

Road Beat: Mazda 6 – the best of the best



The Mazda 6 continues to improve with each year. Photos/Larry Weitzman

By Larry Weitzman

Now starting its fifth year of production, the Mazda 6 still reigns supreme among mid-size family sedans, if you could call it that (a family sedan). And this is after the intro of some new heady models from Toyota in the form of the all new Camry and heavy revisions of the Hyundai Sonata and Kia Optima.

The new Camry is a great car. Some will like it better than the Mazda 6 as it is a bit softer, less edgy, but after spending a week in the new Mazda 6, its close, but give me the Mazda 6 six out of seven days a week.

Mazda 6 is just a bit sharper than the competition and when it comes to looks, the Kodo design philosophy remains supreme. It is the best looking of all mid-size sedans with aggressive, curvaceous and muscular lines with perfect proportions that starts with the best looking front end in the business and ends with one of the best looking rear ends in the business that the competition wishes that Mazda get penalized five yards for "backfield in motion."

While the specs remain the same, for some reason performance has improved and by a significant amount. And, no I am not testing the new turbo model with about 50 additional horsepower that uses the beautiful 2.5L, CX-9 engine that makes 227 hp on 87 octane fuel and a full 250 hp on high test premium. My tester had the normally aspirated 184 hp (at a low 5,700 rpm) version of the 2.5L DOHC, 16 valve, direct injected mill (Mazda calls it Skyactiv) which drove the front wheels via a six-speeder torque converter auto cog-swapper. Shifting can be done through the manual mode floor shifter or steering wheel paddles.



Specifications

Price \$22,780 to about \$34,695

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 3,305 pounds

Weight distribution (f/r)
58/42%

Fuel capacity 16.4 gallons

Cargo capacity 14.8 cubic feet

Passenger volume 99.7 cubic feet

Steering lock to lock 2.81 turns

Turning circle (curb to curb) 36.7 feet

Wheels 19 x 7.5-inch alloys

Tires 225/45 x 19 all season radials

Co-efficient of drag 0.26

Performance

0-60 mph 6.93 seconds

50-70 mph 3.58 seconds

50-70 mph uphill 5.54 seconds

Top speed 140 mph electronically limited

Fuel economy 27/35/30 mpg city/highway/combined. Expect 32-33 mpg in rural country driving and 40 mpg on a level highway at legal speeds.

Performance is outstanding with this Mazda being the first normally aspirated mid-size car to solidly break into the sixes in its 0-60 mph run averaging 6.93 seconds. And that number is no fluke as it blasts from 50-70 mph in a record 3.58 seconds and up a steep grade (6-7 percent) only slows that time to 5.54 seconds. My last test of this same car resulted in respective times of 7.36, 4.15 and 6.09 seconds. Quite an improvement. Throttle response is stellar and linear and the tranny always picks the correct gear. It's a beautiful thing. Mazda 6 definitely lives up to the promises of its looks. I can't wait to test the new turbo model.

Also, with that incredible performance comes guilt free fuel economy. EPA says expect 27/35/30 mpg city/highway/combined and my tester averaged 32.0 mpg for 414 miles of varied driving including all full throttle performance testing and less than 20 percent of the time spent on a highway. At a constant 70 mph in a 20-mile two way run the Mazda 6 averaged exactly 40 mpg. With its 16.4-gallon fuel tank, your road trips could stretch out over 600 miles. Mazda gives you a delicious, low calorie, big piece of cake that you can eat all the time and never gain weight.

The Mazda 6 driving experience is enhanced by its sophisticated fully independent suspension, the use of subframes and a stiff monocoque body. Add to that 19 x 7.5-inch alloys shod with 225/45 series rubber plus a quick electric power steering rack (2.8 turns lock to lock) and you have the ingredients of a true sporting sedan that delivers on all the perceived promises. It changes direction and carves up

corners like a superb Buck knife. It will create new found confidence in handling.

Yet ride quality is especially quiet, smooth, supple and compliant. Perfect for my tastes. And the engine only spins 1900 rpm at 70 mph, part of the reason for its quiet and fuel economy. There is no wind, tire or road noise.

Safety is enhanced with all the acronyms including lane keep assist and strong four-wheel disc brakes. Headlights are superb LEDs with standard automatic high beam control plus adaptive front lighting that follows your steering inputs.

We are not done yet as the interior needs special mention which comes with standard leather and it is nice. Even nicer and making the Mazda 6 into a premium or near luxury vehicle is the optional super soft Nappa leather which comes with the GT Premium Package which also adds the i-Eloop regen engine system which reduces the engine's electrical load, heated rear seats and steering wheel and some other goodies for \$2,500.

Instrumentation is complete along with a heads-up display and two trip computers. It is all beautifully done except for the radio controls which require too many steps and an imprecise knob which is an anomaly in this most precise of mid-size sedans.

I could go on waxing poetic about this Mazda, but it still retains its title as the best in the mid-size arena, although it's a very close call. It stickers for \$30,695 plus \$875 for the boat from Hofu, Japan. My tester had the GT Premium Package four other small options including \$300 for the much-complimented Soul Red paint bring the total price of admission to \$34,695. That very competitive in the family of mid-size rides, but this Mazda 6 just delivers a bit more in performance, fuel economy, looks and handling. Classic Kodo styling doesn't seem to get old. I can hardly wait to test the turbo model followed by the new RX-9. Mazda is known as a

bunch of cowboys. It seems that other manufacturers should take up riding and roping, too.

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.