

SOUL OF MOTION

We drove the 2012 Mazda3 at its launch in the Los Angeles area in 2011, when the full suite of SKYACTIV weight-trimming, performance-enhancing, manufacture-perfecting features were all new. And we drove the 2014 Mazda3 at its launch in the San Diego region last fall, when its KODO "Soul of Motion" body restyling was the big news—now as attractive as the Mazda6.

In San Diego, we drove two 2014 5-door (hatch) models, both 2.0L and 2.5L SKYACTIV-G gasoline engines—rated at 155 hp and 29/40/33 MPG; and at 184 hp and 27/37/31 MPG, respectively. The smaller engine has an improved low-end and midrange torque curve, while the larger one has available i-ELOOP regenerative engine braking.

In January, we revisited the new Mazda3 at home in Arizona—this time the 4-door (sedan) model, in "i" Grand Touring trim, with the smaller two-liter engine and automatic transmission.

We took to this car—and this car takes to the road—enthusiastically. Setup of controls was effortless, even in the dark, ready to roll with little

trouble about anything. Active Driving Display is a heads-up display with a twist: rather than projecting on the windshield itself, it has its own transparent pop-up, allowing for a steeper rake to the main glass. Posture is comfortable and its size feels right inside and out. It's hard to believe this is a small car—we could spend quite a bit of time in it.

During the launch, we drove on aggressive mountain highways with a manual transmission on the 2.0-liter and an automatic on the 2.5-liter. Between the two, we had concluded you wouldn't be disappointed with either, with your decision falling to the balance between price and power. (The 2.5L has about 18 percent more power and 23 percent more torque, for just 14 percent more cost, about \$3000 more.) Our two-liter automatic in January, however, did not feel as powerful, and the manual didn't change this all that much. We would either pay three grand more for the bigger engine, or would try the smaller engine with manual again—a win-win that might end up being our final choice. And we'd opt up to 18-inch wheels. ■

BY JOE SAGE



The controls seem to have been thought through with care, and decisions made by people who actually use this sort of thing—fundamental but disturbingly rare with some brands.

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE.....SKYACTIV-G 2.0L DOHC 4-cylinder
 TRANSMISSION...SKYACTIV-DRIVE6-spd auto
 STEERING.....elec-assisted rack and pinion
 BRAKES.....4-wheel disc
 WHEELS.....16-inch alloy
 SUSPENSION.....independent front/rear
 POWER.....155 hp / 150 lb-ft torque
 MPG.....30/41/34 (city/hwy/comb)
INCLUDED: Navigation, SiriusXM satellite radio, 7" color touch display, multi-function control, Bose 9-speaker audio, SMS text, Pandora-Aha-Stitcher, Bluetooth hands-free phone/audio, cruise, wheel-mounted controls, 16-inch alloy wheels, heated power mirrors w/ turn lamps, one-touch moonroof, leatherette-trimmed sport seats, leather-wrapped wheel, shift knob, brake handle, keyless entry, push button start, 60/40 rear seat, center arm-rest storage, halogen headlights and DRLs, black grille, body-color rear spoiler, bright beltline trim, stability control, traction control, hill launch, ABS w/ brake assist, SKYACTIV-BODY ring structure.

BASE PRICE.....\$23,795
OPTIONS: Cargo mat.....70
 Scuff plates / door sill trim plates.....125
DESTINATION CHARGE.....795
TOTAL.....\$24,785



LOGBOOK NOTES

We found this grey not half as cool as the blue and red colors featured at the launch. But then we realized it was the 16-inch wheels that made the diff. On "s" models, these bump up to more contemporary 18s.

The backup camera is weak at night, a mediocre image with lots of glare and distortion.

The screen is relatively small, but that's a plus. It's separated from other instruments mounted in the driver's line of sight. We found our way around intuitively—overall enjoyably, and that is a first, lately. Audio includes volume on console, another useful separation of functions. And we got some pretty nice sound out of it, once adjusted.