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2010 Mazda 3 Re-engineered premium car at compact price.

Overview

The 2010 Mazda 3 is a premium car in a compact package. The Mazda3 is available as a four-door sedan or four-door hatchback, and offers comfort and luxury features we're not used to seeing in a small car.

The Mazda3 has been reengineered for the 2010 model year. It gets new styling inside and out, a larger, more powerful engine, new transmissions, and even more luxury and technology amenities than the generous helping it offered before. It hasn't been completely redesigned, however. It keeps the same basic architecture, with some upgrades. Introduced for the 2004 model year, Mazda calls the 2010 Mazda3 an evolution, not a revolution of the previous model. Built on a Volvo platform, the previous Mazda3 was a sales and critical success for Mazda. With that in mind, Mazda hasn't radically changed anything on its sales leader. Instead, the company set out to make incremental improvements.

Inside, the Mazda3 adds Bluetooth cell phone connectivity, a Bose Centerpoint surround system, and an available Multi-Information Display that adds a second level of information. The interior is first-class interior with lots of other available amenities. Higher line models get a Multi-Information Display below the windshield that houses readouts for the vehicle information center, climate system, radio presets, and even the available navigation system. A unique cluster of buttons on the steering wheel controls these functions. The readouts are easy to see and the steering wheel controls work intuitively. It's a pretty trick setup. The other controls are mounted high on the dash's center stack, and are also easy to see and use.

The Mazda3 is practical, with useful small items storage up front, as well as plenty of room for the front passengers. The back seat will fit two adults fairly comfortably, provided the front occupants aren't too tall. In both the sedan and hatchback, the rear seats fold 60/40 to create a mostly flat load floor. Flip the back seats down in the hatchback and you'll have lots of cargo room. With its sportier character, better looks, and more useful interior space, the hatch is our choice between the two body styles.

The 2010 Mazda3 benefits from several architectural enhancements designed to make the structure stiffer. The result is a sporty car that feels firm and composed on the road, with moderate lean in turns. The steering is sharp and precise, and the brakes provide a linear pedal feel. The suspension deals well with most bumps, though large ruts can pound through with the available 17-inch wheels.

Two engines are offered. The base engine is a 148-horsepower 2.0-liter four-cylinder that provides adequate power for most needs. Fuel conscious buyers will want this engine, as it delivers EPA fuel economy as high as 25 mpg City/33 mpg Highway. Those who prefer a sportier driving experience will want the new 2.5-liter four-cylinder, which delivers 167 horsepower and is available with a smooth-shifting six-speed manual transmission or a five-speed automatic with manual shift capability.

Mazda rightly points out that in many countries a compact car is a destination rather than starting point for car owners, and that's partly due to fuel costs. The Mazda 3 is an affordable car that offers a pleasant interior environment, sporty handling, and useful space.

Model Lineup

The Mazda3 comes in four-door sedan and four-door hatchback body styles, two model ranges, and an array of trim levels. Sedans are offered as 2.0-liter i and 2.5-liter s models, while hatchbacks are only offered as s models. Sedan trim levels include Mazda 3i SV, i Sport, i Touring, s Sport, and s Grand Touring. Hatchbacks are offered in s Sport and s Grand Touring trim. (The MazdaSpeed3 is expected to return later in the model year, probably as a hatchback.)

Mazda 3i models come with a 148-horsepower, 2.0-liter four-cylinder engine. Mazda 3s models trade a 156-hp, 2.3-liter four-cylinder for a new 167-hp, 2.5-liter four. Mazda 3i models are offered with a five-speed manual transmission or a five-speed automatic with manual shift capability; s models get the five-speed automatic or a six-speed manual.

The base-level Mazda 3i SV (\$15,045) comes with cloth upholstery, power mirrors, power windows, reclining front bucket seats, tilt/telescoping steering column, 60/40 split folding rear seat, AM/FM/CD stereo with four speakers, auxiliary audio input jack, and P205/55R16 tires on steel wheels. It is offered only with a manual transmission. The Mazda 3i Sport (\$15,975) adds air conditioning, an outside temperature display and an available automatic transmission.

