

THE 3 MONTH TEST DRIVE

We spoke to ten owners for each of five new cars to find out whether they lived up to their expectations

Facts and figures

DELIVERED PRICE
£10,467 to £15,447

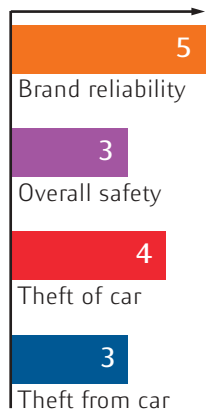
SIZE (l x w)
4.42m x 1.76m

ENGINE SIZES (litres)
Petrol: 1.4, 1.6, 2.0
Diesel: 1.6

FUEL USE (mpg)
Petrol: 34.5 to 39.8
Diesel: 56.5

CO₂ EMISSION (g/km)
Petrol: 169 to 196
Diesel: 138

OUR RATINGS
Worst Best



The Mazda 3 hadn't been assessed for safety before we went to press.



Mazda 3

STRENGTHS

- Excellent brand reliability
- High security levels
- Very low depreciation

WEAKNESSES

- Rear visibility

HEY, GOOD-LOOKING

The Mazda 3's distinctive body styling, high grille and shaped bonnet give it an edge over competition from the Ford Focus, VW Golf and Vauxhall Astra.

Peter Copping described it as 'stylish and modern' while David Adlington remarked: 'It's the only car strangers have commented on.'

Inside, it's well finished and there's an attractive dashboard and plenty of head- and leg-room. The driver's seat and the steering wheel are fully adjustable, so six-footers like Keith David Ross 'have a bit more headroom... someone has really put some thought into it'.

Most owners were satisfied with luggage space. Keith David Ross liked 'nooks and crannies', such as a huge glove box, deep door pockets and a storage bin by the handbrake.



Keith David Ross approves of the headroom

jargon buster

DELIVERED PRICE

List price, VAT and delivery

BRAND RELIABILITY

Rating from our annual members' survey

CRASH TEST

Safety in front and side crash tests

OVERALL SAFETY

Safety in a wider range of accidents

THEFT OF CAR

Ease of stealing the car

THEFT FROM CAR

Ease of breaking into car

FUN AND FUNCTIONAL

Our annual survey rates Mazda as highly reliable. But that's not to say the 3 is dull: it gives a sporty drive and handles well. 'It's a joy,' reckons Gordon Hamilton. And our security tests show that it leads the medium-size class on security: it has the level of protection you'd expect on a more expensive car.

A FEW MINOR NIGGLES

Two of our owners were unhappy with tyre noise, especially on motorways. Rear vision was an issue for three drivers. As George Collie told us: 'I never know where I am when I'm reversing.'

Three of our drivers had problems with various faulty lights and indicators but they were impressed

by the dealers' response (our annual survey also rates Mazda dealers highly). Gordon Hamilton says: 'It didn't change my attitude to the car - I still love it'.

VERDICT

The Mazda 3 shares components with the second-generation Ford Focus and the new Volvo S40, but stands out in a crowd. Gordon Hamilton sums it up: 'I love driving it; it looks nice, it's fast and reliable.'

Mini Convertible

STRENGTHS

- Very low depreciation
- Better-than-average satisfaction with dealers

WEAKNESSES

- Poor basic specification
- Poor rear visibility

YOUR HEART'S DESIRE

Owning a Mini Convertible is about more than a new car. It's a statement about you and your outlook on life. As 40-something Susan Stolberg confessed: 'I wanted a convertible, I wanted a fun car – this is my mid-life crisis!' Other owners described it in glowing terms – original and stylish – and up against the rival Peugeot 206 CC and the VW Beetle Cabriolet, it fares pretty well.

GOING TOPLESS

The Mini is a breeze to handle, it sticks to the road, and its good suspension gives a comfortable drive. There's also unanimous agreement among our test drivers that it's really fun to drive.

All our owners make maximum use of their soft tops. 'If it isn't raining, the roof comes off,' says Susan Stolberg. The roof is fully automated and tucks neatly behind the rear seats in seconds. This limits luggage space and, although the car is sold as a four-seater, our owners felt that leg-room was rather restricted for rear-seat passengers.

There is also a problem with rear visibility – nine of our ten owners mentioned it. As Jo Firth explains: 'The rear windscreen is tiny and you have the roll bars at the back. It's hard to see what's behind you.' Katy Cresner adds: 'Once that blind spot is dirty you can't see a thing. And there's no back windscreen wiper because it's a convertible. Thank God I've got parking sensors.'

EXPENSIVE EXTRAS

Despite its premium price tag, the Mini Convertible comes with surprisingly few features. The basic specification does include those parking sensors although Katy thought an anti-theft alarm system would have been nice, too.

One owner was amazed to be charged an extra £50 for the glove box, and six commented on the lack of in-car entertainment. 'It doesn't come with a CD player, which I find incredible...they charge you £200', said Mark Suggitt. A CD player is standard in both the Beetle Cabriolet and the Peugeot 206CC.

