

FINDING THE BEST 3-ROW SUVS MEANS NAVIGATING A CROWDED MAP

By John Stein
For Auto Edition

The momentum for the ascension of the SUV as the chosen mode of transportation for 21st Century North America began several decades ago. Today's SUVs are less truck-like and, technically, many are crossovers, built on car platforms.

One thing that has not changed, no matter what size vehicle, is the desire to have maximum capacity to haul people and things. Perhaps no feature best represents that flexible capacity than the third-row seat, which is used by manufacturers to attract specific buyers and to qualify for distinct class categories.

One thing can be said for certain about the third-row seat – they are not all created equal. Some third rows are capable of comfortably accommodating two adults while others would struggle to accept an adult-sized duffel bag. The following vehicles are some of my favorites that qualify for three-row seating.



MAZDA CX-9

PRICE: \$32,420 - \$44,915

The new Mazda CX-9 is the sportiest looking SUV on my list. There's plenty of zoom-zoom in the exterior styling and under the hood. This stylish three-row crossover provides the expected well-tuned suspension, outstanding handling, and a light-but-precise steering. A 250-hp 2.5-liter turbo 4-Cylinder is paired with a six-speed automatic and either front- or all-wheel drive. The CX-9 offers adaptive cruise control and automated emergency braking as standard on high-end Grand Touring and Signature trims.



Format: Front- & All-Wheel Drive
Engine: 227-hp 2.5-liter 4-Cylinder
Trans: 6-speed automatic
MPG: 22/28

ACURA MDX

PRICE: \$43,955 - \$58,170

The Acura MDX combines modern curves with luxurious cabin accommodations. The MDX is renown for its great handling characteristics and that notable third row that does a good job of adding a couple more bodies to the cabin capacity. All models are standard front-wheel drive (optional AWD) and feature a 290-hp V-6, mated to a steady 9-speed automatic transmission. The MDX is quick and capable no matter what capacity the cabin is at.



Format: Front-wheel & all-wheel drive
Engine: 290-hp 3.5-liter V-6
Trans: 9-speed automatic
MPG: 19/27



LEXUS GX

PRICE: \$51,755 - \$63,130

The Lexus is the top-end of my list, featuring the expected levels of class and luxurious comfort distinct to the brand. With a very capable four-wheel-drive system working all the time on demand, the GX can easily handle the extra bodies in the third row while tackling extreme off-road challenges – or the more likely scenario of a snow-covered parking lot. A 301-hp 4.6-liter V-8, mated to a 6-speed automatic, is standard and it provides the GX with the go-anywhere attitude it exudes. The cabin is gorgeous, featuring cozy seats and a big 8-inch touchscreen infotainment system. Look for adaptive cruise control and automated emergency braking as optional.



Format: 4WD
Engine: 301-hp 4.6-liter 8-cylinder
Trans: 6-speed automatic
MPG: 15/20



DODGE DURANGO

PRICE: \$31,490 - \$45,590

The Dodge Durango delivers the fun attitude you might expect from the brand that has big, bold styling and equally, or bigger, horsepower. This is easily the most masculine SUV design, but it's not as truck-like as other large SUVs. Under the hood is a 295-hp 3.6-liter V-6 or a 360-hp 5.7-liter Hemi V-8, mated to a strong 8-speed automatic transmission. Both engine options are offered in rear- or all-wheel-drive formats. Inside the cabin, besides the third-row accommodations, are solid fit and finish, soft-touch materials and an impressive Uconnect infotainment system with an 8.4-inch touchscreen.



Format: Front-Wheel or All-Wheel Drive
Engine: 280-hp 3.5-liter V-6
Trans: 8-speed automatic
MPG: 19/26



HONDA PILOT

PRICE: \$31,245 - \$47,670

Given the attention to the third-row seating, I have to say that the Pilot's third row offers generous room and easy access. The Pilot is family friendly and touts lots of active-safety technology to keep everyone safe. While this is not the stunner in terms of exterior styling, the Pilot has Honda's dependable DNA and its trouble-free nature is sure to attract many a consumer. The 280-hp 3.5-liter V-6 is mated to a six-speed automatic transmission. If you want to step up to the Touring and Elite trims, you get the world-class 9-speed automatic. The all-wheel-drive system offers torque vectoring for better handling and modes for snow, sand, and mud.



Format: Front-Wheel or All-Wheel Drive
Engine: 280-hp 3.5-liter V-6
Trans: 6 & optional 9-speed automatic
MPG: 19/26



HYUNDAI SANTE FE

PRICE: \$31,295 - \$37,145

The Sante Fe third row takes passenger capacity to six or seven while the exterior styling really sets this SUV apart from much of the rounded bean-shapes. With a 290-hp 3.3-liter V-6 and a six-speed automatic, acceleration is responsive and dependable. Front-wheel drive is standard, and all-wheel drive is optional. A 12-speaker audio system is optional, as is a hands-free liftgate. Available tech includes Android Auto, Apple CarPlay, and Blue Link connectivity.



Format: Front-Wheel or All-Wheel Drive
Engine: 290-hp 3.3-liter V-6
Trans: 6-speed automatic
MPG: 18/25



CONTINENTAL MOTORS GROUP

ContinentalMotors.com

Thousands of choices...

