standing out in the suv scrum

STORY BARRY GREEN I PHOTOS MARK BUCHANAN

TESTERS: BARRY GREEN, JOHN EWING, GREG MISZKOWYCZ.
STARTERS: MAZDA CX-5 MAXX SPORT AWD 2.5, MITSUBISHI OUTLANDER ES AWD 2.4, SUBARU FORESTER 2.5i.
For relatively large petrol engine vehicles, all boast impressive ADR fuel consumption combined figures and run on cheaper ULP.

**THE SPORTS UTILITY** Vehicles (SUV) under $40,000 category is one of the most prolific in terms of makes and models in our annual Australia’s Best Cars awards. And not through coincidence – this is where more and more buyers are looking for their new vehicle.

Mazda, Mitsubishi and Subaru are but three of the popular makes to recently add new, or upgrade, models to the segment; covering all bases by offering various specification levels, a choice of two-wheel or four-wheel-drive and diesel or petrol engines. Think CX-5, Outlander and Forester, respectively.

On its release last year, the CX-5 won applause from buyers and plaudits from motoring writers alike, although some (us included) were a little underwhelmed by the petrol engine offering. We felt the 2.0-litre SkyActiv-G, while highly-efficient and smooth, needed a bit more power and torque to handle everything that might be asked of it.

Mazda redressed the performance shortfall last February by releasing a 2.5-litre SkyActiv-G unit (producing 138kW of power and 250Nm of torque) to replace the 2.0-litre unit in its all-wheel drive (AWD) Maxx, Maxx Sport and GT models, and debut in the new range-topping Akera.

The impressive newcomer, we felt, made a worthy contender for a square-off against similar-sized AWD competition from Mitsubishi (Outlander 2.4), Subaru (Forester 2.5) and Toyota (RAV4 2.5).

In a perfect world, the CX-5 Maxx auto ($32,880) and RAV4 GX auto ($34,490) would have closely matched Outlander ES CVT ($33,990) and Forester 2.5i CVT ($32,990) on pricing and specification levels.

However, it was the Maxx Sport ($36,620) that Mazda provided, while Toyota’s offering of a RAV4 2.2-litre turbo-diesel AWD made it the odd one out (look for a separate review in the October issue).

**VALUE FOR MONEY**

The price is right for Outlander, though CX-5 and Forester claw back ground in having better forecast residual values from Glass’s Guide (Mazda and Subaru 40, Mitsubishi 38 percent). But the latter has longer servicing intervals at 12 months/15,000km (CX-5 has six months/10,000km and Forester six months/12,500km) and the benefit of capped price servicing ($295 a service up to four years/60,000km) which adds to its ownership appeal. The most generous warranty of five years/unlimited kilometres (Mazda and Subaru are three years/unlimited km), along with an annual insurance premium some $100 cheaper, further sweetens the deal.

For relatively large petrol engine vehicles, all boast impressive ADR fuel consumption combined figures and run on cheaper ULP. On test, though, the Subaru averaged 10.1 litres/100km (2.0 above its ADR combined cycle), compared with Outlander 10.2 (7.5) and Maxx Sport 10.5 (7.4). That said, the bulk of the driving was on the open road, where the benefits of the Mazda’s iStop and Subaru’s stop/start fuel-saving systems were not able to be maximised.

In terms of standard equipment common to all, tick the boxes for central locking, climate-control airconditioning, cruise control, tilt/reach steering, audio system with CD player, six speakers (Outlander also gets a pair of tweeters), MP3 and bluetooth compatibility, auxiliary input and USB; and trip computer among other things.

A comprehensive suite of safety equipment on each includes dual front/side/curtain airbags (Outlander and Forester also get a driver’s knee airbag), anti-lock brakes with brake assist and electronic brakeforce distribution, height adjustable front and rear headrests, height adjustable front seatbelts with load limiters and pretensioners, and electronic stability/traction controls.

For a near $4000 premium over Outlander and $3000 over Forester, Maxx Sport buyers get – in addition to the afore mentioned dual-zone climate-control and two extra speakers – 17-inch alloys, auto on/off headlights; leather wrapped gear knob, handbrake handle and steering wheel; 40/20/40 split fold rear seat instead of 60/40; centre fold-down arm rest; illuminated vanity mirrors, rain-sensing wipers and sat nav.
DESIGN AND FUNCTION

Our trio boasts a five-star ANCAP crash safety rating (the best there is). And environmentally, Forester rates four and a half (out of five) stars in the Federal Government’s Green Vehicle Guide, a half-star ahead of Outlander and one ahead of CX-5.

The Mitsubishi’s security credentials are enhanced by an alarm as standard, while the Subaru is wired for installation for same and also comes with DataDot theft recovery identification.

Open the door and chances are you will find the Mazda boasts the most inviting and impressive interior. All three come with cloth, not leather, seat trim in an obligatory dark grey (in the interests of durability), but it’s the CX-5 that looks the smartest, thanks to tasteful styling highlights. Ditto the dashboard layout – not only are the instruments and switches logically laid out, but the whole presentation is very 21st century and devoid of any pretentious bling. There’s nothing wrong with the functionality of the Subaru or Mitsubishi, but by contrast Forester looks a little conservative while Outlander lacks the quality feel of the others.

