

WHEELS

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Impressive manners and looks make the Mazda6 a standout

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Getting there, as they say, is half the fun.

On a recent family excursion to the Algonquin Park area for a few days vacation, I booked a 2009 Mazda6 GT V6 because it was a double standout last year.

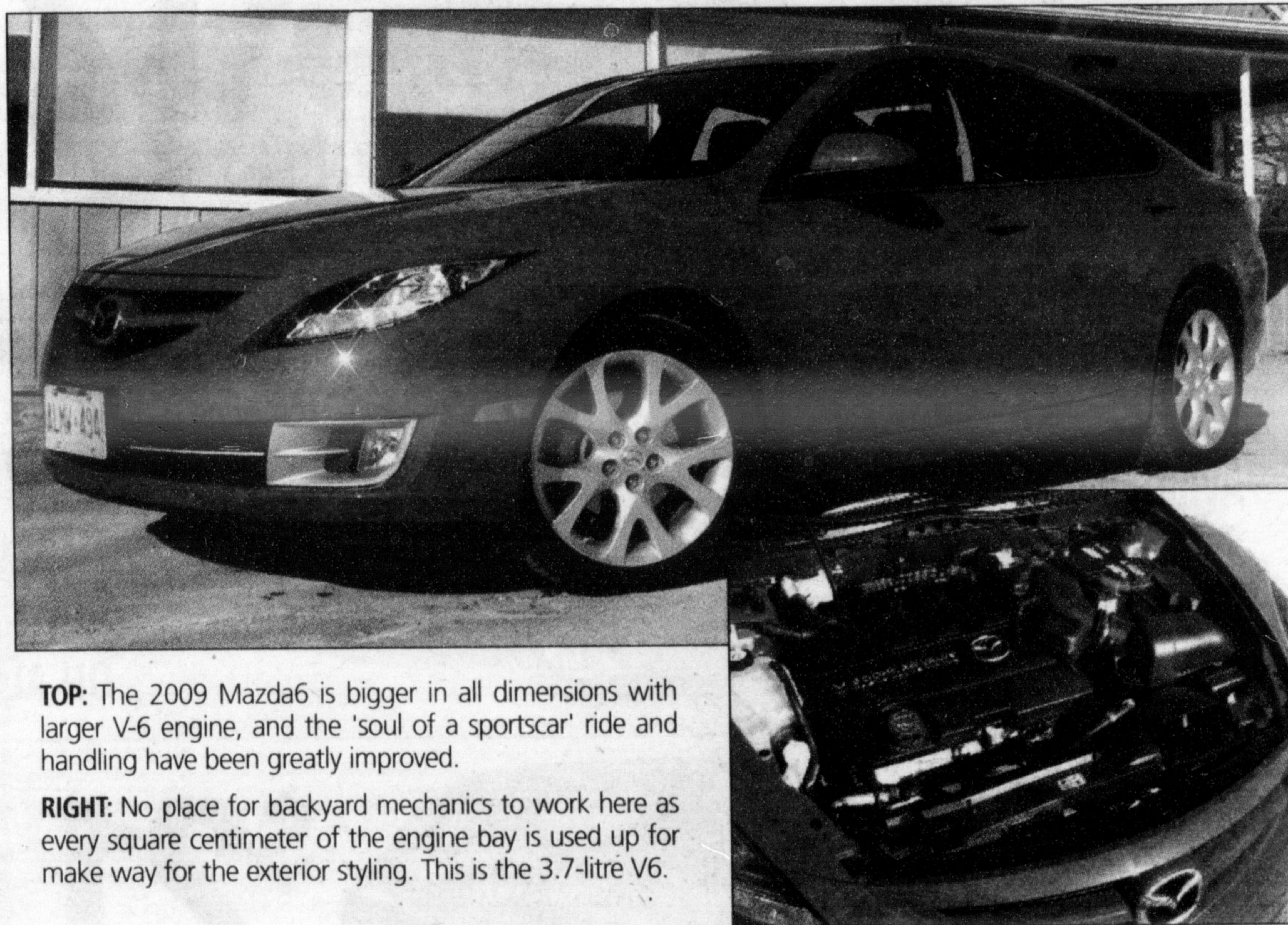
Firstly, it won its category (Best New Family Car, \$22,000-\$30,000) at the annual Automotive Journalists Association of Canada (AJAC) Car of the Year awards. Then it almost took the overall COTY title losing by one, single point to the Hyundai Genesis.

Secondly, I promised myself to reserve one for a week after the press introduction last fall. That's because we normally get about 300 km behind the wheel which is never long enough to get a feel for the car.

The 2009 model is easily the best-looking Mazda6 one yet.

From the front fenders back, you can see how the lines in some of Mazda's recent concepts were moulded into the overall structure. An example is a very subtle and elegant "S" curve that flows from the high point of the roof down and back to the tip of the rear deck.

But the most pronounced feature of the external styling is the way the front fenders flare out like wings, and along with the five-point grille, gives the car the look of a broad arrow. Starting with the RX-8 sportscar then the CX-7 CUV and more recently the 2010 Mazda3, this is now the signature



TOP: The 2009 Mazda6 is bigger in all dimensions with larger V-6 engine, and the 'soul of a sportscar' ride and handling have been greatly improved.

RIGHT: No place for backyard mechanics to work here as every square centimeter of the engine bay is used up for make way for the exterior styling. This is the 3.7-litre V6.

styling cue for the entire model lineup.

Proof that the stylists had done their job was an incident on the highway leading up to Huntsville. At one point, an older Jeep with massively oversized tires came roaring up. Then the driver paced us before falling back and finally blasting past. But as he did, he gave us a 'thumbs up' which impressed even my wife, who said she had never seen that happen before.

The 2009 Mazda6 is larger than the previous version in every dimension. Wheelbase is lengthened by 115 mm; overall length is greater by 195 mm, while overall width is increased by 60 mm.

Both front and rear occupants benefit from more headroom, shoulder room, and legroom. Cargo capacity has grown by 39 litres to 469 litres. That 10 per cent increase in cargo volume results in a very high trunk deck.

This was important to us as we had a lot to haul up north and back including our son, who is one of those modern teens who are part of this new generation of big people who need lots of leg and shoulder room. The increase in the wheelbase of 4.5 inches mostly went to increasing rear legroom which my son appreciated.

Helping things out greatly was the 60/40 split rear seat that allowed the skis to fit inside the

car.

There is a drawback. In creating all that trunk room the high deck lid makes reversing problematical. Ergo, you will have to be very careful when backing up not to hit objects like posts. There is no parking assist audible warning available.

Following Mazda Canada convention, there are two models, the base GS and the top trim GT. The GS and GT start with a 2.5-litre, DOHC inline four-cylinder engine producing 170 hp and 167 lb/ft of torque. This is a larger version of Mazda's ubiquitous 2.3-litre engine that now makes more power with better fuel economy. A six-speed manual transmission (rare in a mid-size sedan) is standard and a five-speed automatic with sequential manual mode is an option on the GS.

Fuel numbers for the six-speed are 10.4/6.9L/100 km city/highway and 9.7/6.7L/100 km city/highway for the auto. This is a case where the automatic is marginally better on gas than the manual.

The GS V6 and GT V6 get a 3.7-litre DOHC engine similar to that found in the CX-9 seven-seat crossover. It produces 272 hp and 269 lb/ft of torque. The only transmission offered is a six-speed automatic with sequential mode that lists fuel consumption as 12.1/8.0L/100 km city/highway.

The GS models (four-cylinder, \$22,695 and V6, \$27,695) come with four-wheel disc brakes with

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