

Comparison Test: 2014 Mazda3 vs 2014 Toyota Corolla



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As someone who is physically incapable of walking past a Hot Wheels display without checking to see if there's anything good hanging on it (it's for my kid! I swear! I'm totally a grown-up!), you might be thinking this comparison was a bit of a foregone conclusion.

After all, most people who end up sitting in front of a keyboard, racking up the word count and waxing prosaic about an inanimate mass of glass, rubber and steel usually have at least some sliver of enthusiasm for the automobile. Pardon me for stating the spoiler right from the outset, but it's no surprise that the Mazda3 is more fun to drive than the Corolla.

Ask a gearhead to tot up the pros and cons list on these two similarly powered, similarly efficient, similarly spacious compact sedans, and surely the one with even half a pulse is going to be the runaway winner. The Mazda goes zoom-zoom, the Toyota goes putt-putt; gold star to the M-badge, job done. But if that's true, then why is the Toyota currently still ahead of the Mazda in the year-to-date sales race by nearly a third?

In order to level the playing field and find out whether the discrepancy in public popularity between these two is due to merit or merely traditional buying habits, I decided to shelve the understeers-at-the-limit driving style, put on the proverbial Dr. Spock pointy ears and get the notepad out. Speaking strictly logically, which one of these cars is best?

Value

This is the big one. In the small car segment, nobody's fiddling around with high-dollar options like those \$350 colour-coded keys that showed up at the [Panamera launch](#). Yes, the small-car buyer is a demanding one, but they're also buying on needs



2014 Toyota Corolla LE Eco & 2014 Mazda3 GS Sedan.
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more than wants. Bang for the buck is a must. Paper-racing the Corolla versus the Mazda, things start off with a large disparity.



2014 Mazda3 vs 2014 Toyota Corolla. Click image to enlarge

The base Corolla CE goes up against the Mazda3 GX, both cars starting at an identical \$15,995, the Mazda's freight charges being a slightly more expensive at \$1,695 versus the \$1,520 of the Toyota. Mechanically speaking, the Mazda is ahead on horsepower by 155 hp compared to Corolla's 132 hp, as well as having one extra cog in the manual gearbox and two extra gears if you option an automatic transmission.

That's right, Toyota will still sell you a modern car with a four-speed automatic transmission, as found in Barney Rubble's jalopy. They'll also bolt a set of 15-inch steelies with hubcaps on there (not so bad), and you get drum brakes out back as compared to the Mazda's discs at all four corners. You get the same lacklustre rear binders on the LE and S trims if you don't pay extra.

However, even Toyota knows the outlier fully loaded and super-cheap cars aren't what the bulk of people buy. Moving our attention to the machines actually equipped with features you might want, like air conditioning, we find the Mazda3 GS (\$19,695) lining up against the Corolla S or LE, at \$20,200 and \$19,500 respectively. As you'd have to pay an extra \$1,200 to get the Mazda3 with an automatic, the Toyota creeps ahead on value.

You have to pay extra to get the heated seats in the Mazda3 as well, and they're standard in the Corolla. A nice \$1,500 upgrade package gives the Corolla 16-inch alloys, fog lamps, a power moonroof and a leather-wrapped steering wheel, all for a total price of \$21,000. To get the same thing out of a Mazda3 GS, you'd have to spend \$22,595 plus freight. Advantage Toyota?

Maybe, especially when measuring things up against the sporty-looking Corolla S. Yes, it does look a bit like Emperor Zurg (Buzz Lightyear's villainous nemesis from *Toy Story 2* for those of you not up on your animated movie characters), but \$22,550 buys a Corolla S with 17-inch alloys, all the power-moonroof stuff, and a Softex leather interior. Well, I say "leather": it's more a cow's scuba-diving outfit than a baseball glove.



Even so, that's a nice-looking, very well equipped sedan that's guaranteed to have good resale, and it does have a few more bells and whistles than the Mazda offering. Getting off the paper charts and into the real world, my Corolla LE Eco tester's \$22,200-plus-freight price tag went right up against the manual Mazda3 GS's \$21,395, which would have been \$1,200 more expensive with the automatic six-speed. The Eco also gets a bit of a bump in power to 140 hp – go figure.

At the base end of the scale, the Toyota is outclassed, but here in the middle, the sales results start to make sense. Or do they? Both cars have backup cameras and Bluetooth hands-free, 16-inch alloy wheels and leather-wrapped control surfaces, heated front seats and power moonroofs. Yes the Mazda's a few hundred dollars more, and doesn't have automatic climate control – but is that really enough to swing it? Add in the Mazda's standard push-button starter, and I'm inclined to call this one a dead heat.

