

Mazda CX-7: a really good sport

by Mark_Maynard

Mazda's CX-7 is the sports car of crossover sport utility vehicles.

The seats are firm, the steering is on the heavy side for more driver feedback, the suspension is tight for body control in enthusiastic maneuvers, and the styling is anything-but-minivan.

Actually, the CX-7 looks like jet-assisted running shoes just waiting to be strapped on and fired up.

MAZDA CX-7 - The Mazda CX-7 has been called the sports car of crossover SUVs. CNS Photo courtesy of Mazda.

Mazda is Ford Motor Co.'s import wild child. It builds cars with Japanese engineering that are sporty enough to live up to the "Zoom-Zoom" marketing.

Its Mazda3 is the hip, cool car in the compact class. The Miata MX-5 roadster just passed 800,000 units built in its 17 years of production. The Mazda5 mini-minivan is unlike anything else with three rows of seats. And Mazda dumped its MPV minivan at the close of 2006 and has replaced it with two dramatically styled crossover sport utility vehicles.

The CX-7, today's test vehicle, has seats for five. The CX-9, just going on sale, has seats for seven. (Prices start at \$29,035 and include a 263-horsepower, 3.5-liter V-6.)

There's no logic to the five-seater named CX-7 and the seven-seater named CX-9, but Mazda would like consumers to know that the CX-7 isn't a short-wheelbase CX-9, nor is the CX-9 an extended CX-7. They were intended to be different from the outset. The CX-7 has more in common with the Mazda5, the CX-9 with the Ford Edge, but that's another story.

CX-7 pricing ranges from \$24,345 for a Sport 2WD to \$28,595 for a top-line Grand Touring all-wheel-drive model. The price can be pushed to \$32,000 with the \$4,050 Technology package, which adds a navigation system with rearview camera, moon roof, nine-speaker Bose audio and keyless entry and starting.

Five- and seven-seat crossovers have different buyers, particularly for Mazda. The point of concentration for the CX-9 is in all three rows of seats with stadium seating. The concentration for CX-7 is the left front seat.

The 244-horsepower, 2.3-liter, four-cylinder engine is the latest turbocharged and direct-injection engine technology. It's also used in the Mazdaspeed3 and Mazdaspeed6 but tuned differently for the six-speed automatic SportShift transmission.

From full stop to full throttle, there's a painful silence of turbo lag, then the power pours on. That's a problem with a 4,000-pound, all-wheel-drive vehicle and particularly annoying for the driver when sneaking out into traffic. Power in the midrange is forceful and satisfying. Traction control and stability control come with every model.

What's lost in launch power is made up in fuel mileage - 18 miles per gallon city and 24 highway for all-wheel drive, 19/24 for front drive, using premium gasoline.

The six-speed automatic is intuitive for power control. The electronics didn't hesitate to give a downshift to stay in the power band or hold a gear for engine braking on downhills. When powering through a corner, the transmission holds the gear to maintain stability and steering control. That's more sport sedan than SUV.

And that's when I appreciated the heavy steering, but not so much when just driving around town. The same can be said about the sport-tuned suspension, which displays its ability when flexed, but also transmits road noise, on some surfaces more than others. And there seems to be a lot of engine noise coming through the fire wall.

If you're the sporting type, those issues won't be problems. Same with the styling. The steep rake of the windshield enhances the fast lines of the exterior, but inside it gives a minivanlike dashboard expanse. And there are blind spots at the base of the large, outswept windshield pillars.

Other features inside were quite user-friendly and accommodating. Doors open wide for access, and the tailgate is almost effortless to close. Light-colored leather seating has an interesting textured, charcoal-gray strip down the middle of the seat back and cushion. And there's no shortage of storage areas and cup holders.

The CX-7 is an alternate to a sedan for active people who have gear to carry on the weekends and a school car pool through the week.

Any kid with a little gasoline running through her or his veins would jump up and down for parents to drive home with this. And what parent doesn't want to feel like a kid again with a new car that's anything but a minivan?

Copley News Service SPECS2007 Mazda CX-7 Grand Touring AWD
Body style: Mid-size, five-passenger crossover SUV
Engine: Aluminum, DOHC turbocharged, 2.3-liter four-cylinder
Horsepower: 244 at 5,000 rpm
Torque: 258 foot-pounds at 2,500 rpm
Transmission: six-speed SportShift automatic
Acceleration: 0 to 60 mph, 7.7 to 7.9 seconds, from the popular car magazines
EPA fuel economy estimates: 18 mpg city, 24 highway (19/24 2WD); 91 octane recommended
Fuel capacity: 18.2 gallons

DIMENSIONS
Cargo space: 29.9 cubic feet; 58.6 rear seats folded
Front head/leg/shoulder room: 39.7/41.7/58 inches
Rear head/leg/shoulder room: 39.3/36.4/55.8 inches
Length/wheelbase: 184/108.3 inches
Curb weight: 3,710/3,929 2WD/AWD pounds

FEATURES
Standard equipment includes: remote locking, automatic climate control, GT leather-trimmed seats and steering wheel, electroluminescent gauges with blue lighting, four-speaker CD audio system, eight-way power driver seat, heated front seats, power locks and mirrors, auto up/down front windows, variable intermittent wipers, rear privacy glass, rear seat center armrest, retractable cargo cover, roof spoiler, carpeted floor mats, 60/40 split folding rear seat.
Safety equipment includes: multistage front air bags, side air bags, front-to-rear air-bag curtains, electronic stability control, traction control, Brake Assist and electronic brake-force distribution.

CHASSIS
Brakes: power-assisted, four-wheel anti-lock discs with electronic stability control and electronic brake-force distribution; dual-piston, 11.6-inch vented front discs; single-piston, 11.9-inch vented rear
Steering: power-assisted, engine-speed-sensitive rack and pinion; turning circle, 37.4 feet
Suspension: front, independent MacPherson struts, coil springs and stabilizer bar; rear, multilink coil springs with stabilizer bar and telescopic, double-acting shock absorbers
Tires and wheels: P235/60 18-inch, H-rated all-season on alloy wheels

PRICING
Base: \$28,595; price as tested, \$30,660
Options on test car: rear bumper guard, \$50; Sirius satellite radio, \$430; moon-roof package, \$1,585, includes 240-watt Bose six-CD changer upgrade with nine speakers
The competition: Honda CR-V, Nissan Murano, Mitsubishi Outlander, Saturn Vue, Toyota RAV4
Where assembled: Hiroshima, Japan

PLUSES: The sports car of crossover SUVs.

MINUSES: Blind spots at windshield pillars; heavy steering at slow speeds; cabin noise from engine, tires and road surfaces.

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