



Best compact SUV for \$25,000?

By Fred Meier, USA TODAY | July 7, 2012

Compact SUVs are increasingly popular with [U.S.](#) families, from couples starting out to empty-nesters. The good news for families on a budget is that these haulers are getting more affordable even as they offer more standard features and get better gas mileage. To see which offers the most value for a family, experts from USA TODAY, car-shopping site Cars.com and PBS' *MotorWeek*— plus a real Chicago family — compared six models that met a mainstream price limit and were EPA-rated at least 30 miles per gallon for our \$25,000 Compact SUV Shootout.



To see just how much a family on a moderate budget can get in a compact SUV, we set the price cap for entries at \$25,000 before shipping.

And with fuel efficiency increasingly important for the family budget, we required at least a 30-miles-per-gallon EPA highway rating. That left out a couple of well-known crossovers — Toyota's RAV4 and Nissan's Rogue — each at 28. But expect their coming redesigns to post higher mpgs.

[For \\$25K, different compact SUVs suit different buyers](#)

The contenders

The 2012 Chevrolet Equinox; the 2013 Ford Escape (new); the 2012 Honda [CR-V](#) (new); the 2012 Hyundai Tucson; the 2012 Kia Sportage; and the 2013 Mazda CX-5 (new).

A note about the price cap: For a couple, including the Escape, the next-higher model, with an engine upgrade or extra features, exceeded the cap by less than \$100. But the top-rated SUVs in our test weren't the ones pushing the price cap, so the price difference with fancier versions of others that just missed the cut is significant.

The testing and scoring

The six SUVs were tested over three days in and around Chicago, including:

- A 200-mile gas-mileage test from urban driving to interstates.
- A day of back-to-back testing by our five experts over the same course to score the features, cargo and storage space, technology and the driving dynamics, including ride, noise, handling, acceleration and braking.
- A day of testing by a family of four in the market for a compact SUV to replace their 2001 Chevy Tracker.

The winner got the most points out of 1,000, with the real-world gas mileage rank weighted to count for 10% of the total score, the five experts' scores for 75%, and the family's scores for 15%.

The expert and family testers

Our experts: [David Thomas](#), Cars.com managing editor; Jennifer Geiger, an editor at Cars.com; Bill Jackson, a Cars.com senior editor; Fred Meier, automotive editor for USA TODAY; and [Brian Robinson](#), auto journalist and a producer for PBS' *MotorWeek* program.

The family: Erin and Nicholas Ravelingeen of Chicago, and their children, Trudy, 4, and Mason, 2. In addition to the Tracker, they own a 2001 [Oldsmobile Alero](#). They use the vehicles for errands and road trips, says Erin, a stay-at-home mom. Nicholas, who works in risk management downtown, doesn't use a car to commute. They put about 8,000 miles a year on each auto.

And the winner is ...

No. 1: 2012 Honda CR-V EX

Points: 809 (out of 1,000)

Price with shipping: \$25,425

Observed gas mileage: 30.3 mpg, No. 2 in test (city/highway EPA rating 23/31)

Key features: Sunroof (only one in test). Backup camera. Pandora Internet radio (only one in test). Insurance Institute for Highway Safety Top Safety Pick.

What they liked: Features. All in our tester were standard for the model, and the blend pleased the judges. "Even just with the standard tech features, it shined. The Bluetooth and [USB](#) integration work well with a vibrant color display that's easy to read. The stereo was one of my favorites," Thomas says. "Loaded with convenience features standard," says Geiger. "Three of my favorites: the always-helpful backup camera; the cavernous center console box; and the easy fold-flat seats with cargo-area release handles." A bonus: "The only vehicle with a sunroof at this price." Thoughtful design. "Great ergonomics and the best interior layout," says Robinson. Family friendly. "Parents will love the roomy rear for child seats, low door sill and rear doors that open a full 90 degrees. Come to think of it, aging Boomers may like those even more," Meier says. Family testers Erin and Nick Ravelingeen were "totally amazed" by the flip-down mirror (most often seen in minivans) that lets parents check on kids in back.

