

Road Beat: Mazda 3 six-speed manual shines



The Mazda 3 six-speed manual – sporty is, as sporty does.
Photos/Larry Weitzman

By Larry Weitzman

About a year ago the Road Beat tested the 2015 Mazda 3 hatchback with the 2.5L 184 hp inline Skyact four with Mazda's six-speed torque converter auto cog swapper. There was little question, nothing in its class could outperform or outhandle this superb ride. It was the top of its compact class.

When I was given to opportunity to test the same Mazda 3 model (Grand Touring Hatchback S) with a six-speed manual, I jumped at the chance to explore the differences between the two otherwise identical vehicles.

Mazda 3 hatchback is the best looking of all the compact cars and there is some pretty heady competition from Focus, Civic and Elantra. Modeled after the Takeri concept car, Mazda calls the shape following the Kodo styling philosophy. Being a hatchback model, it is about 5 inches shorter at only 176 inches, while still riding on a long 106-wheel base. Width is 71 inches. Co-efficient of drag is 0.28 for the hatchback.



Specifications

Engine

D0HC, 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 6.98 seconds
50-70 mph 3.95 seconds
50-70 mph uphill 6.12
seconds
Top speed 130 mph
electronically limited
Fuel economy 26/35/29 mpg
city/highway/combined.
Expect 32-33 mpg in rural
country driving and over 38
mpg on a level highway at
legal speeds.

With the 2.5L direct injected Skyactiv four-cylinder power plant turns a compact car into a very high performance economy car. This direct injected, DOHC, 16 valve, locomotive style inline four pumps out 185 hp at a low 5,700 rpm and 184 pounds

of twist at an extremely low 3,250 rpm which translates to power down low. With the six speed manual it will scamper from 0-60 mph in 6.98 seconds. Passing performance in simulated 50-70 mph acceleration runs on a level highway and up a steep grade posted numbers of 3.95 and 6.12 seconds respectively. The numbers for the automatic are almost identical with 7.08, 3.91 and 5.74, respectively. The difference in the passing numbers can be explained by the fact that with the manual, only third gear was used while the auto gets to use second and third gears making up some of the losses of the torque converter's slightly less efficient transmission of power although most torque converter's lock up when conditions allow it to.

One more important attribute with this 2.5L powerhouse is its flexibility. You can lollygag around at 1,500 rpm in sixth gear smoothly and then accelerate away with moderate power. Even in fifth gear at 1,500 rpm it will accelerate without complaint up a grade. It will pull strong to about 6,200 rpm when a soft rev limiter stops the fun. It feels more like a muscle car V-8 when in the Mazda 3.

Smoother than warm butter, the manual is a blast to drive. Gearing is well chosen and it is so smooth clutchless up shifting is more the norm. For down shifting, the clutch makes it easier. Going first to second I also used the clutch as the ratios are much farther apart to keep it smooth. I am sure most drivers will continue to use the light clutch going up and down.

But here is where it gets interesting, the automatic returns the better fuel economy. EPA numbers also reflect the better automatic fuel economy with the manual getting numbers of 28/35/29 mpg versus the auto's 28/38/32 mpg city/highway/combined numbers. As usual, the real world numbers for the manual are much better with an overall number of 32-33 mpg. The auto version returned one to two mpg better. During a two way run with the cruise control set at 70 mph it

averaged 38.5 mpg versus the automatic's highway number of 43.4 mpg. My Lake Tahoe round trip number averaged 35.5 mpg versus the auto number of 38.6 mpg. Why the difference? First the automatic had Mazda's i-Eloop system which takes a load off the alternator (maybe adding a half to a full mpg), but more important is the lower engine rpm (taller overall gearing) of the automatic. The automatic turns just 2,000 rpm at 70 mph whereas this manual spins at 2,500 rpm. If there are any negative which plagues almost all compact cars it is the small 13.2-gallon fuel tank. It seems that all Japanese compacts must use the same fuel tank vendor as almost all have a capacity of 13.2 gallons.

During highway cruising the automatic's torque converter "locks up" and acts just like a manual as the torque converter is effectively bypassed. In fact, these new super high efficiency torque converters usually lock up in the top five gears in a six speed auto. That's why the auto gets returns more mpg. Perhaps the ultimate tranny would be a dual clutch automated manual, but for now the Mazda torque converter auto is more than fine, it is excellent.

Handling is another department where the Mazda excels. It out handles every other compact save maybe a Focus ST or RS, a VW GTI or a Honda Si which are specially designed for the performance/handling minded and priced accordingly. Mazda's state of the art four-wheel independent suspension is first rate, ditto for the super quick (2.6 turns lock to lock) electric power rack, its wide 61-inch track, 18X7 inch alloys shod with 215/45 rubber all with harmonious tuning do the dancing and this Mazda does dance. It would be disqualified from Dancing with the Stars as a ringer for sure. It is an absolute pleasure when the road bends, inspiring confidence. That's why Mazda 3's and Miata's are so popular in the racing circuit.

Ride quality is as said before, firm supple. Personally, it is a perfect blend. It is quiet on all but the coarsest roads

when some road noise will intrude into the cabin. Even though the engine spins 2,500 rpm at 70 mph it is still extremely quiet and smooth only speaking when spoken to (getting into the throttle).

Braking is superb from the four-wheel discs (front ventilated) with all the acronyms. By the time you read this the 2017s will be out and will have ActivSense emergency braking as well as every other safety acronym now available with this current Mazda 3. Headlights are very good.

Inside is a typical fantastic interior all done in standard leather in the Grand Touring model with contrasting red stitching. They give you long haul comfort. The instrument panel is designed for sporty driving with a big central tach using the lower right hand quadrant for a large digital speedo readout. The GT version also comes with a convenient standard heads-up display. This is a very high quality interior but the sound system needs work as does the TFT display stuck on top of the center dash. It is just plain hard to use. Nav is also standard in the GT.

Rear seating is good for two and with the seats folded there are over 47 cubes of cargo volume for your monthly trip to Home Depot or camping out.

Pricing has remained almost constant from the 2015 model with this top of the line GT model whose only option was the surcharge for the Soul Red Metallic paint (\$300) stickering at \$25,745 plus \$835 for the boat from Hofu, Japan. My recommendation would be to spend about a grand more and buy the automatic and forget the go faster paint (This Mazda has plenty of "soul" without the \$300 paint and besides any color as long as it's shiny is OK with me). If shifting is your bag, then this is your best compact ride right here. The auto will get you a few more mpgs and is just as quick This is the compact car I would buy.

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.