SMALL CARS
BIG BUYING

MALL IS BIG when it comes to new vehicle sales. In July, half the top 20 sellers in Australia were small (read also as ‘compact’) hatches, sedans or SUVs.

Little wonder – small vehicles have never been roomier and more comfortable, performed so capably, returned better fuel and emissions efficiency, or boasted such leading-edge safety and connectivity. To use a cliché, they offer a lot of bang for buck.

Three of the best examples are Honda’s Civic, Hyundai’s Elantra and the Mazda3, all-new or updated models of which were released during the year.

The Civic sedan is available in five variants, with prices ranging from $22,390 for the VTi to $33,590 for the VTi-LX. Similar specification hatchback variants are due to land early in 2017.

Under the bonnet of the VTi and VTi-S is Honda’s venerable 1.8 litre SOHC VTEC four-cylinder petrol engine producing 104kW of power @ 6500rpm and 174Nm of torque @ 4300rpm. Powering the other variants is something new to the Civic – a 127kW/220Nm, 1.5-litre turbo petrol four-cylinder unit. A Continuously Variable Transmission (CVT) is common across the range.

The sixth-generation Elantra comes in three specification levels – Active, Elite
and new SR Turbo. The Active and Elite are powered by Hyundai’s 2.0-litre Nu four-cylinder petrol engine, which delivers marginally more power (112kW) and more useable torque (192Nm) than its predecessor’s 1.8-litre MPI unit.

The entry-level Active is available with either a six-speed manual transmission ($21,490) or six-speed automatic ($23,790), while the Elite ($26,490) is equipped exclusively with the latter.

The new Elantra is 20mm longer, 25mm wider and 5mm taller than the outgoing model, with slightly more shoulder room (+7mm/front and 12mm/rear), improved rear headroom (+4mm) and more rear legroom (+59mm).

The incoming Mazda3 features an interior and exterior redesign, updated connectivity and safety technology and, the maker says, more refined NVH levels, better ride comfort and improved handling.

A myriad of spec levels is offered, in hatch and sedan body shapes, with prices starting at $20,490 for the Neo (six-speed manual) to $35,490 for the SP25 Astina (six-speed auto).

Carried over is a choice of two transmission types – six-speed manual or six-speed auto – and two petrol engines. A 2.0-litre SKYACTIV-G unit with 114kW of power and 200Nm of torque drives the Neo, Maxx and Touring grades, while Mazda’s 2.5-litre SKYACTIV-G engine (138kW/250Nm) comes standard on SP25, GT and Astina variants. The 2.2-litre SKYACTIV-D turbo diesel is no longer offered.

For the purposes of our comparison, we focused on the entry-level Elantra Active and one-step-up Civic VTi-S and Mazda3 Maxx.

VALUE FOR MONEY

Our trio shapes up remarkably closely on price with just $640 the difference between the cheapest (Elantra, $24,250) and dearest (Mazda3, $24,890) with piggy-in-the-middle Civic on $24,490. Projected retained value after three years favours the latter at 56 percent, marginally ahead of the Mazda on 54 percent with the Hyundai trailing on 49 percent.

However, it’s advantage Elantra for capped price servicing over three years at $747 compared with $1193 for the Honda and the Mazda3’s $1367. Ditto warranty, where Hyundai’s five year/unlimited km coverage tops Mazda’s three year/unlimited km and Honda’s three year/100,000km. The Elantra also costs fractionally less to insure – $671.40 pays $698.53 for the Civic and $741.29 for the Mazda3.

Official ADR fuel consumption figures say the Mazda sips the least (5.8litres/100km), with the Honda on 6.4 and Hyundai on 7.2. This was reflected in our test with the Mazda3 averaging 7.0, Civic 7.2 and Elantra 8.4. All take 91 RON ULP.

Each comes well-equipped as standard. The list is too comprehensive to itemise, but the Mazda is alone in having satellite navigation. It also boasts driver assist technologies: G-Vectoring Control (more on that later in our driving impressions), smart city brake support (front and reverse), blind spot monitoring and rear cross traffic alert.
The Honda has single climate control over the others’ standard airconditioning, along with a LaneWatch blind-zone camera that switches on to check if the lane is clear when you indicate left.

DESIGN AND FUNCTION
All can claim a five-star (out of five) ANCAP safety rating, while the Mazda3 shapes as the most environmentally responsible with CO2 emissions of 134 g/km as opposed to the Civic on 148 and Elantra 166.

Seating comfort is subjective, though we can report that in each instance the driver’s seat held up well over fairly lengthy stints at the wheel. None offers cushion tilt or lumbar adjustment, while manual height adjustment is available only on the driver’s seat. All carry two rear seat passengers comfortably; three less so. By our measurements, the Hyundai is best on front leg room, the Honda has less rear head room, and Mazda is tops for rear seat width.

The Civic wins the space race emphatically, with a boot capacity of 519 litres – more than a Commodore. The Elantra is next best on 458 litres, 50 clear of the Mazda3. Boot lid hinges intrude into the space in all of them. With a big glove box in the Hyundai, medium-sized glove box and console bin in the Mazda, and large console bin in the Honda, there’s plenty of stowage for oddments.

All are close on practicality, except that only Hyundai has a full size spare as opposed to space savers on the other two.

Ergonomically, each measures up impressively, though the Mazda’s driver assistance features and a user-friendly interior layout give it an edge, e.g. stalks ideally angled and positioned relative to the steering wheel, nicely-angled external mirror controls, auto dim interior mirror with switch, and paddle gear shifters.

