

Mazda3 Sedan: Almost a Mazda6?

BY JOE SAGE

Choosing your new Mazda is pretty easy. If you want a crossover, they come in large, medium and small: the seven-passenger CX-9, the five-passenger CX-5 and, coming soon, the subcompact CX-3. If you want a sports car, it remains hard to beat the MX-5 Miata for its combination of physical and emotional attributes at a remarkable price.

Mazda2 and Mazda5 have clear niches, one as a subcompact and one serving minivan functions.

If you want a midsize or compact sedan, there are two, with just a few decision points.

The first choice seems easy: a midsize Mazda6 or the compact Mazda3. The obvious difference at this point might seem to be size, but another significant point is that the Mazda3 is also available as a very popular hatchback, creating another decision between a pair officially known as the Mazda3 4-Door and Mazda3 5-Door—the sedan and the hatchback respectively.

But first, back to that option of size.

The Mazda3 we're driving here reminded us of the Mazda6 from the moment we first received it—to the point that we idly doublechecked the decklid badge. We figure this was for two primary reasons: it's the 4-Door (sedan) version; and it

arrived in the same gorgeous Soul Red Metallic paint job as our last test Mazda6, a sedan model and color we increasingly notice on the road.

Within moments of getting in the Mazda3 and turning the proverbial key, taking in the style, features, quality of fitment and general roominess of the car, we kept finding ourselves thinking, heck, this is just like the wonderful Mazda6, but for less dough. What's not to like?

The Mazda3 provides 96.3 cubic feet of passenger volume, to the Mazda6's 99.7. That's a difference of a few basketballs or a couple of bags of groceries, packed to the max, but for basic daily occupancy, it seems negligible. The Mazda3, after all, starts at \$16,945 and the Mazda6 at \$21,190.

Since Mazda3 offers one lower base trim grade, let's jump to the upper middle: a Mazda3 Touring (6-speed manual) goes for \$19,595 and a Mazda6 Touring for \$23,845. That's about 22 percent higher cost (or if you're a base model shopper, 25 percent more) for 3.5 percent more passenger space.

If you use your trunk more than your seats, the Mazda6 provides 14.8 cubic feet, to the Mazda3 4-Door's 12.4—another couple of basketballs.

This brings us to that other key Mazda3 distinction, the availability of a 5-Door hatchback. In this, cargo space climbs to 20.2 cubic feet, or a whopping 47.1 if you fold down the rear seats.

The hatchback is also a little sportier in its rear-most sheetmetal and such accompanying details as bright-tipped twin exhaust pipes (as opposed to concealed pipes on the sedan).

But overall, the two Mazda3 models are the same car, with the same wide trim range. Our test car here is in top trim: the S Grand Touring.

Powertrain choices largely overlap for Mazda3 and Mazda6. The midsize Mazda6 has a 184-hp 2.5-liter SkyActiv four-cylinder in every model, and a choice of 6-speed automatic or 6-speed manual transmission in all but one top model (automatic only). The compact Mazda3 offers either transmission on every trim level or body style, but the larger 2.5L engine only on "S" models (S Touring or S Grand Touring). A 155-hp 2.0-liter SkyActiv four-cylinder is also available, on "i" Touring or Grand Touring trims, or on two models below those, SV and Sport. (Mazda6 skips SV and starts at Sport.)

The Mazda6 weighs about 200 pounds more than the Mazda3, but the range of fuel economies is similar, with some models topping 40 MPG. More significantly, the larger Mazda6 body delivers close to 50/50 front/rear weight distribution, while the smaller Mazda3 is basically 60/40. Most people won't much notice this; enthusiasts could make a case for either, depending upon road

conditions and their driving styles.

Our driving style is generally what you might call routinely aggressive—street, freeway and highway time where acceleration, cornering, tight maneuvers and sweeping curves all come into play. We also do boulevard U-turns and parking lot challenges, and at some point there is always cargo.

We are tall and found the car quite spacious. Its manual transmission delivered strong, solid and responsive driving. We found it a pleasure to shift, a pleasure to steer and a pleasure to accelerate.

We're not automatically fans of a 6-speed manual. Some have a shifter pattern that's spaced too tightly or too ambiguously, but not this. Gearing was equally well spaced. Together, they gave us accurate shifts and a smooth power curve.

