

Beware of expensive imitations

The Mazda Miata has no competition in its price range

Jim Robinson
METROLAND STAFF

Some nine years ago I got a chance to drive an automotive sensation that has become something as an icon, and a loveable one at that — the Mazda Miata.

The breezy exhilaration of charging down a rural road in the early spring air was intoxicating, and remains one of my most cherished memories in a decade of road testing cars.

Some like 'em with huge V8s, others

with mind-boggling complicated turbos, still others crave the soothing sensation of leather and concert sound.

For me, it's a little engine that can be revved forever tied to quick handling and a suspension that helps grab the pavement so you can use your five senses (sometime six) to revel in something that goes beyond sporty driving.

By a very wide margin, the Mazda Miata is the highest volume selling sports car in the world.

But every great product has a pro-

duction life that only lasts so long. The problem comes when the initial product is so good that making changes can result in your most loyal buyers becoming your worst enemies.

With its own glossy club magazine, Miata owners are amongst the most rabid in the world.

Thus, the decisions taken in bringing along the second generation Mazda Miata were of the greatest importance. Not only does the Miata symbolize the spirit of Mazda, the

Hiroshima-based carmaker very much needs to have a cheery image as it tries to remake and reaffirm itself after near fiscal collapse three years ago.

With the 1999 models already in the dealerships, the new car bears a strong resemblance to the 1997 model, but there are actually a myriad of improvements.

Mazda's chief designer, Tom Matano, took the time to go over the many changes to the car, which are extensive. The rear haunches are more muscular in appearance, but with the rear more squared, it has more than doubled the trunk space to the point where it will carry two golf bags.

The nose now has head lamps incorporated into the shape of the car, doing a way

with the former pop-up variety. The air inlet is in a more aggressive Matano takes a certain amount of pride in the Mazda in Markham.



Personally, I hope Tom makes a video some day about how shapes and lines make or break a car. His layman's way of explaining design would make a great educational tool for the zillions of us who have secretly drawn our own dream cars on the backs of textbooks and serviettes and never quite gotten it right.

Another improvement is with the soft top which now has a heated glass rear window. One of the few options is the removable hard top (\$1,675) while air conditioning (why bother with a soft top?) is also an option.

Thankfully, a lot remains the same from the patented and delightful short-throw five-speed manual shifter (an automatic transmission is available), to the gorgeous, fruity tenor of the exhaust that warbles so sweetly off hills and tunnel walls as you flash through.

There is one engine, a 1.8-litre, twin-cylinder, 16-valve, 2000 cc, 160-hp, 1800 rpm, 1600 cc, 1600 rpm, 1600 cc, 1600 rpm.

See MIATA, page 20.

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