

Mazda's MX-5 Miata is powerful and fun

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Summer just wouldn't be summer without a Mazda Miata.

For more than 15 years, getting my hands on a Miata is something I look forward to with anticipation.

Properly called the Mazda MX-5 these days, when the Miata bowed it was inexpensive to operate as well as drive and proved an instant hit.

Many of you will remember when the term "sports car" was synonymous with British makes like MG, Triumph and Austin Healey. Somewhere along the line, the English lost the concept of quality and, with emissions laws, their hegemony simply petered out.

Then Mazda came up with the Miata, and by as early as 1990, it was well on its way to becoming the most popular and largest selling sportscar in history.

Wisely, Mazda has not strayed far from the core concept but has constantly kept refining and upgrading, much as Porsche has done with the 911.

But now Mazda has taken the MX-5 Miata to a 'hard place' with an optional power retractable metal top that goes up and down in a mere 13 seconds.

And while power hardtop/convertibles are starting to become more prevalent, the Miata version takes up zero trunk space and is offered on all three MX-5 models for an extra \$2,195 over list.

What's also amazing is the rear deck is only 20 mm taller than the soft top's and the hardtop assembly adds just 36 kg in overall weight, thus having a negligible effect on performance.

Central to the Miata philosophy is a concept called "Jinba Ittai" or "Rider and Horse as One". It comes from the Japanese where an archer going into battle on his horse required both to function as one, with the archer controlling his steed so the arrow would hit the target on the move.

That was the concept used in the original design and it has not been changed even though there is no part carried over from the last generation Miata (in 2005) to the current third generation of the car.

At the same time, Mazda engineers used a "gram strategy" to keep the Miata as light as possible. An example is the rearview mirror that was reduced in weight by 84 grams. This gram strategy was applied to every part in the car.

The concept and execution of the Miata was, and is, simple. Use a central spine/chassis, place the engine in front, the drive in the rear and two seats in between and keep the whole package as light as possible for sharp handling. The shape of the Miata has not been trifled with in the 2007 generation.

The Miata is still a joy to drive and is as pointable as ever. The front and rear tracks however are wider than the 2005 and that translates into increased stability. The body stiffness is improved by 47 per cent and that means the suspension has to do the work, which you want in a roadster.

Motive power is a 2.0-litre DOHC inline four-cylinder putting out 166 hp and 140 lb/ft of torque on premium gasoline. For 2008, trim choices start with a five-speed manual transmission on the base GX model priced at \$28,195. The \$31,350 GS is the more sporting version while the \$34,500 GT is more luxury equipped. Both the GS

and GT offer a six-speed manual or optional six-speed automatic with sequential mode. If you opt for the autobox in the GT it comes with paddles for the up/down shifts. Both the GS and GT have 17-inch wheels, the GX being

fitted with 16-inchers. ABS is now standard on all models where the GS has a rear limited slip differential and performance Bilstein shocks with shock tower stress bar. Air conditioning and a detachable

hardtop are options. The GT has air but stability control and the limited slip are part of the Performance Package. The GT seats are heated leather and a premium Bose sound system is
 • see RETRACTABLE on page C11

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