Comfort

Both test vehicles came with cloth seats that were nicely supportive and on first seating, both were reasonably cushy, perhaps moreso in the Toyota. Take the Corolla into a sweeping onramp a little too hard, and you'll find that its seats have all the lateral support of a picnic bench.

The Mazda's seats are much more like the sport buckets you'd expect, and as the Corolla doesn't have any lumbar support, they did feel the best of the two. Cranking up the height-adjustable seat will probably work better for shorter drivers in the Toyota as there seemed to be slightly more headroom (checking the specs, this is possibly down to the Corolla's open interior design – the difference is only a centimetre in favour of the Toyota).

Rear seat passengers are going to prefer riding in the Toyota, no question. The Mazda3 is much improved over its previous cramped rear quarters, but the Corolla is a full 15 centimetres bigger (think half a desktop ruler), and there's plenty of room to stretch out and/or fit the car seats in there.

Trunk space comparison also favours the Toyota, with its 370 L capacity giving a full 20 L advantage for grocery shopping or picking up in-laws at the airport. Er, I mean for their luggage. As usual, I had to stuff the running stroller in my tester during the week, and it slid right in, taking up only half the available room.

Ride quality for both cars is excellent, with the Mazda greatly improved in terms of road noise, and the Corolla also quite smooth. Even though the Mazda3 qualifies as the sporty option, it handles choppy pavement and speed bumps even better than the Corolla, though both are miles ahead of what small cars used to be. The Toyota takes this category simply on volume.

Interior Quality/Technology

As tested, both vehicles boasted touchscreen infotainment centres. The Mazda's, which looked like an iPad glued to the dashboard, was easy to use, even if it did employ a control unit not dissimilar to the old BMW iDrive setup.



2014 Mazda3 GS Sedan & 2014 Toyota Corolla LE Eco.
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2014 Mazda3 GS Sedan. Click image to enlarge

The Toyota had basically the same setup that Lexus uses, except that Lexus makes you operate that silly trackball mouse, and the Corolla's interface is purely touchscreen. Not only does the Corolla's setup look somewhat outdated, I watched my wife repeatedly try to push the "Source" input with no effect. Fiddly, then, and not going to impress ridealongs with those AOL-level graphics.

The piano-black-laced interior of the Mazda3 immediately impresses, particularly the way the seats are made. The steering wheel is excellent, and the gauge cluster is stylish, but I disliked the digital tachometer and digital fuel gauges are always horrible. I put seven litres of fuel into this car when it still read Full, and with only 50 L of tank capacity, that's ridiculous.

The Toyota, on the other hand, employs an open design with a stitched dashboard and, in the Eco model, blue accents. It's really quite elegant until you look closer and realize that the "stitching" is actually molded plastic. The door cards and elsewhere are a bit of a hash of mixed hard plastic and fabric, but the cabin certainly felt airier than the Mazda3s. Airier and cheaper.



2014 Toyota Corolla LE Eco. Click image to enlarge

Safety

If you have a habit of ramming telephone poles, I advise against purchasing a Toyota Corolla. In the IIHS's new small-overlap test, the Corolla received a grade of "Marginal" when vehicle structure intruded into the passenger footwell.

Even so, the Corolla still rated a Top Safety Pick, as the crash test dummy declared, "It's only a flesh wound!" or something like that. The Toyota performed well in all other tests (rollover, side-impact), and is a fairly safe choice. As long as you stay away from telephone poles. And Mr. Strong.



The Mazda3 has not completed IIHS crash testing, but the Mazda6 Sedan, with which the '3 shares body structure, performed well in the test previously, scoring an Acceptable in the small overlap crash test. Unlike Toyota, who has been having problems with the new crash-test regulations with their RAV4 and Camry as well (both scored Poor in the small overlap test), Mazda seems to have built their machines proactively for safety, rather than simply planning on reacting to results.

Of course, it's always better not to have the accident in the first place, and both cars come equipped with traction control, vehicle stability control, electronic brake-force distribution (balances braking force depending on weight distribution), and anti-lock brakes. The Toyota also has something called Smart Stop Technology, which cuts the engine power if you try to step on both the throttle and the brake pedal at the same time – no more unintended acceleration lawsuits, thank you very much.

Mazda has one fewer airbag than the Corolla, which has a little added protection for the driver's knee, but will also offer a host of active safety features in the top-spec model including lane-departure warning, blind-spot assist, and a self-stopping driver-assist called Smart City Brake Support. Currently you can only get these systems as an add-on package for the GT trim.