The Civic comes with the aforementioned LaneWatch system, but Mazda’s Blind Spot Monitoring is effective on both sides and doesn’t require the driver’s eyes to be diverted from the rear view mirror to the centre stack display. All three cars allow smart phones to be paired easily.

The Hyundai’s interior is well put together, but with hard-looking plastic on the dash and doors, falls a little short on premium look. The Honda’s interior layout give it an edge, e.g. stalks ideally angled and positioned relative to the steering wheel, nicely-angled external mirror controls, auto dim interior mirror with switch, and paddle gear shifters.

All transmissions shift smoothly, though the Mazda’s auto felt marginally smoother than the Hyundai’s. Honda’s CVT is one of the best in the business and devoid of the ‘artificial’ feel that blights some such transmissions.

Dynamically, the new Elantra is a marked improvement over its predecessor, with less body roll and more reassuring grip. Put this down to stiffer torsional rigidity and re-engineering the front and rear suspension. In all, the Hyundai Motor Company Australia tested 15 different sets of front dampers and 34 sets of rear dampers along with variations of front/rear springs, rear torsion beam bushes and front stabiliser bars in pursuit of an ideal ‘local’ state of tune.

ON THE ROAD
At 88.31kW/tonne and 154.92Nm/tonne, the Mazda3 enjoys a slight power-to-weight and torque-to-weight advantage over the Elantra (87.84kW/tonne and 150.59Nm/tonne). Roll on the throttle and the latter feels more responsive, though we have no acceleration or mid-range numbers to support whether it actually is.

With its smaller single overhead cam engine and heaviest weight, the Civic is down on power-to-weight (78.14kW/tonne) and torque-to-weight (130.73Nm/tonne) and needs to be worked to deliver its peak power and torque, which are higher in rev range.

For their segment, all offer convincing engine performance and would meet the expectations of most buyers. The Mazda3 boasts the best towing capacity with a maximum of 1200kg (braked). All transmissions shift smoothly, though the Mazda’s auto felt marginally smoother than the Hyundai’s. Honda’s CVT is one of the best in the business and devoid of the ‘artificial’ feel that blights some such transmissions.

CAR COMPARISON

FAST FACTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HONDA CIVIC VTi-S</th>
<th>HYUNDAI ELANTRA ACTIVE</th>
<th>MAZDA3 MAXX</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• SAFETY: LaneWatch blind-zone camera, tyre deflation warning system.</td>
<td>• SAFETY: Six airbags, vehicle stability management.</td>
<td>• SAFETY: G-Vectoring Control, smart city brake support, blind spot monitoring.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• CONNECTIVITY: Digital radio, advanced display audio, Apple CarPlay.</td>
<td>• CONNECTIVITY: Touchscreen multimedia system, Apple CarPlay and Siri voice-activation.</td>
<td>• CONNECTIVITY: Satellite navigation, DAB+ digital radio.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• WEIGHT (KERB MASS): 1331kg.</td>
<td>• WEIGHT (KERB MASS): 1275kg.</td>
<td>• WEIGHT (KERB MASS): 1291kg.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• TOWING (BRAKED): 800kg.</td>
<td>• TOWING (BRAKED): Not rated.</td>
<td>• TOWING (BRAKED): 1200kg.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• TAILPIPE CO2 EMISSIONS: 148 (g/km).</td>
<td>• TAILPIPE CO2 EMISSIONS: 166 (g/km).</td>
<td>• TAILPIPE CO2 EMISSIONS: 134 (g/km).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As we so often find in our comparos, each car has much to recommend it and choice will often come down to what particularly a buyer is looking for.

The Civic is a capable, if less sporty, handler, with good grip levels and an absence of tyre squeal when pushed through a back road corner. However, the steering sharpens quickly as lock is wound on at speed and lacks the ‘nth’ degree of feel compared with the Mazda.

The Elantra’s ‘tiller’ feels a little heavier and, at times, loads up as lock is applied. No such problems with the Mazda3, where the nicely-weighted, linear steering can be fine-tuned in Sports mode.

Through twists and turns, the latter remains stable and secure (even in the wet), turning in nicely and – thanks to its G-Vectoring Control – holding its line, eliminating unnecessary steering or throttle inputs.

The Hyundai rides the firmest, though well short of unacceptably so; ditto the Mazda. But neither matches the refinement of the Civic with its softly-sprung, plush suspension.

It’s a similar story overall for smoothness and quietness, where the Honda’s NVH (noise, vibration, harshness) over our ubiquitous coarse chip roads is easily the best contained. The Mazda suffers from some road/tyre rumble, though the powertrain is smooth and engine noise fairly well suppressed, making it quieter overall than the Hyundai.

As we so often find in our comparos, each car has much to recommend it and choice will often come down to what particularly a buyer is looking for.

The Civic boasts the best retained value, most generous boot space, quality build and finish quality, cosseting ride, and impressive smoothness and quietness. The Elantra leads on price, capped price servicing costs, warranty, insurance, practicality and runs the Mazda close on performance. The Mazda3 takes the points for fuel economy, standard features, ergonomics, and performance and handling. It’s no coincidence this is the car that has consistently vied with the Toyota Corolla for the honour of Australia’s biggest seller.

Significantly, all are better than their model predecessor and, in effect, very good cars have just become even better. But, overall, crunching the numbers or driving it, we think the Mazda3 is the most complete and the best to buy and own.