

# Icebreaker

BY JOE SAGE

**M**azda has three models in its crossover and SUV lineup: CX-3 (at about \$20k, more of a tall-car crossover), CX-5 (at about \$24k, a solid two-row SUV) and CX-9 (at about \$32k, an equally solid three-row SUV). It may be the Snowflake White Pearl Mica paint of our sample, or it may be its prominent prow, but the stately, strong presence of Mazda's biggest SUV reminded us of the clear-the-way personality of an Arctic icebreaker.

The CX-9 bears a 2.5-liter four-cylinder powerplant, as does the CX-5, but it receives turbocharging in the CX-9, good for an additional 40 horses (in turn useful for its weight difference, 21.3 percent more power for 19 percent more weight).

We have a sweet spot for full-size SUVs, even if we tend to drive them solo a lot of the time. (We do carry a lot of stuff at times, though.) There are big SUVs that tow more, or have more cargo volume, even more legroom. And there are certainly big SUVs with more horsepower. But at \$44,315 in top trim and with all-wheel drive (none of the options on our sample are vital), it delivers a decently premium experience with clean and purposeful design at half the cost, or less, of quite a few other desirable seven-seaters.

The cabin is a good example of this, with Nappa leather and rosewood trim, complemented by

what has turned out to be a model for others—Mazda's simple dash-top standup screen, which frees up the instrument panel for clean full-width climate vents and an uncluttered console without the massive center stack of most vehicles.

The CX-9's 8.8 inches of ground clearance, relatively trim turning circle and four-wheel independent suspension are countered by long overhangs front and rear, making it an unlikely off-road adventurer, but plenty useful for off-pavement excursions to Arizona's lakes and picnic spots, and 3500 pounds of tow capacity is plenty for a couple of motorcycles or a decent speedboat. And its creature comforts and 26-mpg highway fuel mileage make it great for the cruise to and from.

We found the suspension could be quite firm on a harsher speedbump, but the chassis is very driver-responsive. On freeways, we were impressed by its agility in quick lane-to-lane maneuvers—reminding us (hopefully not sacrilegiously) of heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali's famed tactic—to float like a butterfly and sting like a bee.

At six-foot-something in height, we found we would have welcomed a little more legroom in the front row, although the CX-9 has worked hard to provide humanly useful space even in its third row, within a trim and aerodynamic overall shape. (The biggest SUVs have several more inches in the first row and over 40 inches in all three rows.)

Mazda is a master of lightweight, fuel-efficient

## SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE	SKYACTIV 2.5L 4-cyl Dynamic Pressure Turbo	
DRIVETRAIN	I-Activ AWD (only, in this trim)	
HP/TORQUE	(reg/prem) 227/250 hp / 310 lb-ft	
TRANSMISSION	SKYACTIV 6-spd auto w sport/manual	
TOP SPEED	130 mph	
STEERING	power rack & pinion, speed-var assist	
SUSPENSION	F: indep MacPherson strut w stblzr bar R: indep multi-link w stblzr bar	
BRAKES	F: 12.6" vented 2-piston; R: 12.8" solid, 1p	
WHEELS/TIRES	10" alum alloy / P255/50 R20	
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	.199.4 in / 115.3 in	
TURNING CIRCLE	38.8 ft	
HEADROOM (F/2/3)	39.3 / 38.5 / 35.4 in	
LEGROOM (F/2/3)	41.0 / 39.4 / 29.7 in	
CARGO CAPACITY	14.4 / 38.2 / 71.2 cu ft	
WEIGHT	4361 lb	
TOW CAPACITY	3500 lb	
FUEL CAPACITY	(AWD) 19.5 gal	
FUEL / MPG	reg / (AWD) 20/26/23 (city/hwy/comb)	
BASE PRICE	<b>\$44,315</b>	
SNOWFLAKE WHITE PEARL MICA PAINT	200	
REAR SEAT ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM	1995	
ILLUMINATED DOORSILL TRIM PLATES	575	
DESTINATION CHARGE	975	
TOTAL	<b>\$48,060</b>	

yet potent powertrains with Swiss watch precision, as well as a master of size, from the MX-5 Miata on up. They do an especially good job of fitting in everything that a particular vehicle in its category should have, within a trim-efficient allocated space, no bloat, nothing missing. The three-row CX-9 is their biggest example of this—a relative heavyweight with the agility (and fuel economy) of something much smaller. ■

