

Road Beat: Mazda CX-9, full-size luxury CUV



The Mazda CX-9 is everything you expect in a Mazda and then some. Photos/Larry Weitman

By Larry Weitman

For 2016, Mazda reintroduced a new CX-9 crossover utility vehicle, a brand-new vehicle, although it uses the nomenclature from the prior CX-9 which was a superb CUV in its own right. Mazda's new tag line "driving matters," is an obvious part of the CX-9's DNA as it is a pleasure to drive while being at the same time engaging to drive.

Mazda's Kodo design philosophy is apparent in the CX-9 in perhaps its most elegant form. Staring with its themed, aggressive front end, the lines flow in a fluid manner in perfect proportion only to disappear into its curvaceous body.

There are four lines in the design, a hood line that flows into the A-pillar, another secondary hood/shoulder line that disappears into the body in the rear door and a third rear shoulder line starting in the formation of the taillight that also turns fluidic in the rear door and a subtle fourth line that starts in the rear D-pillar that also disappears in the upper window line. Clever stuff. Adding to its beauty are the perfect proportions of the body. In relation to other current Mazda designs, the hood is carried a bit higher, being less snout like.

CX-9 is a full size CUV with a length of 199 inches on a wheelbase of 115 inches. Its broad, strong shoulders of almost 78 inches offset its tall, 68 inches of height.

Under the exquisite hood is a blown version of Mazda's 2.5L, DOHC, 16 valve, Skyactiv (direct injected) inline four-cylinder engine. Instead of 185 hp the relatively low boost turbo charger adds 65 hp bringing the total output to a max of 250 hp at a super low 5,000 rpm and a stump pulling 310 pounds of twist (that's the torque made by some 5.0L V-8s) arriving at just 2,000 rpm (on premium fuel) meaning this powerplant is cranking out a whopping 120 hp when peak torque arrives making this an extremely responsive engine that doesn't require it to wind out before it starts making lots of thrust. It is so strong that you forget it's a turbo with that characteristic turbo lag. Not here. Compression ratio is a very high 10.5:1.



Specifications

Price \$31,520 to about \$45,000 for the Signature model

Engine

2.5L turbocharged DOHC, 16 valve direct injected inline four 250 hp @ 5,000 rpm

310 lb.-ft. of torque @ 2,000 rpm

Redline 6,300 rpm

Transmission

Six-speed torque converter automatic

Configuration

Transverse mounted front engine/FWD/AWD

Dimensions

Wheelbase 115.3 inches

Length 199.4 inches

Width 77.5 inches

Height 67.6 inches

Track (f/r) 65.3/65.2 inches

Ground clearance 8.8 inches

Weight (FWD/AWD) 4,054/4,307 pounds

GVWR (FWD/AWD) 5,661/5,816 pounds

Tow capacity 3,500 pounds

Steering lock to lock 3.1 turns

Turning circle 38.4 feet

Fuel capacity 19.5 gallons

Wheels 20X8.5 inches

Tires 255/50X20

Co-efficient of drag 0.35

Performance

0-60 mph 6.54 seconds
50-70 mph 3.58 seconds
50-70 uphill (6-7%) 5.00
seconds
Top Speed Does anyone really
care?
Fuel economy EPA rated
(FWD//AWD)
22/28/25//21/27/23 mpg
city/highway/combined.
Expect 23 mpg in rural
country and suburban driving
and 28-29 mpg on a level
highway at legal speeds.

One interesting note that if you choose to use regular fuel, the engine hp rating goes down to 227 hp at the same rpm probably due to the engine's computer retarding the spark to prevent pre-ignition. I didn't test the vehicle with regular gas, but I doubt the following performance numbers would be effected by much or that the overall feel of the vehicle would change or even be noticeable.

