haul of fame

A recent rash of new releases suggests the good, old station wagon never really passed away, it just took a temporary vacation. We check out four mid-sized offerings around $40,000.

STORY BARRY GREEN | PHOTOS MARK HORSBURGH
IT COULD BE argued that a station wagon’s point of being is to offer more room and carrying capacity than a sedan.

That may be, but to win over the modern day family it also needs to provide a quality drive and ride, something sometimes missing among their increasingly popular vehicles of choice, the Sport Utility Vehicle (SUV).

Recently we put the new wagon variants of the well-regarded Ford Mondeo, Mazda6, Skoda Octavia and Subaru Liberty to the test.

The petrol-engined test contingent of Mondeo Zetec (six-speed auto), Mazda6 Classic (five-speed auto), Octavia RS TSI (six-speed DSG) and Liberty 2.5i CVT are well representative of their ilk and have plenty to offer as an alternative to the ubiquitous SUV.

VALUE FOR MONEY

On price alone, Mazda at $38,740 takes some beating by being $1250 cheaper than the Ford and $1750 less than the Subaru. At $42,290, the Skoda is by far the dearest. Glass’s Guide by far the dearest.

The latter pays further for its high performance credentials by incurring an additional $400 insurance excess per year.

Going by official Australian Design Rule (ADR) figures, Skoda is the best on fuel consumption, although it prefers the more expensive 95 RON to the 91 (standard unleaded) ‘sipped’ by the others. But on test, the Czech-built wagon imbibed more than Mazda and Liberty, with Mondeo consistently the thirstiest.

Each of our contenders comes well equipped with standard features. Stick the boxed for dual climate control airconditioning, trip computer, multi auxiliary power outlets, front map lights, cruise control, leather steering wheel cover, multi cup holders, centre console and centre rear folding armrest, six-stack CD player, MP3 compatibility and auxiliary input, tinted windows, alloy wheels, ‘auto off’ headlights, front fog lamps, power mirrors/ windows and remote locking.

Mondeo and Octavia outnumber the Mazda and Liberty for the number of speakers (eight plays six) and the former also boasts rear fog lamps, front/ rear parking sensors, bluetooth and USB port, front seatbelt reminder and ‘follow-me-home’ lighting. The Skoda provides a one-touch power driver’s window operation, lights-on audible warning, roof rails, and front and rear audible/virtual seatbelt warning.

The Skoda scores by boasting map lights over the rear seats, auto dim mirror, speed alert, heated front seats and rear view mirrors, alloy pedals, roof rails and tyre pressure sensor.

Mazda6, Octavia and Liberty can claim a cargo light, while the latter has heater ducts for rear passengers and electronic park brake with hill hold.

DESIGN & FUNCTION

Safety is a strong point for all four wagons, with dual front, front side and front/rear curtain airbags.

Photos, from left: Mazda6 is a lot of car for the least money. Octavia offers the most dynamic ride.

The Ford and Subaru also get a driver’s knee bag. All have potentially life-saving anti-lock brakes (ABS), electronic brake distribution (EBD), brake assist (BA), electronic stability control (ESC), traction control (TC) and front height-adjustable seatbelts with pretensioners. Little wonder they score a five (out of five) star ANCAP safety rating, except Skoda, which earns a still respectable four.

Mondeo is alone in having a security alarm as standard, although the Liberty comes pre-wired for installation and Skoda offers it as an option. Our foursome is fitted with an immobiliser, but only Liberty can claim the Datadots ID system and stereo theft code protection. Ford provides locking wheel nuts.

No one misses out on driver’s footrest, tilt and reach steering and audio/cruise controls handsomely mounted on the steering wheel. All offer the driver a choice of manual sequential shift, but Liberty and Octavia also come with a wheel-mounted paddle shift.

Comfort is another universal strength. The Skoda’s front seats boast lumbar and height adjustment and their sporty design provides both comfort and support.

It’s possible for a driver to get well settled in the Ford, too, with power adjustment for height and slide. The seats are flatter and, while they come with lumbar adjustment, miss out on cushion tilt (as does the Mazda and Subaru).

Subaru offers the best front and rear headroom, by a fair margin from the Ford, but it’s line ball between the pair for most rear leg room. Skoda has the longest rear seat cushion, Mazda the widest.

In cargo area, Ford is by far the longest, Subaru the widest and Skoda the best in height. But maximum dimensions tell only part of the story as no cargo area or boot is perfectly symmetrical. The minimum dimensions largely determine practical load carrying capability and here Subaru wins on length, Ford on width and Skoda on height.

For more cargo space, the rear seats on each can be split-folded 60/40 but only the Mazda folds completely flat without the inconvenience of adjusting head rests and the cushion. With seats down, the Subaru offers arguably the best load carrying solution.

Mazda pips the others for practicability primarily due to providing a full size spare tyre and the aforementioned flat-fold rear seats. All offer good access to the cargo area through the absence of internal load lip, except Skoda. But only the Czech mate boasts a ‘ski port’. All are endowed with a flat cargo floor and come with tie-downs and coat hooks, seatback pockets and cargo blind, although just Mazda and Octavia provide a locking glovebox.

All score multiple power outlets but only Skoda rear passengers get their own ventilation. Ford’s under-floor storage trays in the cargo bay are a handy touch.

None of the four misses out on lap/sash three-point seatbelts for all five occupants or a full complement of headrests, along with mounting points fitted for three child restraints.

ON THE ROAD

With easily the best power and torque outputs and being just 1 kg heavier than the lightest wagon (Liberty), Octavia RS was always going to set the pace in performance. And so it proved, with the 2.0-litre turbo four giving the others a ‘towelling’ in six of our track acceleration figures, the RS set the pace in performance. And so it proved, with the 2.0-litre turbo four giving the others a ‘towelling’ in six of our track acceleration tests. There’s no hint of turbo lag, and with the DSG gearbox providing blazingly fast and precise up shifts, the RS was in a class of its own among this field. Consistently second quickest, in all but 50-80 km/h, was the Liberty. This surprised our
testers, as it doesn’t engender any great feeling of responsibility.

In contrast, the Mazda feels and sounds like it enjoys being questioned. While not particularly quick, the 2.5-litre, in-line double overhead cam (DOHC) four never seems to be found wanting and its torque curve is well matched to the five-speed Autoactivator.

Weight, together with a lack of power and torque, counted against the Ford and it was no surprise to see it finish last in every acceleration test. But around town and cruising on the highway these discrepancies are less noticeable and the Mazda drives more than capably.

Mazda and liberty are Herculaneum when it comes to towing ability, both rated at 1500 kg (braked), 200 kg ahead of Octavia and 300 kg up on Mondeo. However, unbraked, the latter can pull 750 kg.

Liberty 720 kg, Octavia 650 kg and Mazda 510 kg.

Ride quality could be split into two camps: firm (Mazda and Subaru), with its sports suspension, or softer or soft-ish (Ford and Subaru). The Octavia, with its sports suspension, 18-inch wheels and low-profile rubber, might even be considered harder under power, while the Skoda’s boisterous personality might be put down to its willingness to work harder under power, while the Skoda’s boisterous personality might be put down to its willingness to perform.

CONCLUSION

On performance alone, Octavia would win this encounter handily. ‘Then would follow liberty, and Mazda and Mondeo. If size and space counted for everything, it would be Ford, Subaru, Mazda and Skoda in that order.

But we suspect most station wagon buyers might be looking for something with a good serving of both commodities – a ‘Labrador lugger’ with a user-friendly personality that they could live with everyday. The Mazda 6 fits the bill.