

More Mazda zoom-zoom with room for seven

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Special to The IFP

It's getting to point where there are as many SUV/CUVs on the market as sedans.

Buyers have decided minivans aren't as appealing anymore, something I just can't understand.

It's the image and/or status of the SUV/CUV which has taken hold of buyer psyche, not just here, but around the world. Take a look at the upcoming Frankfurt Motor Show in Germany and you will see batches from just about every maker in Europe.

Mazda has never been behind the curve in this segment and had one of the first compact SUVs with the Tribute that's still selling well. Similarly, the gap left by the phasing out of the MPV minivan van has been replaced by a battery of three different people mover choices, the Mazda5 compact wagon, the CX-7 compact CUV and the range topping, mid-size CX-9 CUV with full seven-seat capability.

Launched only last year, the CX-9 hit the ground running and is already a success.

For 2008 CX-9 has been enhanced and is offered in two trim grades: GS and GT. Front-wheel drive (FWD) is standard on the Mazda CX-9 GS trim and delivers excellent drivability. New for 2008, Active Torque Split All-Wheel Drive (AWD) is standard on the GT. AWD is optional on the GS. The all-wheel drive system uses a computer-controlled coupling integrated with the rear differential to deliver up to half the available torque to the rear wheels on demand.

Pricing for the GS starts at \$39,995 and \$48,825 for the GT with my GT as tested fitted out with a bevy of options coming in at \$51,195.

The CX-9 is by far the biggest Mazda with more interior room than any other current Mazda but not as big as the discontinued MPV minivan, and I should know because I own a MPV. While the CX-9 also seats seven as in the MPV, the difference is you'll find 487 litres of cargo capacity behind the rear seat, big for a CUV but still not as much as my MPV. Both second- and third-row seats fold flat to allow additional storage, up to 2,851 litres, all the way up to the back of the front seats.

The biggest of the on-going changes on the 2008 is an all-new 3.7-litre, 24-valve V6 engine. It is built by Mazda at its Hiroshima plant and produces 273 hp and 270 lb/ft of torque on regular fuel. This compares to the 2007 CX-9 that used a Ford-sourced 3.5-litre V6 with 263 hp and 246 lb/ft of torque. Unchanged is the use of an Aisin-supplied six-speed automatic transmission with manual shift mode as standard equipment.

Fuel consumption is listed at 13.2/9.0L/100 km city/highway for the FWD version and 14.0/9.7L/100 km city/highway in AWD. That compares to the 2007 model that returned 13.3/8.9L/100 km city/highway in FWD and 14.5/9.7L/100 km city/highway in AWD. So the bottom line here is more power for slightly better mileage.

The CX-9 is very well equipped and that includes standard Bluetooth connectivity.

Also standard is front and rear air conditioning with three-zone climate control, power windows, power door locks with remote keyless entry, cruise control, six airbags, rain sensing windshield wipers, tilt and telescopic steering wheel, eight-way power adjustable driver's seat, AM/FM/CD player with six speakers, four-wheel ABS, Dynamic Stability Control, Traction Control, Rollover Stability Control, and a factory installed towing package that includes a larger cooling fan and radiator.

The standard wheel on the GS is an 18-inch alloy while the GT upgrades that to 20-inchers. The GS comes with halogen headlights and cloth inter. The GT adds Xenon (HID) headlights, fog lights, side turn signals on the outside mirrors, interior wood grain finish, power-adjustable passenger seat, leather upholstery with heated front seats, and driver's seat position memory function.

As mentioned above, my tester was well optioned out and that included the navigation system with touch screen and rearview camera and the Luxury package that includes in-dash six-CD changer, premium Bose sound system with 10 speakers, audio pilot noise compensation system, intelligent key system (keyless entry and start), and power lift tailgate.

I doubt I would have opted for the Luxury package, the main reason being I don't like the intelligent key system. With the approximate dimensions of a credit card, it is a proximity device that locks the car when you walk



Launched just last year, the 2008 Mazda CX-9 CUV features a number of on-going changes, chief of which is a larger, more powerful V6 engine.

away. Sounds good, but the card is slippery and it's easy to miss your pocket. Lose this baby and you have a problem. Mazda uses this on a lot of their vehicles. My advice is to get two or three extra because you're likely to lose one over the life of the vehicle.

The CX-9 is based on the same platform as the Mazda6 sedan and benefits from the sporty handling that chassis was designed to provide. Now the CX-9 is no sportscar, but it feels tight in the corners and doesn't start to wallow near the adhesion limit, which is a serious limitation with these bulky CUV bodies on car platforms, especially the full-size ones.

The CX-9 does not have a ponderous feel even when motoring briskly. And just to make sure you don't get caught out, all the standard safety features (ABS,

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