SMALL CARS, BIG BUYING

THREE OF AUSTRALIA'S MOST POPULAR HATCHBACKS PUT TO THE TEST.

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HYUNDAI i30 ACTIVE, KIA
CERATO S, MAZDA3 MAXX

BIG BUYING

STORY
IMAGES
TESTERS
STARTERS
IN 2017, A year when SUVs overtook passenger car sales in Australia, the best of small cars continued to stand tall. Toyota Corolla, Mazda3 and Hyundai’s i30, finished third, fourth and fifth overall, with Kia’s Cerato also coming on strong to record its best-ever sales.

Given such market relevance, this made the decision to conduct a four-way match-up of the more affordable hatchbacks within the above ranges to be simply irresistible. Hyundai and Kia duly supplied their entry level Active and S models respectively and Mazda the one above entry, Maxx. Unfortunately, Toyota could not meet our request.

Let the number crunching and 800km+ drive begin …

VALUE FOR MONEY
In terms of ‘bang for buck’, our starters share the spoils somewhat. The Kia comes in cheapest, claims the best (industry-leading) warranty of seven years/unlimited kilometres and is also lowest on insurance, albeit by only a few dollars.

According to Glass’s Guide, the Hyundai rates the best forecast retained value after three years with 54 percent to the Mazda’s 51 and Kia’s 47, and capped price servicing (average cost per service) is the cheapest.

It’s advantage Mazda for fuel economy, with the thriftiest ADR combined cycle figure of 5.8 litres/100km to Kia’s 7.1 and Hyundai’s 7.4. On test, the order remained virtually the same: 7.9, 8.6 and 8.6 litres/100km. All use regular unleaded (91 RON).

We also have Mazda ahead in standard features, perhaps not surprising given the Maxx is a specification level above that of the i30 Active and Cerato S. The latter has most of the essentials, but is not as well equipped (no satellite navigation, DAB+ digital radio or reversing camera, for starters) as the Active, which comes with an 8-inch, multimedia display with Apple CarPlay and Android Auto compatibility, including steering wheel-operated voice control. But it’s the Maxx that boasts the latest in safety tech: Smart City Brake Support-Forward and Reverse, Blind Spot Monitoring and Rear Cross Traffic Alert and G-Vectoring Control.

DESIGN & FUNCTION
Importantly, all are rated five-star for safety by ANCAP.

For the driver, there’s no seat cushion tilt or lumbar adjustment, only manual height and slide, but over two days of driving all proved to be acceptably comfortable. That said, some were a little more efficient, or deficient, in some areas. The Kia got singled out for a flatter cushion; the Mazda a thumbs-up for its figure-hugging, supportive backrest.
By our measurements, it was swings and roundabouts in interior space. Basically, there’s little between the Mazda3 and i30 for front head and leg room, both having the edge on Cerato. Rear seat passengers enjoy better head space in the Korean cars, though the i30 is tight comparatively on knee room. With 395 litres capacity, cargo space favours the Hyundai, 10 litres bigger than the Kia which is well clear of the Mazda’s 308.

Ergonomically, the interiors are well laid-out and have necessities such as tilt/reach steering adjustment, driver’s footrest and height-adjustable front seatbelt anchors, along with various switchgear mounted on the steering wheel. But the Mazda gets the nod for its nicely positioned and angled stalks, easy-to-use infotainment controls and paddle gearshift. Conversely, the Cerato’s thick, triangular-base A-pillars can be hard to see around on right-hand bends. These are among the smartest hatches in the small car segment, and have a reputation for being well built. By virtue of being a newer generation, the Hyundai and Mazda have a more premium feel and look to the Kia, which is nearing the end of its production run.

ON THE ROAD
Whether tootling around town, being hustled along a country backroad or cruising the motorway, each of our trio goes about its business nicely. On paper, the i30 holds the performance aces with 120kW of power and 230Nm of torque, compared to 112/192 for the Cerato and 114/200 for the Mazda3. On the road, the numbers are validated, with the former feeling more responsive overall. You don’t see too many small cars towing anything much, but for the record the Hyundai is rated to pull 1300kg (braked), 100 up on the Mazda and 200 better than the Kia.

The six-speed auto transmission in each of the Korean cars is a smooth operator. The Mazda’s is also a smart unit, providing downshifts when slowing/braking in Sports mode. However, it often holds onto a gear too long, appearing unwilling to upshift on a steady or trailing throttle.

