FAUX-WHEEL-DRIVES

FOR AN INSIGHT TO WHERE THE AUSTRALIAN MOTORING LANDSCAPE MIGHT BE HEADING, LOOK NO FURTHER.

THE NAME IS Crossover; the game is extrapolation of a light car handy hatchback into an even more practical and roomy mini SUV.

Australians can’t get enough of them. While local vehicle sales dipped two percent in 2014, this relatively new segment soared 30 percent. Industry observers forecast that by 2020, one in 10 new vehicle sales will be a Crossover. And that might be conservative.

Honda, Mazda and Renault are three players to add a Crossover in recent months, joining the likes of Holden, Nissan, Ford, Mitsubishi, Peugeot, Suzuki, Jeep and SsangYong. We decided to put the newcomers to the test, matched in price and specification level as closely as possible.

However, availability among the relevant press car fleets resulted in the starters being the range-topping Holden Trax 1.4 turbo LTZ and Renault’s Captur Dynamique, while Honda came to the party with its entry level HR-V VTi and Mazda its mid-spec CX-3 AWD sTouring Safety.

In all, an enticing mix of turbo and normally-aspirated engines of varying displacement, continuously variable and auto (single and dual clutch) transmissions, front and all-wheel-drive; each car absolutely relevant to modern motoring. Here’s how it shook out...

COMMONALITY
All come well equipped. Standard fare includes: ABS, AM/FM radio, auxiliary input/USB, auxiliary power outlets, AW, BA, Bluetooth, central locking, DFSCa (except Captur, which lacks rear curtain airbags), EBD, ESC, height-adjustable front seatbelts with load limiters,
HSA, immobiliser, MP3/CD player, power mirrors and windows, PS, RC, steering wheel-mounted audio and cruise controls, TC, tilt and reach steering adjustment, trip computer and touch screen.

**HOLDEN TRAX**
Based on the Barina Light car, the Trax 1.4 turbo carries the second highest price sticker of our quartet. The LTZ is well equipped and you get a few extras such as powered sunroof and heated front seats, though its airconditioning doesn’t extend to climate control (which the others have).

The swings and roundabouts to its value-for-money proposition continue with the Trax claiming fractionally cheapest capped-price servicing costs ($229-289 per service) and insurance premiums, but poorest (36 percent) Glass’s Guide forecast residual (after five years/70,000km).

With the meatiest torque output of 200Nm, the Holden has the pulling power to carry its 1421kg (heaviest on test) bulk without trouble. It was quickest from 0-60km/h (4.2 seconds), topped our roll-on acceleration tests (50-80km/h in 4.2 and 60-100km/h in 6.1 seconds) and shares equal best braked towing capability of 1200kg with the Mazda.

The trade-off is fuel economy. A highest ADR average fuel figure of 6.9 litres/100km morphed into 9.5, the thirstiest on test. And the handling proficiency and ride comfort, while capable for segment, is short of best in this company.

But the front and rear seat headroom is impressive and there is plenty of useful storage for odds and ends. Additional cargo space can be utilised by folding the rear seats to form a flat floor.

None of the test vehicles had a full-sized spare, but the Trax at least comes with a temporary use wheel and tyre, which we find preferable to the spacesaver of the other three.

**HONDA HR-V**
Space and user-friendly flexibility is what the HR-V does best. Despite its Jazz Light car underpinnings, the HR-V came up trumps in all six of our maximum/minimum cargo area measurements. It was also best on rear leg room.

Honda’s trademark ‘Magic Seats’, which flip, fold and stow to offer 18 different load-carrying possibilities, are such a good thing that we are confounded why the opposition doesn’t follow suit.

Also impressive is the HR-V’s driveability. This compact Crossover surprised us with its handling, ride, smoothness and quiet, competent manner.
At 1328kg, it might be some 100kg heavier than the CX-3 and Captur and have the lowest torque output of all with 172Nm, but its 1.8-litre 150kW engine works well in unison with Honda’s well-calibrated CVT. The HR-V posted equal best 50-80km/h time (4.2 seconds) and proved second swiftest from 0-100km/h (10.1 seconds).

