is voluminous with comfort and enough leg room for the front line of the Sacramento Kings.

Instrumentation is sporty with a tach and center speedo plus a digital trip meter/info gauge flanking right. Center stack and controls couldn't be better thought out and the materials on the instrument panel, door panels, center console and steering wheel is near luxury car quality or better. The trunk is large at almost 15 cubic feet.

Pricing starts at \$21,190 plus \$795 for the boat from Hofu, Japan. And that is a six-speed manual. The auto adds about \$1,050. I would enjoy driving the manual which is also available in the touring sedan at \$23,845. My fully loaded

ride stickered for \$29,895 and that included NAV and Bi-xenon adaptive headlights. The only option was the \$2,080 Tech Package which added i-eloop, high beam control and radar cruise. I would take a pass. It is the best mid-size car I have ever driven.

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.