What they didn't: It was one of three redesigns in the test, but not all thought Honda improved its looks. Jackson says. "It's got the biggest butt ... here," says Jackson. "Actually, the front styling ain't so hot, either." Handling. It's "where the CR-V showed some chinks in the armor," Thomas says. "When taking corners, driver and passengers leaned more than in the others." "Comfy ride, but vague steering and loads of body lean make it not the driver's choice," says Meier. Aggressive Eco mode. "I appreciate the potential fuel savings, but (Eco) alters the throttle response and delays shift points to where the CR-V seems lazy," says Geiger. Missed tech expectations. "Still trails many others in tech and convenience features such as blind-spot monitoring systems, push-button start, etc," says Robinson.

Bottom line: "One of the most well-rounded in this segment. It's a comfortable cruiser with a solid powertrain, a compliant ride and plenty of features," says Geiger. "The brand's history of strong reliability helps tip the scale."

No. 2: 2013 Mazda CX-5 Touring

Points: 784 (out of 1,000)

Price with shipping: \$24,690

Observed gas mileage: 32.8 mpg, No. 1 in test (city/highway EPA rating 26/32)

Key features: Power driver seat. 5.8-inch color touch-screen. Backup camera. HD and satellite radio. Blind spot alert system (only one). IIHS Top Safety Pick.

What they liked: Top fuel economy. More than 2 mpg above next best. Interior "The richest look of any in our test," Jackson says. "I kept thinking that we had to be in a model that didn't meet our price." Value. "Low base prices and high fuel economy mean this car should appeal to penny pinchers, and lots of features for the price (blind spot alert, backup camera, power driver seat) mean they're getting good value," says Geiger. Front visibility. "High windshield, pulled-back front pillars and door-mounted mirrors give great road view and safety, particularly in the city," says Meier. Rear seat. "Folds in a 40/20/40 split, which is useful for hauling different combinations of people and cargo," says Geiger. "Also folds flat with ease, thanks to cargo-area handles."

What they didn't: Power. Low scores here likely kept it from winning. "The 2-liter engine has adequate pep from a stop, but is on the loud side and takes a while to gather steam," Geiger says. Handling. "The Escape, Tucson and Sportage out-cornered it," says Thomas.

Bottom line: Mazda needs the CX-5 to be a winner, says Geiger, "and it's poised to be ... with eye-catching styling, a quality interior, plenty of features and excellent-for-the-class fuel economy."

No. 3: 2012 Kia Sportage LX

Points: 774 (out of 1,000)

Price with shipping: \$24,575

Observed gas mileage: 28.5 mpg (city/highway EPA rating 22/32)

Key features: Navigation system (only one). Heated mirrors. Cooling glove box (only one). Backup camera. Five-year/60,000-mile new vehicle warranty, 10-year/100,000-mile powertrain (tie for longest). Satellite radio. IIHS Top Safety Pick.

What they liked: Navi and audio. "A full navigation system with an upgraded stereo at a price in the middle of our range was a huge win," says Thomas. Styling. "Definitely has attitude," says Geiger. "The edgiest-looking of the bunch." Storage. "A deep center console, coupled with underfloor bins in the cargo area, means plenty of places to stash stuff," says Geiger. Handling, ride. "Has the crisp handling of mechanically similar Hyundai Tucson," Meier says, "but its good ride and quiet interior are amazingly better."

What they didn't: Rear visibility. The rakish roof "means you'll need its backup camera and wish for a blind spot alert," says Meier. Interior quality. "Doesn't seem on par with most recent Kias," says Robinson. Cargo area. "Too small with a high load floor," Thomas says. Navi screen angle. "You've got a great nav system and install it leaning backward toward the windshield? That leads to a lot of glare," Thomas says.

Bottom line: "The sticker price and features wowed me, the family and likely other shoppers," says Thomas. "If cargo space isn't a concern, the Sportage will be hard to ignore."

No. 4: 2012 Chevrolet Equinox LS

Points: 740 (out of 1,000)

Price with shipping: \$24,355

Observed gas mileage: 27.1 mpg (city/highway EPA rating 22/32)

Key features: Sliding (8 inches) second-row. Power height control for driver's seat. IIHS Top Safety Pick.

