WHEN IT COMES TO CARS, CAN CHEAP BE CHEERFUL?
LET’S FIND OUT…

STORY BARRY GREEN | PHOTOS DALE HABERFIELD
GOOD NEWS – THE cost of owning and operating a new car in Queensland is the lowest it’s been since 2010.

That’s the finding of the RACQ’s annual Vehicle Running Costs survey, which revealed lower interest rates, cheaper fuel and more competitive insurance prices in 2014 helped to reverse the upward trend of costs in recent years.

The recent survey examined 111 popular vehicles across 13 categories, taking into account all the expenses associated with normal car ownership, including purchase price, interest, fuel, new tyres, insurance and depreciation. (The complete survey results can be found at racq.com/runningcosts).

The cheapest car to own and run in Queensland is a Suzuki Celerio, costing an average of $99.77 a week. That’s $13.19 less than the current Australia’s Best Cars Micro category winner, the Mitsubishi Mirage ES, and $24.31 down on the runner-up, Nissan’s Micra ST.

Cheap these little tiddlers may be, but are they cheerful? What are they like to live with every day? We decided to find out by commuting daily and going about our business in the tiny trio for the best part of a week. We also took them on a 400+km country drive to see how they hold up outside their city comfort zone.

COMMONALITY

These are no poverty packs. Tick the all-important boxes for front, side and curtain airbags; anti-lock brakes; electronic brake force distribution; brake assist; and electronic stability control.

Ditto airconditioning, power steering, electrically-operated windows and side mirrors, remote and central door locking, tilt (but no reach) steering wheel adjustment, AM/FM radio with CD player and connectivity such as Bluetooth, auxiliary input, MP3 compatibility and USB port.

All run happily on unleaded and ride on 14-inch steel wheels, although only the Nissan has a full-sized spare (the others have a spacesaver). Adjustable headrests are provided for all occupants except on the Micra, which lacks one for the rear centre seat. A ventilated front disc/rear drum brake combination is standard across all three vehicles.

SUZUKI CELERIO

Available in one equipment level and with a 1.0-litre three-cylinder engine, the Celerio carries the lowest price sticker of our threesome – $12,990 with standard five-speed manual gearbox (as tested), or $14,490 with optional Continuously Variable Transmission (both drive away prices as at August 25, 2015).

Unlike the Mitsubishi and Nissan, the Suzuki is purely a four seater; the trade-off is more space and hence comfort for all occupants.

As replacement for the Indian-sourced Alto hatch, the Thai-built Celerio is 100mm longer and 70mm higher. Improved interior space and larger door openings are provided and, by our measurements, it shapes up as best for front and rear head room and rear seat width.

It has the biggest boot capacity (claimed as class leading at 254 litres) and lower load lip, which makes cargo carrying easier, although versatility would be even better if the 60/40 rear seats could be folded completely flat (this is also the case with the other two).

But what surprised us was the Suzuki’s overall driveability. The engine is way more refined than that of the rough-idling and noisy Alto and its comparatively modest power and torque outputs of 50kW @ 6000rpm and 90Nm @ 3500rpm don’t tell the real story.
NISSAN MICRA ST
Nissan upgraded its Micra earlier this year. More than 50 percent of the exterior panels came in for a makeover that included a sharper nose and different tail lights. The interior also got a wave of the styling wand; result, a more stylish and functional centre console and instrument cluster along with higher quality interior trim.

Cruise control (a first for the segment and something the Suzuki and Mitsubishi don’t have), rear power windows, Bluetooth with audio streaming, and a fold-down driver’s centre armrest became standard. The Micra is available with a 1.2-litre three-cylinder engine in two equipment levels – ST (with five-speed manual or four-speed auto) or Ti (auto only) – priced at $13,490, $15,290 (as tested) and $16,990 respectively.

It’s well kitted and reasonably roomy with our measurements showing the Micra to be nearly identical to the Mirage for front head and leg room, seating cushion length and travel (the amount of driver’s seat slide adjustment).