VERDICT

All our owners were happy with the car and would recommend the Mini to friends. They felt they'd bought a small luxury car that was reliable and economical to run, held its value well and was a hoot to own and drive. As Mark Suggitt summed up: 'A very good car, high performance, great handling and unique' – or as Nick Vincent put it: 'Cool and desirable. Can I have another one?'



Facts and figures

DELIVERED PRICE
£10,617 to £19,947

SIZE (l x w)
3.63m x 1.93m

ENGINE SIZES (litres)
Petrol: 1.6

FUEL USE (mpg)
Petrol: 30.7 to 39.2

CO₂ EMISSION (g/km)
Petrol: 173 to 221

OUR RATINGS
Worst Best

2

Brand reliability

Safety and security of the Mini Convertible had not been assessed before we went to press.

All interviews were carried out by phone between September 2004 and January 2005.

'Cool and desirable – can I have another one?'

Nick Vincent





**'It's economical and has
a bit of character'**

Andrew Gardner

Facts and figures

DELIVERED PRICE
£6,452 to £8,702

SIZE (l x w)
3.54m x 1.58m

ENGINE SIZES (litres)
Petrol: 1.1, 1.2
Diesel: 1.3

FUEL USE (mpg)
Petrol: 42.8 to 52.3
Diesel: 65.7

CO₂ EMISSION (g/km)
Petrol: 127 to 156
Diesel: 114

OUR RATINGS

Worst → Best

2	Brand reliability
3	Crash test
2	Overall safety
3	Theft of car
1	Theft from car

Fiat Panda

STRENGTHS

- Lower than average depreciation

WEAKNESSES

- Poor safety
- Poor brand reliability
- Lower than average satisfaction with dealers

NEW KID ON THE BLOCK

The new Panda is the latest cheap and cheerful urban runaround, vying for space in the city with the Kia Picanto, Citroën C2 and Skoda Fabia. But how does it stand up to the daily grind?

THIS IS REVOLUTION

Most of us can recall the old Fiat Panda: boxy and basic, deckchair fabric seats. The new model couldn't be more different. It's smart and airy – June Tatch, owner of an Eleganza 1.2 Panda, told us: 'For a supermini, it's extremely roomy.' It has an extensive array of extras, from alloy wheels to a CD player and reversing sensors. Our owners were impressed. Naomi Sant said: 'You're getting a big car in a small package.'

A LITTLE CAR WITH BIG IDEAS

The Panda has borrowed some interesting features from its big brothers in the MPV class. First, it's tall, especially compared with other mini-MPVs, and spacious. As Andrew Gardner comments: 'There is no shortage of headroom', so getting in and out is a breeze, even for older or disabled passengers. The extra height also gives you a good view of the road.

As in bigger MPVs, the gearstick is mounted on the dashboard, giving extra space between driver and passenger. This takes a little getting



Patricia Manson finds the Panda's raised gearstick easy to use

used to but most of our owners were positive about it. Patricia Manson says: 'I really like the gearstick... it's slightly raised and it's very easy to use.'

Most of our owners are satisfied with the drive. The Panda gives a firm ride, handles corners well and is stable in high winds. A 'city button' boosts the power steering for low-speed manoeuvring, which should make parking easier. This suits many of our owners, who use the car as a runaround. 'I wanted something small and nippy,' said Naomi Sant.

VERDICT

Diesel and 4x4 versions are now available, and three of our owners said they wished they'd waited for these. However, on the whole, the new Panda got the thumbs-up. It has its limitations when it comes to rear leg-room, noise and storage, but as Andrew Gardner summed up: 'It has low running costs, it is very economical and very cheap to insure...it has a bit of character – it's fun to drive.'

Toyota Corolla Verso

STRENGTHS

- Excellent occupant safety
- Good pedestrian safety
- Excellent brand reliability

WEAKNESSES

- Limited leg-room in rearmost seats

ALL ABOARD

The Toyota Corolla Verso is a seven-seater mini-MPV. It's a practical and flexible vehicle, eloquently summed up by Tim Collins as 'a solid workhorse with flair'. But it faces some tough competition from the VW Touran, Vauxhall Zafira and Renault Scénic.

A SENSIBLE CHOICE

The Corolla Verso is a sensible car, with a sensible design – made for sensible drivers. There's nothing sporty about it but why should there be? Our owners loved it for its solidity, and Toyota has a great track record for making reliable cars. With nine airbags, the company is clearly taking safety seriously, and in our tests it does well too: it just misses out on the leader board to the VW Touran and the Renault Scénic. Depreciation is about average for a small MPV and Toyota dealers have an above-average satisfaction rating.

The interior of the car is incredibly versatile. All five of the rear seats fold flat, which gives you loads of luggage space. As David Rochester explained to us: 'I wanted room in the back to get a couple of bikes in...and also seven seats for when my family come over. We were looking for boot space and a little bit more seating'. The seats are also quite high off the ground, which makes it extremely easy to climb in and out.