The Mazda 3i Touring model (\$17,500) adds power door locks, remote keyless entry, cruise control, two additional speakers, a Bluetooth hands-free cell phone link, steering wheel audio and Bluetooth controls, traction control, electronic stability control, and alloy wheels.

The Mazda 3s Sport sedan (\$18,470) and hatchback (\$19,230) models get a unique front fascia, sport seats, electroluminescent gauges, leather-wrapped steering wheel and shift knob, front center console, Mazda's new Multi-Information Display, an iPod adapter, fog lights, rear lip spoiler, and P205/50R17 tires. The s Grand Touring (\$21,500 for both body styles) adds dual-zone automatic climate control, heated front seats, leather upholstery, eight-way power driver's seat with memory, automatic headlights, rain-sensing wipers, adaptive bi-xenon headlights, LED taillights, and heated outside mirrors with integrated turn signals.

The MazdaSpeed3 comes with a 263-hp turbocharged 2.3-liter inline-4, six-speed manual transmission, limited-slip differential, sport seats with special red and black cloth interior trim.

Options include pearl paint (\$200). The Moonroof, 6CD and Bose package (\$1395) includes a 10-speaker, 242-watt Bose Centerpoint surround sound system. The Technology package (\$1195) comes with a navigation system, a full-color version of the Multi-Information Display, Sirius satellite radio with a six-month subscription, keyless access and starting, and a perimeter alarm.

Safety features standard on all Mazda3 models include dual front airbags, front side airbags, curtain side airbags, active front head restraints, tire-pressure monitor, and anti-lock brakes with brake assist and electronic brake-force distribution. As mentioned above, traction control and electronic stability control are standard on the Mazda 3i Touring and all s models.

Walkaround

The original Mazda3 was a sharp car. The styling was just right. No line seemed out of place. The 2010 model uses the same wheelbase as the previous version but it's three inches longer in overall length. Some of the lines on the 2010 model seem somewhat askew, most notably the front end's goofy smile.

The smile comes from a bold new grille. Whereas the last model had a small, high-set grille with a prominent lower air intake, the new model has only the grille, now much bigger and set lower. The five-point shape seen on other Mazdas, including the restyled 2009 MX-5, creates the smiley face shape.

Mazda says the new grille serves a purpose, making the Mazda3 slip through the air better while also taking in sufficient air to cool the engine. The result is a polarizing look that we fear customers may dislike.

The rest of the car is an evolution of the last model and is quite attractive. The grille is flanked by a pair of angled headlights that wrap around to the sides. Fog lights are found in prominent flared pods that fill out the front end and also help improve aerodynamics.

Those aforementioned headlights are bi-xenons on the Grand Touring model. They're also adaptive, meaning that they point into turns as the steering wheel is turned. That's a pretty neat safety feature on dark country roads, both for the driver and pedestrians.

The headlights come to a point around the side of the car, where they meet up with prominent front wheel flares that surround 16 or 17-inch wheels. The base car gets steel wheels, but higher line models have attractive alloy wheels. The fender flares direct the eye to a rising beltline that starts at the front of the door, bisects the door handles, and leads all the way to the taillights. This line has a stronger wedge shape on the hatchback. On both body styles, another character line is found just above the rocker panel, and it rises as it moves toward the rear wheel. Like the outgoing model, the hatchback features triangular rear side windows and a rear roof spoiler.

At the rear, the sedan has a rear lip spoiler. The hatchback features a five-pointed rear window that reflects the shape of the grille. The taillights wrap around the side of the car on both body styles, and they have LED lighting when the s Grand Touring trim is ordered. Mazda 3i models have single exhaust and s models have dual exhaust with bright tips.

Mazda3 is based on a premium Volvo-sourced platform. That platform worked quite well in the last (pre-2010) car, so Mazda stuck with that winning formula but tweaked it to make it lighter and stiffer. This was accomplished by using more high-tensile strength steel and thicker steel in key locations, adding gussets to areas such as the suspension mounting points, and employing a technique called weld-bonding to strengthen areas such as the door apertures. Weld bonding, which combines spot welding with the use of structural adhesive, enhances the unibody's flex resistance. The result is an even better handling car.

