light and easy

STORY BARRY GREEN | PHOTOS MARK BUCHANAN

THE LIGHT CAR SEGMENT IS HEAVY WITH GOOD BUYS. WE PUT THREE OF THE BEST TO THE TEST.

TESTERS: BARRY GREEN, JOHN EWING, TIM POMROY
STARTERS: HONDA JAZZ VTi-L, MAZDA2 GENKI, VW POLO 81TSI COMFORTLINE
OUR MULTI-VEHICLE COMPARISON immediately following the annual Australia’s Best Cars awards is always a challenge. With the awards covering 220 volume-selling models across 15 categories, haven’t we covered them all?

Well, yes – and no. Such is the Australian new car market’s constant state of flux that there are always new models arriving, many with the potential to rearrange the pecking order. An example is the light car segment, where the latest generation of the perennially-popular Mazda2 arrived too late to be considered in the 2014 awards judging.

So, here is the Mazda2 Genki, pitched against other recent new model arrivals in the Honda Jazz VTi-L and Volkswagen Polo 81TSI Comfortline. All are five-door hatches and the range toppers of their respective model line-ups.

DESIGN AND FUNCTION

With 81kW of power and 141Nm of torque, the Genki is more powerful than any of its predecessors. Its high-spec SKYACTIV-G 1.5-litre petrol engine, with optional SKYACTIV-Drive six-speed automatic transmission, shows an improvement of 28 percent in fuel efficiency over the old model.

In a first for the segment, Mazda has introduced a Heads-Up Active Displaying Display on the Genki. Tick the box also for Mazda’s next-generation HMI with Commander control, which accesses navigation, communications and infotainment, including social media via MZD Connect. Of our test trio, it’s alone in boasting satellite navigation.

Like the Mazda2, the third generation of Honda’s Jazz has also been born again, with new styling, new chassis and a new, paddle-equipped seven-speed CVT replacing the old automatic transmission. While the car’s 1.5-litre petrol engine retains its single-over-head-cam configuration, this 88kW, 145Nm 1.5-litre unit is lighter and 12 percent more fuel efficient.

An extensive list of standard features includes a three-mode rear view camera, colour touch-screen display audio system, plenty of storage capacity and a host of safety features.

Honda claims class-leading interior space and practicality courtesy of the Jazz’s centre-mounted fuel tank and ingenious Magic Seats that flip and fold in 18 different ways. Such versatility enables longer and taller items to be carried.

The Polo has had a major, though in many ways not particularly obvious, facelift and picks up a range of styling cues from the revised Golf range.

The two new models have turbocharged 1.2-litre petrol engines that are essentially identical, but the Trendline is rated at 66kW of power while the more upmarket Comfortline (as tested with optional 7-speed DSG) has 81kW and 175Nm of torque.

Multi-Collision Braking System, which automatically initiates braking after a crash to prevent a subsequent collision, is standard. Ditto VW’s Bluemotion fuel consumption and emission-reducing technology, which includes start/stop function, brake energy recuperation and gearshift recommendation indicator.
Like the Genki and VTI-L, it is comprehensively equipped though basic air-conditioning is standard, and not climate-control. All three score a five-star ANCAP safety rating, as good as it gets. They also live up to their environmental responsibilities, with the Federal Government’s Green Vehicle Guide awarding the Mazda and VW five (out of five) stars and the Honda 4.5.

Largely because of having a full-size (steel) spare wheel and adjustable-height boot floor, Polo tops our practicality score, a point ahead of the Jazz and two up on the Mazda2, both of which come with a spacesaver spare. One discrepancy is that none has airconditioning vents for the rear passengers.

All are fitted with three child restraints and ISOFIX lower anchorage points, but there’s more room in the Jazz to centre mount a baby capsule or seat. It also offers rear seat passengers a better deal by way of noticeably longer leg room and, overall, the interior seems more airy and open. By our measurements, it also has the biggest boot.

As alluded to, all want for very little by way of standard features, including comprehensive connectivity: bluetooth phone and audio streaming, USB, touch screen, aux-in, etc.

Hop into any of these cars and you will find steering reach and tilt adjustment, cruise and connectivity controls on the wheel, switch gear that fails conveniently to hand, good head and leg room and manual seat height adjustment. But the VW is the only one with height adjustment on both front seats and its remote open/close function for all windows is a feature not usually seen in the Light Car segment.

The Polo and Mazda2 do an equally good job of providing their driver with a compliant seat cushion and lateral support that endures. Not so the Jazz: its cushion feels flat and unsupportive from the start.

