

Comparison Test: Small All-Wheel-Drive SUVs First Place: 2007 Mazda CX-7 Grand Touring AWD



More than "just another" car-based sport-utility, Mazda is, indeed, fulfilling its zoom-zoomy promises with the 2007 CX-7. Most manufacturers have read the oil-stained tea leaves and decided to offer either this year or next a sport-utility-something that is based on existing car architecture. Have a look at our Future Vehicles section for proof of the emergent category.

The Mazda CX-7 epitomizes this new crop of crossover vehicles that is smaller, nimbler and more fuel-efficient than that ubiquitous high-profile hiking-boots-on-lugged-tires SUV of the not-so-distant past. The new archetypal sport-utility is evolving before our eyes, and although the CX-7 is not the first to embody these new-era SUV values, it is at the forefront of the sea change at

this sub-\$30K price point. We'd credit BMW's X5 and Infiniti's FX series as the progenitors of the car-based performance-minded sport-utility, but at a higher buy-in.

PAPA'S GOT A BRAND-NEW BAG

Unlike the other markets where families have long understood the relative merits of hatchbacks and wagons in terms of packaging, performance, safety and economy versus sport-utilities, we Americans have been slow to relinquish our "commanding view" of the road behind the wheel of high-output SUVs. And because it is assumed that high mass equals high family safety, you've probably heard or even said, "I can afford to stay out of a tin-can minivan, and I'll be damned if I let my family go out there in anything smaller than a full-size SUV."



It seems hard to argue with that logic, but some sources indicate that 90 percent of all rollovers occur after an SUV leaves the road. The 2007 Mazda CX-7 is determined to change that. Stability and traction control systems (to keep you on the road), as well as rollover detection (wherein side curtains are deployed in anticipation of a roll) are all standard on the CX-7. Additionally, the new Mazda has earned five-star crash test ratings across the board from the NHTSA (NHTSA rollover and IIHS offset tests have yet to be performed) thanks in large part to a standard airbag assemblage once offered on only high-end sedans and wagons.

To be fair, the Santa Fe in this test also offers the same standard airbag collection (though not rollover detection), and side (torso) and curtain (head) airbags, plus rollover detection are optionally available in the RAV4. If safety is one of your fundamental concerns, the CX-7's got you covered.

FUN, TOO

OK, so the CX-7 is relatively safe, but is it fun to drive? In a word, yes. Of these three crossovers, the CX-7 is the most entertaining and most satisfying to drive on a variety of roads - and even off-road. It isn't baffled by some common surfaces like the Hyundai is, and it features far more communicative steering than the RAV4. The Mazda's MacPherson-front and multilink-rear suspension tuning is the firmest setup here, but it follows in lockstep the ripples and irregularities of the real world with the precision and isolation of a BMW.

Despite a stability control system that cannot be fully shut off, the CX-7 gripped our skid pad with a 0.79g lat-



eral load and blazed through the slalom at 63.6 mph. Both of those numbers set a new standard in the segment, especially at this price. The CX-7's sport-tuned chassis translates directly into an enthusiastic and athletic driving experience lacking in the other two.

NEW WAVE MOTIVATION

The CX-7 is nearly as quick as the raging V6-powered RAV4, but the way it provides its power is more attuned to the scope and mission of the vehicle. Thanks to the combination of clever turbocharger tuning and direct-injection fuel delivery to exploit it, the CX-7's test-topping torque peaks at a mere 2500 rpm (versus 4500 or 4700 rpm in the others). This means there's more shove-you-back-in-the-seat motivation earlier in the CX-7's turbo-four rev range than in either the RAV4 V6 or Santa Fe V6, both of which are naturally aspirated.

Besides, the CX-7's transmission is calibrated far more competently than either of the other two. Shifts are intuitively timed and kick-downs are near instantaneous. The fact that it's a six-speed automatic (to the others' five-speeds) had us worried the CX-7 would be feverishly hunting for just the right ratio for every incline or lane change. Not so. And if you'd prefer to manage shifting yourself, the manual mode operates with equal exactness.

HALT!

Our instrumented brake testing backed up what we suspected from driving all three back-to-back. Although fitted with essentially the same-size tires (and thus contact patch) across the board, the Mazda proved to be the best at bringing the scenery to a standstill, as well. At



just 123 feet to stop from 60 mph, the CX-7 is again in a league of its own, and outdoes the worst-performing Santa Fe by some 17 feet.

All four of the Mazda's brake rotors are vented, while in the other two only the fronts are so constructed. This would indicate (correctly) that the CX-7's brakes would resist fading. We confirmed this with the Mazda's "worst" stop (fourth and last consecutive run) being shorter than the RAV4's 130-foot best on its first attempt.

GOT DIRT?

All this on-pavement prowess had us concerned that the CX-7 would feel like a fish outta water on the dusty trail to the camp site. Would "the crafty chassis with Mazda sports car DNA" knock our fillings out? Might we shear off an oil drain plug in the first mile? Would the lack of grip confound either the all-wheel-drive or stability control systems? No other automotive journalist outlet had taken a CX-7 off-road (to our knowledge), and Mazda's press materials make no claim of off-highway capability. That's what we're here for.

All of our apprehension turned to admiration at the base of the mountain where we set the minimum level of competency before heading up. There, we tested suspension

articulation, hill-climbing capability and washboard surface isolation on a purpose-built off-road course. To our amusement, the CX-7 performed at least as well as the RAV4 and Santa Fe. In fact, the CX-7 offers one-half-inch better ground clearance than the RAV4's 7.5 inches. Also, on the loosely packed hill climb where we purposely stopped in each SUV (in an attempt to get stuck), the CX-7's low-rpm torque showed itself to be an asset a second time by effortlessly resuming its slippery ascent.

Once we committed to the 18-mile drive up the mountain, the only criticism we had for the CX-7 was that it was reluctant to "play." It felt so sure-footed and powerful (turbocharged engines better compensate for the debilitating effects of increased elevation) that it began to feel like a rally car. The problem was that the non-defeat stability control discouraged anything but safe and sane rates of progress and responsibly acute yaw angles. In other words, there's no sliding it around corners like WRC star Sebastien Loeb. Buzzkill. The CX-7 felt so confident that it was almost worth finding the nanny fuse and pulling it out.

THE SUM OF ITS TALENTS

In the final tally, we found the Mazda CX-7 Grand Touring AWD package to be a delightful blend of sport sedan, hot hatch and sport-utility. There's ample room in





the cargo bay for a week's worth of getaway luggage. There's plenty of power to keep the other guys guessing what's under that bulging hood. There's enough personality and ability in the chassis to keep you guessing how hard you can push it - and a stability control system if you overestimate it.

Combined, the CX-7 represents decidedly untrucklike styling and dynamics that we feel indicate the direction where sport-utilities will inevitably go. Even the category of sport-utility will need to be rethought from here out. The CX-7 isn't the first, nor will it be the last. However, for the time being, it is the best crossover out there for the money.

Please call Mazda at 1-800-639-1000 for more info,
or visit MazdaUSA.com