What they liked: Storage, cargo space. "Being the biggest one in the group, there's lots of cargo space, but even more important, there's lots of small-item storage up front, as well," Robinson says. "The interior has an 'almost-premium' feel." Sliding second row. It "was the only SUV where I felt I could take a road trip in the second row, thanks to the sliding rear seats," says Jackson. "There's a huge second row and a large cargo area, too; most SUVs in this class make you choose." The child seat latch anchors. "Among the best I've ever used. Completely exposed and lots of clearance. Hooking up a child-safety seat is a breeze," says Geiger.

What they didn't: The drivetrain. "This powertrain needs to go to finishing school," Geiger says. "It's slow, loud, and the transmission's shifts are clunky and oddly timed." Road noise. "The loudest of the six" on the highway, Thomas says. No USB. "Unexpectedly good audio with subwoofer at this price, and then no USB for your iPod!" says Meier. The "cost-cutting will turn off younger buyers you could have wooed with good sound."

Bottom line: "It's very roomy inside, and has one of the best rides of the group," says Robinson. "It's a great overall package that could just use a little more powertrain refinement."

No. 5: 2012 Hyundai Tucson Limited

Points: 721.5 (out of 1,000)

Price with shipping: \$25,820 (highest)

Observed gas mileage: 27.6 mpg (city/highway EPA rating 22/32)

Key features: Top trim with heated leather seats (only one in test). Roof rack. Five-year/60,000-mile new vehicle warranty, 10-year/100,000-mile powertrain. Hill descent control. Power driver seat. Satellite radio. IIHS Top Safety Pick.

What they liked: Value. "The price starts under 20 grand, and by the time you get to 25, you've got a ton of features for not a lot of price," says Robinson. "Amazingly well-dressed for the price. Delivers on Hyundai reputation for value for your bucks," says Meier. Easy-to-use technology. "Give me the Tucson's straightforward tech over the Mazda's touch-screen any day. Scrolling through iPod playlists, synching your phone and making calls was intuitive and natural," says Thomas. Power and handling. "The Tucson springs away from stoplights and has decent passing power," says Jackson. "Handling was top-notch," says Thomas. "One of the few crossovers that I could take at full speed through tight turns."

What they didn't: Noise. "Road noise and tire roar are hard to ignore ... one of the loudest SUVs in the class," says Geiger. Cargo space. Says Thomas: The cargo area is "too small for my family dog, let alone what we pack for a road trip, and has a high load-in height."

Bottom line: "The Tucson remains an excellent option in the class," says Thomas, "but the class has gotten much tougher very quickly."

No. 6: 2013 Ford Escape S

Points: 693.5 (out of 1,000)

Price with shipping: \$23,295 (lowest)

Test gas mileage: 27.4 mpg (city/highway EPA rating 22/31)

Key features: Reclining second row. Under-floor storage in second row. No IIHS crash test data yet.

What they liked: Driving dynamics. It "excels in ... ride, handling and acceleration by managing to feel both composed and relaxed," says Jackson. The new look. The 2013 is sleek, no longer boxy. The rear seat. "The thin-looking rear seat has a reclining back, and is surprisingly comfy and roomy for two," says Meier. Cargo room. "Quite large with a low load floor," says Thomas.

What they didn't: Lack of features. The base Escape had the lowest price, and fewest features. It was the only one with wheel covers and without Bluetooth connectivity. But just one step up to more features and a new engine topped \$25,000. The base "2.5-liter engine [is] not nearly as nice as the available EcoBoost engines," says Robinson. Storage, for a family SUV. "Clever underfoot rear storage can't make up for a tiny console bin and lack of cubbies," says Meier. Air conditioning vents. "They don't shoot air in the direction you think when adjusting them," says Thomas, "and there are two above the controls that shoot air only toward your lap. I had a hard time getting comfortable."

Bottom line: "The base model is a black-plastic austerity plan," says Meier. "You have to pay more to get the real redesign, including a nicer interior and new state-of-the-art engines."