

REDEFINED

BY JOE SAGE

Mazda's lineup has long been easy to follow. For SUVs, there have been the CX-5 since 2013 and the larger CX-9 since 2007 (as well as a CX-7 from 2007 to 2013). With the smaller CX-3 arriving a couple of years later, for 2016, we now had a CX-3, -5 and -9 (with a hole where -7 used to be), at this point a pretty clear small, medium and large, though each with its own nature.

That sets the stage for a new round of evolution and potential confusion. In 2020, CX-single-digit alphanumerics made room for a CX-30, initially said to "fall between" CX-3 and CX-5. Its lower profile makes it more hatch-like, while a beefy lower half still says SUV. That fall-between idea did not last long, though, as 2021 brought the last CX-3, with the CX-30 now said to be replacing it.

This year, a new shoe has dropped, with the arrival of the Mazda3-based CX-50—also long, low and wide, also beefy below, and currently said to

fall between the CX-5 and the CX-9.

MX-30 arrived at about the same time, available as a full EV, but also as a plug-in hybrid.

MX aside, things now stood as CX-30, -5, -50 and -9. Might it stay this way? Or will the CX-5 follow the dead end of CX-3 and the CX-9 make way for a CX-90, creating an all-two-digit lineup?

Manufacturers don't like to "discuss future product," and it has become more fun to just speculate and watch it unfold, anyway.

Regardless, each one of them is a standout machine holding a valuable place in the realm.

Parked near more traditional SUVs, CX-50 makes some suddenly look positively whale-like. Inspired by its long, low, road-hugging look, we ran a great many charts and calculations, expecting to find a dramatic new height vs stance ratio, but the math turns out to be not that dramatic, its totally updated character being more visual.

In the CX-30, the new look is achieved more via a lower roofline, while in the CX-50 it's achieved more with a visually lower beltline (itself a significant design evolution after a couple of decades of rising beltlines from adding more side impact, air-bag and rollover protections industrywide).

CX-50 is immediately recognizable as a Mazda SUV, while less obviously a brother—or possible successor—to the highly familiar CX-5. CX-50's presence is strong both inside and outside. Mazda has worked hard to position itself as being a cut above. And this new entry is a cut above that.

Features are solid, from their typically smaller and simpler screen up top, with exceptional camera views, to auto-dip mirrors in reverse (which we wish everyone had), to digital instrumentation that looks analog (which works so well) but with clever innovations like the posted speed limit being translated to a shifting visual zone on your speedometer. (The radio preset interface can be frustrating, though we've heard it may become more useful,

given more time.) The cabin cools quickly in triple-digit heat, and our trim includes cooled seats.

Power is ample, and in an uncommon specification, variable, depending upon grade of gasoline—256 hp with 93 octane gas, 227 with 87 octane, while 91 octane is the standard recommendation but with no power spec given (see sidebar). Weighing in at just under two tons in our top grade, the CX-50 tows almost its own weight, 3500 pounds.

A healthy 8.6-inch ground clearance suggests off-road time, but our top trim's handsome 20-inch wheels and low-profile all-seasons discouraged us from pushing it. (A new Meridian Edition with 18-inchers is expected to aim more directly for this niche.) We did give it a few miles' run on an unpaved road with ruts, swales and loose gravel. Its performance tempted us to push it harder, but we contained ourselves. However, it turns out the CX-50 was entered in both our Texas off-road comparos the very next week, where all capabilities were pushed hard (see elsewhere in this issue).

On our off-pavement run here, we gave off-road mode a try, and back on the rural highways, we tried sport mode. Both were fine, but not earth-

shakingly different, which is fine—philosophically, we'd be happy if vehicles didn't need modes at all and were just totally multi-capable, always. The ability to change around can be equal parts feature and nuisance, so we appreciate it when it's useful and enjoyable, but not essential.

Elsewhere in this issue, we suggest that a \$25k crossover may be all you need—unless your aspirations run higher, as most people's do. The CX-50 starts at just above \$25k for the base model in its 187-hp non-turbo sub-lineup. We haven't driven that yet, but the turbo is a natural—either 21 or 37 percent more powerful (depending upon gasoline grade, a solid vote for 93-octane right there), while about 14 percent pricier comparing equivalent upper trims, or 35 percent pricier comparing base trims, financially useful but more of an apples and oranges affair in terms of features.

The redesign earns an A-plus. Though a smaller-volume manufacturer, Mazda is often a style and technology leader. The new double-digit CX-50 not only looms large in their evolution, but may influence the entire segment—beyond being in step with the times, it may redefine the times. ■

WINNER: TAWA Texas Truck Rodeo: Compact SUV of the Year
WINNER: TxMPA Off-Road Invitational: Compact SUV of the Year



SPECIFICATIONS

ASSEMBLY	Madison, Alabama
ENGINE / TRANSMISSION	Japan / Japan
PARTS CONTENT	50% US-Canada, 25% Mexico, 20% Japan
ENGINE	SKYACTIV-G® 2.5L w twin scroll turbocharger, alum alloy block/head
HP/TORQUE	(87 octane) 227 hp / 310 lb-ft (93 octane) 256 hp / 320 lb-ft
COMPRESSION RATIO	10.5:1
TRANSMISSION	SKYACTIV-Drive 6-spd auto
DRIVETRAIN	i-ACTIV AWD
MODES	Mi-Drive sport/off-road/tow
SUSPENSION	F: MacPherson strut; R: torsion beam
STEERING	elec pwr rack & pinion
BRAKES	F: 12.8 vented; R: 12.8 solid disc
WHEELS	20 x 8J alum alloy, black metallic finish w machining cut
TIRES	P245/45 R20 all-season
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	185.8 / 110.8 in
GROUND CLEARANCE	8.6 in
TURNING CIRCLE	39.0 ft
HEADROOM (F/R)	38.6 / 37.5 in
LEGROOM (F/R)	41.7 / 39.8 in
CARGO CAPACITY	31.4 / 56.3 cu.ft
CURB WEIGHT	3907 lb
GVWR	4945 lb
TOW CAPACITY	3500 lb
FUEL	87 reg or 93 prem unl / 91 oct recmd
FUEL CAPACITY	15.0 gal
MPG	23/29/25 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE	\$41,550
TURBO PREMIUM PLUS PKG: heated rear seats, 360° monitor, frameless auto dim rear mirror w Homelink, wireless phone charger, auto dim driver side mirror, Mazda nav system, active driving display, traffic sign recog, traffic jam asst, front/rear park sensors, rear smart brake, blind spot prevention	incl
PAINT: Polymetal Gray Metallic	395
DESTINATION CHARGE	1225

TOTAL **\$43,170**
(Note: price has increased; see chart below.)

2023 MAZDA CX-50 LINEUP

SKYACTIV-G® 2.5L 4-cyl, 187 hp, 186 lb-ft, AWD Tow capacity 2000 lb	
2.5 S	\$27,550
2.5 S Select	28,950
2.5 S Preferred	30,250
2.5 S Preferred Plus	32,690
2.5 S Premium	35,150
2.5 S Premium Plus	37,150

SKYACTIVE-G® 2.5L w twin scroll turbo, AWD (w 87 oct reg gas): 227 hp, 310 lb-ft (w 93 oct prem gas): 256 hp, 320 lb-ft Tow capacity 3500 lb	
2.5 Turbo	\$37,150
2.5 Turbo Meridian Edition	39,950
2.5 Turbo Premium Package	40,300
2.5 Turbo Premium Plus Package	42,300

(Destination charge now \$1275.)