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Refreshed Cabin, More Features

Mitsubishi Outlander Improves in Hot Market for Family Crossovers

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When you're shopping for a family-friendly crossover, there's no sense asking yourself whether it's a nice vehicle or not.

There just aren't any bad ones in this segment right now.

The question you need to ask is a bit trickier: Is it nice enough?

That's what I keep wondering as I drive the revamped-for-2017 Mitsubishi Outlander, a three-row crossover that starts at a budget-friendly \$23,495 but has long struggled to stand out in a market oversaturated with strong products.

It definitely makes a case for value shoppers, particularly at the low end of its price range where, dollars-wise, it competes with some compact cars but offers a whole lot more roominess and comfort.

On models that top out over \$30,000 with luxury features like my SEL-trim tester, though, the value proposition is a bit harder to justify. You have a lot more choices at that price, including some with more refinement if you look closely.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MITSUBISHI OUTLANDER

Starting at \$23,495, the Mitsubishi Outlander is one of the most affordable crossover vehicles that offers three rows of seating in the cabin.

Mitsubishi has been working on that criticism, and it makes big strides toward addressing it with the Outlander's reworked cabin for 2017. It feels more sleek and modern now, with better materials and nice graphics on its flashy new digital interface. As a whole, its interior

leaves a noticeably better first impression than the 2016 model did.

Its suspension, though, is overdue for some tweaking. The ride feels just a bit old-fashioned, with a bounciness over bumps that most new crossovers have managed to massage out of existence. Today's crossovers generally feel more taut than this one, something that inspires confidence when turning or maneuvering.

On the highway, though, the Outlander shines. The suspension does a good job soaking up the bumps at freeway speeds, delivering the kind of supple, reasonably quiet ride I like in roomy family vehicles.

Styling is almost not worth mentioning, since most of today's family haulers all seem to copy the same jellybean theme. The Outlander looks a bit more chiseled, perhaps, letting some of this nameplate's offroad history show in its body, but it's a subtle difference from the cookie-cutter crossover masses that fill America's highways.

Most Outlander models come with a continuously variable transmission (CVT) designed to deliver good gas mileage from its 2.4-liter, four-cylinder engine. My tester was rated for 25 mpg in the city and 30 mpg on the

highway, both impressive numbers for a three-row crossover.

Personally, while I think the rubber-band driving feel of a CVT is a mortal sin in sporty compact cars, it doesn't bother me in vehicles like this one, which are designed more for comfortably hauling kids and cargo than generating smiles on twisty roads.

There's one exception, though. Mitsubishi offers the Outlander GT designed for people who want more exhilaration and performance. It comes with a 3.0-liter V6 coupled with a six-speed automatic with paddle shifters.

Yes, I think paddle shifters on a crossover are silly. Not all drivers agree, though, which is the whole point of these different flavors of Outlander.

To expand the palate even further, Mitsubishi is adding an entry-level four-wheel-drive system called All-Wheel Control (AWC) this year. It's available on the ES trim for \$24,995 and comes with 2WD, 4WD and Lock modes.

A more sophisticated Super All-Wheel Control system is available on the higher-end SE, SEL and GT models. It adds an active front differential and special settings for driving in snow or saving fuel in eco mode.

Also new this year are a long list of optional safety features. You can now get blind-spot warning with lane change assist, rear cross-traffic alert and a forward collision mitigation system with pedestrian detection.

Finally, there's news that always makes me smile. The Outlander offers Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, so smartphone addicts can rejoice.

What was tested?

2017 Mitsubishi Outlander 2.4 SEL 2WD (\$25,495). Options: SEL Touring Package (\$4,000). Price as tested (including \$895 destination charge): \$30,390

Wheelbase: 105.1 in.

Length: 184.8 in.

Width: 71.3 in.

Height: 66.1 in.

Engine: 2.4-liter four cylinder (166 hp, 162 lbs-ft)

Transmission: Continuously variable

Fuel economy: 25 city, 30 highway

RATINGS

Style: 6

Performance: 7

Price: 9

Handling: 4

Ride: 5

Comfort: 7

Quality: 8

Overall: 7

Why buy it?

It's a tremendous value for the money at the lower end of its price range. It's one of the most affordable three-row crossover vehicles for sale today, and changes to the cabin make it more refined than before.



The Outlander's interior is updated for 2017 with nicer materials and better technology, including a suite of active safety features and smartphone connectivity.