A fair few owners criticised leg-room in the back, which is particularly tight in the last row of seats. 'It's fine for children but I think if you wanted larger people in the back you'd need to shift the middle row forward. And that would affect the leg-room of



David Rochester has ample space in the back for bikes

the middle row,' said Izabella Shaw. So think about how many you'll be carting around before you buy.

OUT AND ABOUT

The Verso gets a positive response on the road. Ros Clipston was impressed: 'It's the easiest car I've ever driven. I think it's because it's so responsive; it's just a pleasure to drive, and the driving position is fantastic.' Brian Marks thinks it's 'ideal for long trips because it's so comfortable'.

Other owners were also happy with performance, as 45-year-old Tim Collins explained: 'I'm not a boy racer these days so I'm not zipping about everywhere. But I can go round corners relatively quickly with no drift and no tendency to skid in wet conditions. It handles very well.'

VERDICT

The Toyota Corolla Verso is unlikely to turn heads but our owners were pleased with their choice. Despite limited leg-room in the rearmost seats, you get a comfortable ride, lots of specification for your money and endless flexibility inside. Dr Eric Mackay concludes: 'It delivers what it promises.'

Facts and figures

DELIVERED PRICE
£14,302 to £19,612

SIZE (l x w)
4.24m x 1.71m

ENGINE SIZES (litres)
Petrol: 1.6, 1.8
Diesel: 2.0

FUEL USE (mpg)
Petrol: 36.7 to 37.7
Diesel: 45.6

CO₂ EMISSION (g/km)
Petrol: 178 to 184
Diesel: 165

OUR RATINGS

Worst → Best

Brand reliability	5
Crash test	5
Overall safety	4
Theft of car	4
Theft from car	2

'It's just a pleasure to drive'

Ros Clipston





Facts and figures

DELIVERED PRICE
£10,832 to £21,947

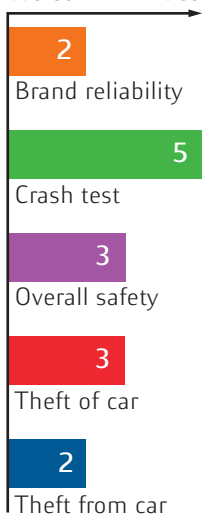
SIZE (l x w)
4.25m x 2.03m
Estate version: 4.62m x 2.03m

ENGINE SIZES (litres)
Petrol: 1.4, 1.6, 1.8, 2.0
Diesel: 1.7, 1.9

FUEL USE (mpg)
Petrol: 30.0 to 44.8
Diesel: 47.8 to 61.4

CO₂ EMISSION (g/km)
Petrol: 151 to 218
Diesel: 132 to 140

OUR RATINGS
Worst Best



'A pleasure to drive and good value for money'

Roger Lee

Vauxhall Astra

STRENGTHS

- Excellent occupant safety

WEAKNESSES

- Poor pedestrian safety
- Poor brand reliability
- Below-average security

THE NEXT GENERATION

The new Astra is the fifth generation of this popular family car. There's lots of choice of engine size and the specification is good too, with many tempting features, including alloy wheels, air conditioning, Digital radio and an MP3-compatible CD player. Its main competitors are new versions of its long-time arch rivals the VW Golf and the Ford Focus.

OUT WITH THE OLD - IN WITH THE NEW

Our owners were Vauxhall loyalists, with only one new to the brand. 'I've always been very happy with Vauxhall, particularly the Astra,' said Roger Lee. 'It's the size and the range of options that suit.'

It's certainly versatile. Roger Lee commented that 'it steers well, and easily gets into parking places, plus the fuel consumption is reasonable'. Another owner added: 'It's roomy and comfortable enough for a long trip.'

But the new Astra has some sporty credentials too. The SRi model features a 'sports switch' for more responsive steering and sharper acceleration on the open road. Geoff John agrees that 'it seems fairly powerful, it

accelerates well and there's not much road noise'. Jennifer Smith also enjoys the ride: 'It sticks to the road like glue; you can throw it around corners and roundabouts – not that I'm a speed merchant, but you can drive it with confidence.'

The Astra's new look went down well with our owners. Christopher Humphries commented that 'the styling had that wow factor... it stood out from the crowd. The finish, the quality, the way the doors shut and everything – it was quite a classy car.'

A FEW BUTS...

It's not all good news. Vauxhall gets a poor rating in our annual reliability survey and the Astra's depreciation is worse than average. Rear visibility was a problem for several owners and keeping the car clean was an issue. 'All the dirt ends up at the back,' explained Jennifer Smith. 'We're forever washing the tailgate and back window.'

Boot size was also criticised by some. Christopher Humphries thought that luggage capacity was a little disappointing. 'Compared with the old one, it seems slightly smaller.' And Roger Lee had a problem with accessibility: 'You have to lift things over a big lip on the car to put them in the boot.'

VERDICT

Vauxhall has succeeded in injecting new life into the Astra. And our owners were generally pleased. 'The new design has some very positive benefits, which make it a pleasure to drive and good value for money,' concluded Roger Lee.



Jennifer Smith says the back gets very dirty