The boot is 16 litres larger than the Mitsubishi, and just three less than the class-leading Suzuki.

But its driving dynamics trail both, particularly the latter. When pushed, the Micra loses its composure too easily, breaking into tyre squeal and body roll. And the ride quality is surprisingly too firm for a car in this market segment.

Carrying much more weight (956kg, nearly 66 more than the Mirage and 126 – the size of an Australia’s Greatest Loser contestant – up on the Celerio) blunts the engine’s 56kW of power and 104Nm of torque, especially away from a standing start.

Unfortunately, this also knocks the fuel economy about. The Nissan’s ADR average of 6.5 litres/100km is nearly 2.0 higher than its rivals and, on test, it was also the thirstiest at 7.7 litres.

MITSUBISHI MIRAGE ES
Mirage buyers get more choice with a hatchback or sedan available in the base model ES or upper-spec LS models. Standard five-speed manual or optional CVT are offered in both body styles except the LS sedan, which has CVT only. Prices range from $11,990 (manual ES hatch) to $17,490 (CVT LS sedan), with our ES CVT hatch test car ‘piggy in the middle’ at $13,990.

The only one with five seats and five headrests, the Mitsubishi measures up best on boot length and through load (distance from boot lip to back of the centre console with rear seats folded), although adult passengers in the outer rear seats might find the head space tight.

There’s little between it and the Nissan for interior presentation and function, with audio and Bluetooth controls conveniently located on the steering wheel and other switchgear close to hand on the centre of the dashboard.

Call it illusionary, but in some ways the Mirage feels the most solid and planted on the road; at times, you could be tricked into thinking you’re driving a Light – not sub-Light – car.

It goes, handles, rides and stops among the best in the Micro segment, though it’s not as much fun to drive as the Celerio. That may have something to do with our test car’s CVT which, while obviously user-friendly and convenient in stop/start driving, does not get as good as the manual from the 57kW/100Nm, 1.2-litre three-cylinder engine. At 890kg, it weighs in between the Suzuki and Nissan.

An ADR fuel consumption average of 4.6 litres/100km is the best of all three, though this could not be matched on test with the Mirage returning 6.0 – still appreciably better than the Micra.
CONCLUSION

Around town, these cars are in their element – but that’s what they’re designed for. Outside the city limits, they all surprised with an ability to cruise relatively comfortably at highway speeds for the best part of a day’s drive. Overtaking had to be done with forward planning, though that’s not necessarily a bad thing.

So which one takes home the chocolates? Well, consistency across 19 scores is what drove the Mirage to its mantle of Micro champion in our last Australia’s Best Cars awards. The Mitsubishi finished class leading, or equal class leading, in pricing, depreciation, running and repair costs, fuel consumption and warranty and dealer access. Ditto safety, environment, space, ergonomics, performance, handling and braking.

It stacks up pretty convincingly in this latest company too, although the Celerio impressed us as the better, all-round drive with an amazing fun quotient to boot. Call it ‘smiles per hour’.

But one thing no-one should compromise on is safety, and here the Mitsubishi is alone among our trio in scoring a five (out of five) star ANCAP rating to the others’ four. That has to make it the winner.

COSTS & RATINGS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Manufacturer’s List Price (Does Not Include On-Road Costs)</th>
<th>RACQ Vehicle Running Costs Survey.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>MITSUBISHI MIRAGE ES</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Price^</td>
<td>$13,990^ (CVT)</td>
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<td>ANCAP safety rating</td>
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<td><strong>NISSAN MICRA ST</strong></td>
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<td>Average weekly running cost</td>
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<td>Average weekly running cost</td>
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^ MANUFACTURER’S LIST PRICE (DOES NOT INCLUDE ON-Road COSTS).
^^ RACQ VEHICLE RUNNING COSTS SURVEY.

IMAGES: INTERIOR DETAILS OF THE SUZUKI CELERIO (TOP), ALONG WITH A REAR VIEW.