REMEMBER WHEN SMALL cars really were the smallest cars around? Enter light cars, something smaller again. Then, a few years ago, along came a sub-light class - pint-sized 'city cars' with a frugal, three-cylinder engine and budget price.

Previously the domicile of tiddlers such as the Suzuki Alto and Nissan Micra, the class has seen a flurry of activity in recent months with, first, the arrival of Volkswagen’s up! and Peugeot’s 208 and, in January, the Mitsubishi Mirage.

With prices starting in the low teens, they’re cheap – but what about cheerful? We decided to see by putting all five to the test, but, before we divulge how they drove and their various pluses and minuses, let’s tick off the commonality.

Apart from the aforementioned triple-cylinder engine, standard fare is a five-door body, McPherson strut/torsion beam suspension, rack and pinion power steering and front disc/rear drum brakes. Safety is commendable, with as many as six airbags, anti-lock brakes, brake assist, electronic brakeforce distribution, electronic stability control and height-adjustable front seat belts with pretensioners and load limiters the norm.

Other standard equipment includes immobiliser, central locking, airconditioning, auxiliary power outlet, driver’s seat height adjustment, split-fold rear seat, steering height adjustment, tachometer, and audio system with CD player, MP3 compatibility and auxiliary input, so forget any notion of them being ‘poverty pack’.

MITSUBISHI MIRAGE ES
Our Mirage ES test car felt comparatively strong and responsive in general driving, it is, after all, second only to the 208 in power (57 kW) and torque (100 Nm) outputs and the lightest on test (865 kg). That said, we were surprised by how much quicker the all-new 1.2-litre MIVEC ‘triple’ proved in our measured performance tests.

The mini Mitsubishi could give the others a start and then some and, while no one is likely to ever take any of these
cars anywhere near a drag strip, it’s reassuring to know that you’re driving something that can hold its own in general traffic. Hills, though, will test every one of these tiddlers.

There’s no major trade-off in fuel economy, with Mirage consuming 6.0 litres/100 km on test, 1.4 above its ADR combined average.

The interior has a touch of style, borne out by a glossy, piano black centre panel and two-tone (black and ivory) dash and door trims. We measured Mirage as the best, or nearest to, for overall rear room and, while the boot is short on width, it’s accommodating for height.

At $12,990 and boasting the most generous warranty, long service intervals and four-year/60,000 km fixed price servicing ($250 a service), Mirage represents value. CVT is a $2250 option.

**Other likes:** Uses ULP, standard equipment includes Bluetooth with audio streaming and voice control, driver side window auto up/down, keyless entry.

**Other dislikes:** Spacesaver spare, road noise intrusion.

**NISSAN MICRA ST**

Like the Suzuki Alto, the three-cylinder Micra ST manual featured towards the pointy end of RACQ’s 2012 New Vehicle Running Costs Survey.

Micra was calculated as costing an average of $132.35 a week in standing and running costs – cheap, but still dearer than four-cylinder offerings from Hyundai (i20 Active) and Holden (Barina Spark CD) and the three-cylinder Alto GL.

Our test car came equipped with optional four-speed auto, making it the odd one out among the otherwise five-speed manual comparison line-up.

Obvious convenience of city driving aside, this put the tiny Nissan at a disadvantage, adding $2000 to the list price and 0.6 litres/100 km to the manual version’s official ADR combined fuel consumption figure of 5.9. But more than that, the auto failed to stir Micra when your right foot went down.

Performance was pedestrian from 0-400 m and all points between (0-60, 80 and 100 km/h); though in roll-on acceleration it bettered up! and Alto from 50-80 km/h and the latter again from 60-100. Our noise meter showed it to be the most raucous, too, when being worked.

Notwithstanding its go-to-whoa limitations, Micra drives acceptably for what it is – a 1.2-litre city car. Good use of space is made inside, where our measurements had the Nissan best for front and rear leg room and maximum boot width and height.