Interior Features

Much of the Mazda 3 appeal is the interior, which is first-class for a vehicle of this size and price. Mazda has completely redesigned the cockpit for 2010, taking an approach based on human-machine interface studies that places controls and readouts in two key zones.

Controls most frequently used, including the radio and climate dials and buttons, are placed high on the center stack, where they can be most easily accessed. Readouts for the vehicle information center, climate system, radio presets, and even the available navigation system are found in a Multi-Information Display that is located just under the windshield. Mazda says it chose this location because it is very close to the driver's line of sight, making it easier and safer to check those readouts. Note that only s models have the Multi-Information Display.

The readouts in this display are controlled by a small grouping of six buttons on the right side of the steering wheel. It's a unique approach, but it works well. The buttons are set right by your right thumb and you don't have to look far from the road to see the readouts. When the navigation system is ordered, the screen is quite small, making it harder to read than most others, which are usually mounted on the center stack.

The look and feel of the dash would be appropriate in an entry-level luxury car. The dash is made of a nicely grained soft-touch material, the plastics that are used are sturdy and attractive, and s Sport and Grand Touring models get electroluminescent gauges with red numbers on a black background. Plus, the

Mazda3 is offered with several features you'd expect in a much higher priced car. The goodies include a thumping Bose Centerpoint surround sound system with 10 speakers, leather upholstery, driver's seat memory, heated front seats, automatic climate control, push-button starting, and Bluetooth cell phone connectivity. That's quite a list for a car that doesn't reach \$25,000.

Small items storage is plentiful, with a nicely sized center console bin, an average-size glovebox, and two cupholders behind the shifter.

The front seat has plenty of head and leg room, and the s model's sport seats provide good support in turns. The rear seat has enough space for adults provided those up front aren't too tall. Those seats fold 60/40 to create a mostly flat load floor.

In the sedan, the trunk has 11.8 cubic feet of space. The hatchback has 17 cubic feet of space, and that can be expanded considerably with the seats down. Given the hatchback's sportier character, better looks, and more useful interior space, it's our choice between the two body styles.

Driving Impressions

Mazda claims that every vehicle it builds has the soul of a sports car. While that may be a bit overstated, the Mazda 3 is a fine handling vehicle. The feel is firm and composed, with moderate lean in turns. The steering is sharp and precise, and the driver feels connected to the road.

The suspension on the base models deals well with most bumps. Larger ruts, however, can feel harsh, especially with the s model's 17-inch wheels.

The brakes on both models have a linear pedal feel. The Mazda 3s has larger brakes and we prefer the additional confidence of larger binders.

The Mazda 3i model's 2.0-liter engine carries over from 2009. The engine produces 148 horsepower, which will be adequate for most needs. Drivers can get the most out of this engine with the standard manual transmission. New for 2010, however, is the optional five-speed automatic transmission that replaces the previous four-speed automatic, and the extra gearing improves the responsiveness of the 2.0-liter.

The best news is the base engine's fuel economy, which comes in at an EPA-rated 25 mpg City/33 mpg Highway with the manual and 24/33 mpg with the automatic.

There are many compelling reasons to upgrade to the Mazda 3s, and the new 2.5-liter four-cylinder engine is one of them. It's the same engine used in the Mazda 6 and it puts out the same 167 horsepower and 168 pound-feet of torque. This engine delivers the type of power we expected in performance hot hatches just a few years ago. That's not to say it's a powerhouse, but it does provide the type of grunt that makes it fun on twisty mountain roads. Thanks to dual balance shafts, it's smooth, too, and fuel economy is pretty darn good at 22/29 mpg with the automatic and 21/29 mpg with the manual.

Drivers will have the most fun with the six-speed manual transmission. The shifter isn't as tight or as precise as in the wonderful MX-5, but it is easy to shift, with relatively short throws and a natural clutch feel. Those who choose the automatic get a manual shift mode, but no steering wheel paddles.

Summary

The Mazda3 is known as an attractive, premium small car at a reasonable price, and the 2010 update only reinforces that hard-earned reputation. It does cost a bit more than most direct competitors, but it also offers a sportier character and several amenities normally reserved for luxury cars. The hatchback body style feels even sportier and provides useful space. If you're looking for a small car, be sure to put the Mazda3 on your shopping list.

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