

Straight arrow

BY JOE SAGE

Driving the Mazda3 Hatchback is like throwing a dart, traveling straight and true wherever you intend. Too bad that name's already taken.

The gen-four Mazda3, new in 2019, picks up strengthened Kodo design language styling cues from the top models, for a rich feel beyond its price tag. Substantial rear pillars and smaller side windows build a profile that echoes classic brougham styling used on large personal luxury cars over the years, suggesting a very private cabin. (Interior rear visibility is nonetheless quite good.)

Inside, screen settings and options are extensive—we spent awhile going through all—yet especially well organized. Functions on the wheel use switches that proved less intuitive.

Mazda3 is for driving, the hatch version livelier than most—the right size, power and spirit, responsive (even with its simple rear suspension) and small enough (eight inches shorter than the sedan) to conquer rush hour freeway maneuvers in the presence of both pricey, powerful luxe utilities and lightweight sports cars, outgunning them with just 186 hp.

Though engineered from a front-drive basis, this AWD has zero torque steer characteristics, tracking rock solid, with a nicely weighted steering feel. The six-speed automatic plus AWD add more than 200 lb, but it's not noticeable. Gunning it through a 90-degree surface street turn can challenge its shift points (though sport mode may help—base performance is good enough that we just forgot about sport mode most of the time).

We're six-feet-plus, but had plenty of legroom, with more seat travel left over, rare. Rear legroom is above average (matching the sedan), while cargo volume is 52 percent more than the sedan.

The Bose unit fell short of expectations, though a custom audio shop could surely easily tweak it.

We had an episode with its smart brakes (presumably) panic-stopping us twice while stop-and-go exiting a supermarket parking lot in a column of five cars—groceries to the floor, reason unknown.

Mazda3 sedan starts at \$21,500, the hatchback at \$23,700. AWD is available on all hatches, and a 6-speed manual is available on the top Premium Package hatch (but not the sedan), very nice when so often relegated to base models only. Top trim also brings you leather. There were options we'd add to ours (satellite radio), though we could skip

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINEalum alloy SKYACTIV-G 2.5L DOHC 16v VVT	
HP / TORQUE	186 hp / 186 lb-ft
DRIVETRAIN	AWD
TRANSMISSIONSKYACTIV-DRIVE electronic 6-spd	
TOP SPEED	130 mph
SUSPENSION	F: Indep MacPherson strut; R: torsion beam axle
STEERING	elec power-assist rack & pinion
BRAKES	F: 11.61 vented; R: 10.43 solid
WHEELS / TIRES	18x7J / 215/45R18 M+S
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	175.6 / 107.3 in
TURNING CIRCLE	34.76 ft
HEADROOM (F/R)	(w/moonroof) 37.5 / 36.5 in
LEGROOM (F/R)	42.3 / 35.1 in
CARGO CAPACITY	20.1 cu.ft
WEIGHT	(hatch, auto, AWD) 3255 lb
FUEL / CAPACITY	reg unleaded / 12.7 gal
MPG	24/32/27 (city/hwy/comb)
BASE PRICE	\$28,900
PREMIUM PKG INCL:	Paddle shifters, active driving display, front and rear LED signature lighting, adaptive front lighting, leather seats, power sliding glass moonroof, black finish alloy wheels.
OPTIONS:	Cargo mat (100), illuminated door sills (425), antidim frameless mirror (275), navigation SD card (450), rear bumper guard (125), wireless charging (275).....1650
DESTINATION CHARGE	920
TOTAL	\$31,470

a couple, too. That's just the short version, if you're ready to build. It's a nifty lineup, easy to navigate, and the hatchback is especially distinctive. ■

Mazda3 is a World Car Awards finalist for both World Car of the Year and World Car Design of the Year. Winners will be announced during the New York International Auto Show in April.