As our testers stood, the middle-of-the-road Mazda3 appeared to be the safer car, with a stiffer body structure. An airbag for your knee won't make much difference if there's steel sticking in your leg.

Fuel Economy

Leaving aside the four-speed automatic transmission, designed for folks who put fifty thousand kilometres per decade on their cars, the Corolla's CVT transmission should net it a theoretical 6.5 L/100 km fuel consumption in the city and 4.6 L/100 km on the highway – this for the best-performing Eco model. The automatic Mazda3 just about ties things up with a projected 6.7 L/100 km city and 4.7 L/100 km highway, with the manual option being 0.1 L/100 km worse. On paper.

In reality (something the people who came up with the Natural Resources Canada testing method can't even spell), both cars fare worse than their figures would indicate – but also better than expected. They do so in different ways.

The Corolla's CVT, wedged firmly in Eco mode, rewards smooth throttle inputs and careful driving. It doesn't like to hustle, but isn't unpleasant about it, you simply slow down and enjoy the ride. As a result, your fuel economy figures do very well.

The Mazda3, on the other hand, doesn't seem to care how hard you flog it. It's almost like driving a diesel, where the real-world fuel economy approaches the normally optimistic official figures even if you don't pussyfoot around it. Even if you are a Hot Wheels-collectin' car nut, it impresses with fuel-sipping behaviour.



2014 Toyota Corolla LE Eco & 2014 Mazda3 GS Sedan.

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2014 Mazda3 vs 2014 Toyota Corolla. [Click image to enlarge](#)

At the end of the week, in mixed use heavily skewed towards traffic, the Corolla had done better at an observed 7.1, but the Mazda3 was just three tenths worse than that, and had not been driven slowly. There are so many variables in a short-term test like this (time of day, temperature variability, one slowpoke who makes you hit all the lights), but again both cars were very close.

Based on results, if you're spending \$1,500 a year on fuel, you might potentially save \$50 per annum by choosing the Corolla. Whee.

Conclusion

Watching these two play tennis, volleying back and forth on roominess versus safety ratings, has hardly been what you'd call thrilling. It's a very even match, extremely close scores split depending how you weight the Mazda's better power-to-weight ratio versus the Corolla's greater interior capacity.

You can see why someone in the market for a small car might simply end up going with their gut here. On paper, if you don't look too closely, the Corolla is efficient enough, smooth enough, safe enough, and value-priced enough to compete with the Mazda3, and it's also a nice, safe choice. Plus, Toyotas are supposed to be reliable – it's a no-brainer, right?

I'd like to suggest the opposite. Mazda's redesign of their bread-and-butter small car has resulted in a machine that performs nearly as well in terms of space and comfort as the segment's traditional motorized sofa, and I'd be willing to bet that the six-speed automatic car would have pipped the Corolla's fuel economy as well, or at least tied it. Leaving passion out of it, the Mazda3 is an entirely logical choice, with nearly no compromises made to economy and comfort for the sake of performance; just the opposite actually, as it's both safer and nicer on the inside.

And, even though I said I'd leave it out, let's just bring back performance here for a minute. The really great thing about the Mazda3 is that it lets you have all the same amenities as a traditional segment choice, but you also get a simply great-looking car with an upscale interior, and the best driving experience in the segment, full

The winner, just as we knew it always would be, is the Mazda3 – right now, it's the best compact car in the segment, even if you don't really care about cars. If we get to the end of the year and it doesn't hit a podium finish in sales results, it doesn't make one whit of difference. This is the one you should buy.



2014 Mazda3 vs 2014 Toyota Corolla & 2014 Mazda3 GS Sedan. Click image to enlarge

Pricing: 2014 Mazda3 GS Sedan

Base Price (GS): \$19,695

Options: \$1,700 (Convenience package [heated front seats, leather-wrapped control surfaces] – \$500; Moonroof Package – \$1,200)

Freight: \$1,695

A/C Tax: \$100

Price as tested: \$23,190

Pricing: 2014 Toyota Corolla LE Eco

Base Price (Eco): \$20,250

Options: \$1,950 (Eco mode, power moonroof, 16" alloys, leather-wrapped control surfaces)

Freight: \$1,520

A/C Tax: \$100

Price as tested: \$23,820

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Chevrolet Cruze

Dodge Dart

Ford Focus

Honda Civic

Hyundai Elantra

Kia Forte

Mitsubishi Lancer

Nissan Sentra

Subaru Impreza

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