Speaking of performance, this 4,054-pound vehicle gets it done quickly. Zero to 60 mph occurs in 6.54 seconds, making it the quickest Mazda except for the MX-5 Miata and understanding that all Mazdas are pretty quick cars. There is no such thing as a lethargic Mazda. Passing times also reflect the CX-9's outstanding performance with a 50-70 mph passing simulation of just 3.58 seconds and the same run up a 6-7 percent grade lasts just 5 seconds. This is a honkin' on CUV with immediate and a linear throttle response that without the traction control and in spite of the big meats, can light'em up easily at lower speeds. What's nice about a turbo charged engine and living in the foothills and Sierras, there is no performance loss as you climb in altitude. At 7,382-foot Echo Summit, the CX-9 is still making its max rated hp of 250 hp where a

normally aspirated engine of the same sea-level power rating would be down to about 195 hp because of less oxygen and induction pressure.

Mazda also holds the title as the auto industry's highest average EPA CAFÉ (Corporate Average Fuel Economy) numbers for all their models, but the CX-9 has to bring up the rear as it's rated by the EAP at 22/28/25 mpg city/highway/combined. My testing revealed almost identical numbers with a two-way highway run at 70 mph returning 28.5 mpg. A round trip to South Lake Tahoe from Placerville averaged 24.6 mpg and overall in country rural two-lane road driving showed 23.5 mpg. While not the greatest numbers on their face, when compared to other full size SUV/CUVs, the CX-9 looks darn good.

Now to a Mazda forte, handling. As with all Mazdas, handling matters and the CX-9 certainly is not only an easy handler, but an adept one as well. It has all the creds, sophisticated four well independent suspension, coils in all the corners, stab bars at both ends, a wide 65-inch track and reasonably quick steering at 3.1 turns lock to lock. Also, adding to the CX-9 cornering power are massive 255/50 series rubber mounted on 20X8.5-inch great looking alloy wheels. Needless to say, turn in is crisp and its attitude is flat when pushing hard in the twisties. It simply goes where you point it without feeling like a cumbersome, head tossing, big top-heavy SUV, but more like a sporting sedan. Making 2 tons change direction with aplomb is no easy feat, but Mazda has found a way.

Ride quality is excellent. One passenger immediately remarked about its quiet and wonderful ride quality. It has the ability to absorb road imperfections with its very supple suspension and absolutely no harshness. While the engine spins a relatively low 2,200 rpm at 70 mph, it extremely quiet with no wind or road noise.

Four-wheel disc brakes (front ventilated) are over a foot in

diameter and have all the safety acronyms making for powerful controlled stops and Smart City Braking which includes a large flashing red "brake" sign in the heads-up display. Standard in this Grand Touring unit are lane keep assist, blind spot monitoring, roll stability control, adaptive headlights which turn night into day and so much more. Safety has certainly not taken a backseat with Mazda.

Inside is another area where Mazda is an industry leader with soft, leather sublime (full power) front chairs, second row seating with huge legroom and a third-row fold down system for two. Actually, the second-row folds flat as well. Most all of the interior surfacing is quality soft touch.

Instrumentation is all business with a three-hole dash containing tach and speedo left and center with the right dial containing the trip computer, with a secondary instant read out with a needle pointer instead of a graph which also depicts the average fuel economy with a blue indicator besides a digital average readout in the multipage trip computer. Nice.

If there is a negative, it is the center stack with the large screen stuck on top of the dash and its mouse like sound system/Nav controller. Mazda is such a great company making some of the best cars in the world all holding top of class positions, yet their radio systems need work. Maybe you get used to them after a while, but I have seen better. On the other hand, HVAC controls are easy to use.

In another surprise, the CX-9 is well priced with this top of the line Grand Touring model in FWD stickered for a very reasonable \$40,170 plus \$900 for the boat from Hiroshima, Japan. The only option was the (glow in the dark) Soul Red paint (\$300) bringing the bottom line to \$41,370. Personally, I like just about any color that is shiny. A base model CX-9 with the turbo engine and six speed auto cog swapper starts at just \$31,520. All wheel drive will add \$1,800 to the price

and will add about 250 pounds and cost you an mpg according to the EPA.

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.