Honda, Mazda and Volkswagen are among the best for build and finish and, while these Light cars are some of the cheapest they make, the quality doesn’t disappoint.

However, the Polo’s interior, lacks the style and flair of the other two, particularly the Mazda2.

**ON THE ROAD**

Each of the test line-up is admirably suited to its main role in life – that of city car. Take them outside home base, though, onto the highways and byways and differences emerge.

The Polo’s 1.2-litre turbo engine – a match for power with Mazda2 – might trail the Jazz by 7kW, but it has much more torque. What’s more, both peak power and torque are delivered earlier and across a much broader spread of the rev range. The result is enhanced driveability and flexibility – and best-on-test acceleration from 0-60, 80, 100km/h and over the standing 400m by some margin.

That said, the Mazda2 proved more responsive in our roll-on acceleration tests, from 50-80 and 50-100km/h, by 0.3 seconds. Overall, it’s a nice drive with performance that would more than meet the expectations of buyers in this segment.

The Jazz, despite a paddle-gearshift and body kit suggesting some degree of sportiness, doesn’t like its SOHC engine being stressed in search of peak power, which doesn’t arrive until 6600rpm. It delivers its best – in terms of performance and smoothness of operation – with light and gradual throttle applications.

In ride quality, the VW and Mazda are well ahead. The former felt the most supple and comfortable over a variety of roads, though larger undulations suggest it is a bit under-damped. The Mazda, the firmest of the three, is also more compliant and composed.

Handling-wise, it’s a similar story with the Polo and Mazda dynamic by class standards and clearly superior to the Jazz. Both show good grip levels, an ability to turn in nicely and a willingness to change direction. The Honda’s steering is quite light, which is not an issue at low speeds, but lacks road feel and, overall, the Jazz is not as lithe or responsive.

We expected more from the VW by way of its front and rear disc brakes (as opposed to the others’ disc/drum combination), but it pulled up from 80km/h 0.7m longer than...
the Jazz, which surprised with a best of 24.1 metres. The Mazda was 25.3m.

Road/tyre noise is less suppressed in the latter, particularly over coarse chip and pock-marked surfaces, though it’s an improvement over the previous model.

**VALUE FOR MONEY**

The Jazz is dearest by some $1700 over the Polo and $500 up on the Mazda2, but crunch the numbers and it shapes up well in terms of whole of ownership.

According to Glass’s Guide, the impact of depreciation is less with the Honda retaining 46 percent of its value after five years/70,000km, compared to 44 percent for the Mazda2 and 38 percent for the Polo.

Capped price servicing, which all have, works out cheaper on average despite shorter service intervals, and it also costs less to insure.

And though its ADR combined cycle fuel consumption figure of 5.8 litres/100km can’t match the VW’s 4.8 and Mazda’s 4.9, on test the Honda averaged closest to its claimed number with 7.3 as opposed to 7.1 for the Polo (which requires dearer 95RON PULP) and 7.35 for the Mazda2.

Warranty-wise, there’s little between the three except that Mazda and VW offer unlimited kilometres to their three years, while Honda is limited to 100,000km.

**CONCLUSION**

The Jazz is a sound value-for-money proposition and is spacious and practical. Its clever Magic Seat system, alone, would be reason enough for some people to buy it.

The Mazda2 and Polo, however, tick more boxes, especially by way of drive appeal. Which is the better? I’d say it’s too close to call.

So if you’re in the market for a new light car, we suggest checking both (or all three if versatility is what drives you). And, while you’re there, don’t forget our Australia’s Best Light Car champion, the Renault Clio Expression TCe.

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**COSTS & RATINGS**

**HONDA JAZZ VTI-L**

- Price: $22,490
- Environmental rating: 5 stars
- ANCAP safety rating: 5 stars
- Annual insurance costs: $586.51
- Capped price servicing: $263 (average per service over 5yrs/100,000km – whichever comes first).

**MAZDA2 GENKI**

- Price: $21,990
- Environmental rating: 5 stars
- ANCAP safety rating: 5 stars
- Annual insurance costs: $598.25
- Capped price servicing: $309 (average per service over 3yrs/45,000km – whichever comes first).

**VW POLO 81TSI COMFORTLINE**

- Price: $20,790
- Environmental rating: 5 stars
- ANCAP safety rating: 5 stars
- Annual insurance costs: $733.88
- Capped price servicing: $490 (average per service over 6yrs/90,000km – whichever comes first).

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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.