On test, fuel consumption of 8.6 litres/100km (2.0 litres above the ADR average) was bettered only by the thrifty Renault.

A substantially low price of $24,990 belies the entry level VTi model’s equipment inventory, which extends to a tyre pressure monitor. Second lowest capped-price servicing (at 10,000km intervals over five years) and insurance also massage the hip pocket nerve.

Shortcomings: braked towing capacity of 800kg is the smallest of our foursome; emergency braking distances are the longest; front head room is not as generous as others; and the front seats too flat for our liking.

MAZDA CX-3
Built on the Mazda2 Light car platform but with the Mazda3’s bigger 2.0-litre DOHC engine under its shapely bonnet, it’s perhaps little wonder the CX-3 proved the performance benchmark on test.

With the strongest power (109 kW) and second-highest torque (192Nm) and all-wheel-drive to deliver superior traction and grip, the CX-3 topped all but 0-60km/h in our standing acceleration tests and pulled up the shortest in braking from 80km/h (23.1m).

According to our noise meter, the CX-3 is quietest at idle and at a steady 80km/h, though out on typical coarse-mix back roads, tyre ‘roar’ sometimes intrudes the cabin at an irritating level. And while the Mazda rides compliantly, it can be a little skittish over bumps.

But, dynamically, the CX-3 shines with impressive grip levels and handling response. Clearly, this is the best chassis of the four.

Comfort matches considerable style in the interior where there is plenty of ‘travel’ (driver’s seat slide adjustment) affording the most generous leg room. Cargo space, though, trails the Trax and (by some margin) the HR-V.

A $1030 safety pack is what gives the sTouring the ‘Safety’ aspect to its name, but even without it this AWD model is the priciest of our quartet. But it is money well spent and potential resale value is the strongest with Glass’s Guide giving the CX-3 a 41 percent residual.

Like Holden, Mazda offers lifetime capped-price servicing. Expect to pay between $280-$307 each 10,000km scheduled service.

RENAULT CAPTUR
With the lowest power (88kW) and second lowest torque (190Nm) outputs from its 1.2-litre turbo engine, we suspected the Captur would struggle against its bigger engine competition – at least flat-out in a straight line.

So it proved, due also in part to the car’s EDC (dual-clutch transmission) being slow to move.
CONCLUSION

Such is the pace of contemporary automotive development that the Trax – though only two years into its model life – shows its age badly. In some aspects, the Holden feels more like a generation old and needs an extensive styling and engineering upgrade to cut it with the best.

Not so the three newcomers, none of which would disappoint a buyer in this segment. For those captivated by style and French funkiness, the Captur puts up a compelling argument, especially given its value for buck. Then there’s the CX-3. It matches the Renault’s looks, but adds an element of driving dynamism and performance that gives it an edge in this company.

But if size and functionality matters most to you, then the HR-V holds the aces. And there’s no appreciative compromise of driving reward. Simply put, we think this exciting new Honda ticks more boxes than any other of its brand in quite some time.

COSTS & RATINGS

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<th>ANCAP SAFETY RATING</th>
<th>CAPPED PRICE SERVICING</th>
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<td><strong>HOLDEN TRAX 1.4 LTZ</strong></td>
<td><strong>$29,990</strong></td>
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^ PRICES ARE MANUFACTURERS’ LIST PRICES UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED AND DO NOT INCLUDE STATUTORY AND DELIVERY CHARGES. PRICES CORRECT AT TIME OF PRINTING.
^^ BASED ON AN RACQ INSURANCE COMPREHENSIVE POLICY FOR A 35 YEAR-OLD MALE, MAXIMUM NO CLAIM BONUS, VEHICLE FINANCIALLY UNENCUMBERED, AND $600 EXCESS. MULTI POLICY AND RACQ MEMBER LOYALTY DISCOUNTS MAY APPLY. DISCOUNTS OF 2.5-15 PERCENT MAY BE AVAILABLE TO RACQ MEMBERS DEPENDING ON LENGTH OF MEMBERSHIP.
^^^ REFER TO MANUFACTURER’S WEBSITE FOR FULL DETAILS AS CONDITIONS APPLY.