With the aid of its G-Vectoring Control, which uses engine torque control to improve vehicle behaviour during cornering, the Mazda3 is one of the most dynamic in its segment. It offers well-weighted and consistent steering, turns in and changes direction nicely and holds line reassuringly through a corner.

The latest release among the three, the i30 no doubt benefits from Hyundai Australia’s ongoing localised handling and ride program. Once a step behind
the Mazda dynamically, we have it now level pegging. Clearly, both are blessed with an excellent chassis. The Cerato S, in contrast, seems underdone in this company. The only one on steel wheels as standard, it howls in protest under hard cornering and sometimes breaks into understeer.

The steering is not as consistently resolved as the other two, feeling reasonably heavy in sports mode yet not offering any increase in feel. The worst in road surfaces can bring out a bit of kick-back through the steering in both the Mazda and Hyundai.

The Kia’s ride quality is a little short on the compliancy of the i30. Mid-corner bumps, particularly, can also upset the rear. The Mazda3, too, showed itself to be a bit jittery over road imperfections. In comparison – reminiscent of Goldilocks and the three bears’ porridge – the Hyundai consistently rode not too hard, and not too soft.

All have ventilated discs at the front and solid discs at the rear, making for progressive, positive braking.

Mazda has been working on improving NVH (noise, vibration, harshness) levels in recent times, but on test we felt the 3 underachieved at times. The engine came on rowdy in the upper rev range under hard acceleration and tyre and road noise on coarse chip surfaces intruded noticeably. The earlier-mentioned tendency to hold revs due to the transmission shift mapping also proved annoying. The Cerato, too, was guilty of engine flare-up and tyre/road roar. Our noise meter readings – taken at idle, accelerating from 50-80km/h and cruising at a constant 80 – showed the i30 to have the lowest readings.

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**COSTS + RATINGS**

**HYUNDAI i30 ACTIVE**

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**KIA CERATO S**

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**MAZDA3 MAXX**

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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 $650 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.
CONCLUSION

The Kia Cerato S is our reigning Australia’s Best Small Car Under $35,000 champion, and it remains a very good buy. But such is the pace of development, age has wearied it somewhat in this tough, three-cornered contest. Had it been tested in isolation, this might not have been so evident. With a new model due later this year, expect Cerato to again rise to the top.

With its significant suite of safety technology across the range, the Mazda3 has proved a game changer in the lower price range of the new car market. That alone is enough to recommend it. Factor in proven on-road ability, smart design and reputation for quality and it shapes as a compelling buy, particularly the Maxx. Choosing between it and the i30 is a tough call.

In the past, the latter has been an Australia’s Best Cars’ star. Much of the success then could be put down to value for money, a virtue that this latest generation continues to deliver. But, now it’s an engaging drive too. We think the new i30 Active is the complete allrounder.

REVIEW DEB ECCLESTON

ANOTHER SET OF EYES...

I LOVE A hatchback. What is it about a hatchback that tickles my fancy? Easy to drive, easy to park and cheap at the bowser. What’s not to love? So, I jumped at the opportunity to test drive three of the most popular models on the market – Mazda3, Hyundai i30 and Kia Cerato.

First off the mark was the Mazda3, a car I’ve heard plenty of good reports about. The car cruises along so easily – you barely need to touch the accelerator when driving at 60km/h – it was a little, dare I say it, boring. There are drivers out there who would love the silky-smooth ride, but I like a little more grit on the bitumen.

Stop/start technology might save engine consumption, but I just found it annoying (especially when the air conditioner cut out at traffic lights on a hot day). Fortunately you can turn it off, which was my preferred option.

The interior of the Hyundai i30 was similar to the Mazda3 – quite roomy, good layout with all the bells and whistles – but that’s where the similarities ended. As a bit of a traditionalist when it comes to cars, I was happy with the good old key ignition as opposed to the Mazda’s push button start.

The ride was solid and, while not as smooth as the Mazda3, the i30 had more personality and was more fun to drive on suburban roads. There was a little more road noise than the Mazda3, but it was by no means offensive. Solid steering, smooth acceleration and braking combined to make the i30 a pleasure to drive.

The Cerato is a good-looking car inside and out and, like the Mazda3 and i30, offers all the mod cons. Again, it wasn’t as smooth on the road as the Mazda3 and felt like it had more grit. And the power steering was fantastic.

In terms of pick up, the Cerato didn’t feel as powerful as its two competitors and, while solid on the road, the ride wasn’t as firm as the i30. But cruising along at 60km/h was equally effortless in all three.

I must point out my reviews of these vehicles are completely subjective. But, if I had to choose from these three based on a test drive alone, my pick would be the i30.