

DOCTOR ON THE ROAD: MAZDA CX-60

A premium SUV with affordable price tag

Independent Practitioner Today's motoring correspondent **Dr Tony Rimmer** (right) gets behind the wheel of a premium SUV that undercuts its rivals by £10-£15k



Due to smart styling, you get a commanding view from the driver's seat. Inside, there is plenty of room for five and generous luggage space in the rear

WE LIVE in a competitive world and, for any business to survive, it needs to be open to new practices and innovations. For car makers, this means looking at market sectors that are new to the brand and then offer their own special attributes as enhancements.

Mazda is a company that is well known for producing cars with sharp dynamics that appeal to keen drivers. The brilliant MX-5 is a class-leading sports car and Mazda's small hatchbacks and SUVs also share this sporting DNA.

So, it seems like a brave move for the Japanese company to move out of its comfort zone and build a premium SUV to compete with the likes of Lexus, Volvo and BMW.

This market sector is all about high quality, versatility and comfort and all the current favourites are plug-in hybrids for optimum economy, which also boosts their green credentials. Can Mazda compete without previous hybrid-building experience?

On paper, the CX-60 seems to

have everything needed to take up the challenge. The plug-in hybrid powertrain consists of a 150bhp 2.5litre petrol engine and a 173bhp electric motor, which is supplied by a 17.8kWh battery.

This provides a claimed 39 miles of electric-only driving when fully charged. There are three trim levels available and all come with leather seats, alloy wheels and a large 12.3-inch driver's digital display.

My test car was the entry-level Exclusive Line and was not lacking in any of the essentials expected from a car at this premium level.

Smart styling

From the outside, this Mazda is a big car. It hides its bulk with smart styling and you get the usual commanding view from the driver's seat. Inside, there is plenty of room for five and generous luggage space in the rear.

There is an under-floor area, so charging cables can be stored out of the way. Also, there is even a three-pin plug socket in the boot should you need it.

Passengers should have no problems with head and leg room and the perceived luxury from the quality trim materials and finish is certainly on a level with premium rivals.

The little Mazda MX-5 is one of my favourite cars to satisfy keen drivers, so I took the CX-60 out on a mixture of challenging local roads to see if it could live up to the brand's reputation.

Well, any car weighing two tons is not going to be sprightly, but this large SUV does pretty well to avoid excessive body roll and has reasonable feedback through the steering.

However, this is no sports car and isn't as much fun as perhaps

any Mazda should be. The ride is a little harsh over rough surfaces, too, which doesn't help comfort levels.

Power is adequate and you can't complain about the performance, but the transition from petrol power to electric and vice versa needs some work to make it smoother and a bit quieter.

Lexus, using all the years of sister brand Toyota's development of similar systems, is the leader in this field. The CX-60 is Mazda's first offering with this technology and I am sure that it will catch up given time.

Real-world economy

I fully charged the battery on my home wall-charger and found that the electric driving was hushed and smooth. However, it doesn't take much extra pressure on the accelerator to wake up the petrol engine, which spoils the economy and quiet progress, but this is an issue with other hybrids I have driven.

As far as real-world economy is concerned, expect about 45mpg, which will improve only if you charge regularly and do lots of short journeys.

I had my test car during a particularly cold and icy spell and there is one really useful feature that is shared with most plug-in hybrids and all-electric cars.

The Mazda App allows you to remotely pre-heat the car's interior before you set off, so you jump into a fully defrosted and warm car before you begin your journey – a most welcome accessory for those chilly starts.

Overall, the CX-60 is a fine entry into the premium plug-in hybrid SUV market, but it has some refinement issues that need ironing out. Knowing Mazda, I am sure that this will happen in due course.

Also, the Mazda holds an important trump card. At £43,950, it undercuts its direct rivals by £10k to £15k. That is a significant saving and particularly relevant in these fiscally challenging times.

If you are in the market for a Lexus NX 450h+, a BMW X3, an Audi Q5 or a Volvo XC60 Recharge, then it certainly is worth including the Mazda CX-60 for your consideration. ■

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MAZDA CX-60 PHEV EXCLUSIVE LINE

Body: Five-seat SUV, four-wheel drive

Engine: 2.5litre four-cylinder petrol + single electric motor

Power: 150bhp + 173bhp. Total: 323bhp

Torque: 500Nm

Top speed: 124mph

Acceleration: 0-62mph in 5.8 seconds

Claimed economy: Combined – up to 188.3mpg

CO₂ emissions: Between 33 and 154g/km

On-the-road price: £43,950