Behind the wheel, each measures up ergonomically: steering able to be adjusted for tilt and reach, driver’s seat with slide/height/backrest adjustment (all manual), a footrest, and audio/cruise/bluetooth controls on the steering wheel. And in terms of seating comfort, all provide well, though CX-5 offers better lateral support – but there’s not much in it.

By our measurements Subaru is the most generous for front and rear head room, front leg room and rear seat width. The cargo areas are all user-friendly, with a flat floor, four tie-downs and no interior load lip or major intrusion. Here, where size does matter, Outlander is the most accommodating and CX-5 less so. Extra carrying capacity in each is easily accessed by dropping the split-fold rear seats, all of which flat fold conveniently.

There are storage spaces aplenty across all three – door pockets, back of the front seats, console, armrests, boot, etc – but the Mitsubishi impresses particularly with a combination of moulded plastic bins under the cargo floor. It and the Subaru have a full size spare wheel, whereas the Mazda makes do with a spacesaver.

ON (AND OFF) THE ROAD

Tipping the scales at 1559kg, the Mazda might be 80kg heavier than the Subaru and 60kg more than the Mitsubishi but, at 88.5kW/tonne and 160.4Nm/tonne, it can claim a power and torque-to-weight advantage over the former (85.2 and 158.9) and the latter (82.9 and 147.2). No surprise, then, that while all three are rated to tow 750kg unbraked, CX-5 can pull 1800kg compared to 1600 for Outlander and 1500kg for Forester.

It’s also no eyebrow raiser that the Mazda should perform the best in our standard acceleration tests. From a standing start, it covered the 400m in 16.5 seconds, rattling off times from 0-60, 0-80 and 0-100km/h of 3.9, 6.1 and 9.0 seconds respectively. Each was the best part of a second quicker than the Subaru, which shaded the Mitsubishi. It proved pretty handy in roll-on acceleration, too, going from 50-80km/h in 3.8 seconds – 0.5 better than Outlander. However, the outcome was reversed from
60-100km/h, where the Mitsubishi (5.0 seconds) prevailed by nearly a second. Forester was fairly pedestrian by comparison, returning times of 4.9 and 7.1 seconds.

Importantly, the results confirmed the overall impression you get from driving all three vehicles back-to-back. The Mazda clearly feels the most spirited and responsive. It stops just as well, too, pulling up in an impressive 22.7 metres from 80km/h, which must go close to class leading. This was 0.7m shorter than Forester and 1.6m better than Outlander.

And it doesn’t end there ... CX-5 is the most competent dynamically, on a twisty road delighting its driver with keen turn in and tight (for segment) body control and good grip levels. There’s a nice balance to it all, communication constantly streaming through the well-weighted steering. That’s not to say Forester and Outlander don’t deliver in meeting their target market’s likely handling expectations and demands, it’s just that CX-5 does it and then some.

Our trio offers occupants a supple ride, though it’s the Subaru which does the best job of smoothing out the impact of our typical back road bumps and potholes.

All give off some tyre roar over coarse chip surfaces, but then this more the norm than the exception. Mechanical noise is pretty well suppressed on the Mazda, which proved quietest at idle and constant 80km/h, but not as controlled as the Subaru under acceleration from 50-80km/h.

While the bulk of SUVs will spend most – if not all – of their time on the blacktop, those with all-wheel-drive credentials should have some degree of off-road capability. With this in mind, we put our threesome to the test in slick conditions on the dirt roads that traverse Mt Mee State Forest and in the countryside around Imbil.

From stationary, climbing a slippery slope, the hill-start-assist function that is standard on all three proved its worth. Heading downhill was more of a challenge for the Mazda, which required a degree of finessing. Ditto the Mitsubishi, even on ‘full attack’ with its 4WD Lock activated. No such problems for the Subaru, whose X-Mode function maintains a constant speed through its hill descent control and applies the brakes as required, leaving the driver to basically just steer.

Forester also went bush where the others couldn’t, strutting its articulation competence in ‘crawling’ up a steep, deeply rutted bank that stopped CX-5 and Outlander in their tracks, thanks to its superior (220mm) ground clearance and grippy Yokohama Geolander tyres.

**CONCLUSION**

So, which is the winner? We make it CX-5. Sure, it doesn’t win the value for money equation (the Mitsubishi does) and the Subaru has the edge in design and function, but the Mazda rules on the road (except when the blacktop turns to dirt) and is so convincing a performer in most other areas that it deserves to take home the chocolates.

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**COSTS & RATINGS**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Car Model</th>
<th>Price^</th>
<th>Environmental rating</th>
<th>ANCAP safety rating</th>
<th>Annual insurance costs^^</th>
<th>Capped price servicing</th>
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^ Prices are Manufacturers’ List Prices, not driveaway or special deal.
^^ Insurance cost is based on an RACQ Insurance comprehensive policy for a 35-year-old male, maximum no claim bonus, vehicle financially unencumbered, and $500 excess. Postcode 4066, 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.