Driving technologies are applied at just the right level. There is no auto stop-start. Electric power steering feels like a solid mechanical setup. Plentiful electronic aids (see sidebar) are non-invasive. A heads-up display is another premium inclusion.

None of our compact-midsize comparative drill, mind you, is intended to detract from the Mazda6. The point is to underscore how much the newest Mazda3 delivers, riding the Mazda6's coattails.

Sales of both have been red hot. In fact, Mazda overall just had its best sales year in over 20 years,

with over 300,000 units sold in the US in 2014. These two cars did their bit, with Mazda6 US sales up by 22 percent for the year and Mazda3 hitting its best month in history during December, with its US sales up 26.7 percent from the year prior.

If you have the dough, and no major parking or other size constraints, the Mazda6 is a beautiful choice. To save several thousand dollars, and/or if you just prefer the fit and feel of the smaller car, Mazda3 has the edge. If you specifically want the smaller 2.0L engine, and/or a hatchback, and/or a top S Grand Touring model but with manual transmission, Mazda3 wins uncontested.

Having settled on the Mazda3, your choice among six different trim levels, times two body styles, times two transmissions is relatively easy and rewarding (except for those of us who want to own both bodies). And Mazda's all-inclusive trim levels and pricing make the rest easy.

This Mazda3 made us simultaneously want everything it is and everything it almost is. It's almost equal to a Mazda6 sedan in many ways, and we want that. It's a direct sibling of a Mazda3 5-Door hatchback, and we want that. And it is what it is—both of those in a sporty, responsive, affordable high-trim package, and we want that. If that's not successful market positioning, what is? ■



SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE.....	SkyActiv-G 2.5L DOHC 4-cylinder
TRANSMISSION	6-speed manual
DRIVETRAIN	FWD
POWER/TORQUE	184 hp / 185 lb-ft
TOP SPEED	130 mph (limited)
WHEELS/TIRES.....	18" alloy, P215/45 all-season
TURNING CIRCLE	34.8 ft
WEIGHT.....	(60/40 F/R distrib) 2947 lb
FUEL.....	regular unleaded, 13.2 gal tank
MPG	25/37/29 (city/hwy/comb)

INCLUDED: keyless entry and start, heated power mirrors w turn signals, fog lights, rain-sensing wipers, leather wheel, leather shift knob, leather brake handle, leather-trimmed sport seats, 6-way power driver's seat w lumbar adjust, heated seats, dual-zone climate, power windows/locks, Homelink auto-dim mirror, one-touch moonroof, 60/40 fold rear seat, rear seat armrest/cupholder, anti-theft immobilizer, 24-hour roadside assistance, blind spot monitor, rear cross traffic alert, 4-wheel disc brakes, electric power steering, independent front/rear suspension, auto on/off bi-xenon headlights, gloss black grille, rear lip spoiler, LED taillights, adaptive front lighting, active driving display, 7" color touchscreen display, multifunction controller, rear camera, navigation, Bose 9-speaker audio, Pandora, Aha, Stitcher, AM-FM-CD, HD radio, dual USB inputs, satellite radio, SMS text delivery/reply, Bluetooth phone and audio, cruise, trip computer, paddle shifters (if automatic), steering wheel mounted controls, dynamic stability control, traction control, hill launch assist, ABS with EBD and brake assist, air bags and air curtains all around.

BASE PRICE.....	\$25,045
SOUL RED METALLIC PAINT.....	300
CARGO MAT.....	70
SCUFF PLATES/DOOR SILL TRIM PLATES.....	125
DESTINATION CHARGE.....	795
TOTAL	\$26,335

LOGBOOK NOTES

The touchscreen interface is easy to understand—icon-ID'ed buttons are intuitive, and most functions are one-step. Saving radio favorites is a little cumbersome, but you don't do it often.

Volume for audio is on the console, leaving the upper stack clean for screen, thus disambiguating climate controls.

The Bose audio does a great job with just bass-treble equalizer and a handful of other common settings. It's drive-around-a-little-longer-just-for-the-tunes good.

We pulled into the garage after one very short dash from dinner home, and as we shut off the engine, we noticed a complex fuel economy readout and charts briefly on the main touchscreen. It disappeared sooner than we wished, but not before we saw a stated fuel economy for that run as just 7.0 MPG. We didn't have this car long, unfortunately, and never saw that readout again.