**Other likes:** Capped price servicing, seven-inch touch screen, Bluetooth, power windows with one touch function

**SUZUKI ALTO GLX**

First the good news: With an average of $116.70 a week, Alto was the cheapest car to own and run in Queensland last year, according to the RACQ New Vehicle Running Costs
Survey. And it is something of a fuel economy run champion, for example, returning an average of 3.68 litres/100 km on an independent test over a 3400 km drive around New Zealand.

So, light on the hip pocket it might be, but there is more to selecting, buying and owning a vehicle, which is what our comparo looks at.

Our test car was the GLX, costing $700 more than the base-model GL, for which buyers get extras such as 14” alloy wheels and front fog lamps.

Like up!, Alto is strictly a four seater, which is just as well as it measured up as the smallest (or close to) across the rear interior and boot.

Its power and torque outputs are five kW and five Nm less than the other 1.0-litre ‘triple’, up!, making it the most performance challenged on test – and it showed. Though more responsive than Micra under acceleration, Alto was slower in the mid-range. An average of 29m in braking from 80 km/h-stop was far and away the poorest of all.

On test, Alto returned an average of 5.9 litres/100km, 1.2 higher than its ADR combined figure. Fixed price servicing is not applicable.

Other likes: Low drag co-efficient (0.30), low rolling resistance tyres.

Other dislikes: Sounds rough at idle, requires 95 PULP, manual wing mirrors.

**VOLKSWAGEN UP! 5-DOOR**

No review of up! would be complete without mention of its City Emergency Braking (CEB), a genuine point of difference not just in our comparison, but anywhere near this end of the market.

CEB is a laser-based system fitted as standard and designed to help a driver avoid a low-speed crash, or to reduce its severity. At speeds between five and 30km/h, it monitors an area 10m ahead for vehicles which might present a threat of collision.

If a collision is likely, CEB first pre-charges the brakes and makes the emergency Brake Assist system more sensitive. If the driver should notice...
Crunch the value for money numbers ... and it’s line ball between the Mitsubishi and the Suzuki.

the risk, the car is ready to respond more quickly to their braking action. However, if the driver still takes no action and a collision becomes imminent, it independently applies the brakes hard. If the driver intervenes to try to avoid the crash, either by accelerating hard or by steering, CEB will deactivate.

Having the least bulk to carry (880 kg), up! covers ground nicely, particularly around twisty back roads where its handling poise and chassis dynamics impressed. With an average stopping distance of 24.1m, it topped the emergency brake test.

up! supped least overall, with its average of 4.3 litres/100 km bettering the ADR combined figure of 4.9.

Front and rear leg room is tight, and we measured up! as having the smallest boot.

Other likes: Capped price servicing.

Other dislikes: Requires 95 PULP, no auto option.

CONCLUSION

Crunch the value for money numbers (which include price, depreciation, maintenance costs, fuel consumption, warranty and standard features), and it’s line ball between the Mitsubishi and the Suzuki, with the VW snapping at their heels, then a drop to the Nissan and another gap to the Peugeot.

In terms of design and function (safety, environment, comfort, space, practicality, ergonomics and build and finish), the 208 takes the honours by a wide margin to up! and Mirage close together, and then Alto just ahead of Micra.

Mirage’s dominant engine performance is not enough to snare on the road honours, with other score lines, such as ride, handling, braking and smoothness and quietness, giving up! the edge over the 208, and Micra and Alto some way back behind Mirage.

Overall, the VW outpoints the Mitsubishi, from the Peugeot, with the Suzuki and Nissan relative also rans. But, if operating a new car as cheaply as possible is the be-all and end-all, then the latter pair, particularly Alto, present a compelling case.

However, if your budget can stretch another few thousand, we suggest checking out the best of the light car category at australiasbestcars.com.au or Australia’s Best Cars 2013 edition magazine. For comparable money to the 208 Active, there are a host of smart buys and fine drives (think Kia Rio, Hyundai Accent and i20, VW Polo, et al), that ultimately would be far better to live with everyday. Less, it would seem, is not always more.