

Mazda Protege 2000

Mazda's pleasant Protege has been a major player in a pleasant turnaround at Mazda Canada. Back in 1994 Mazda was slashing models (323, MX-3, and RX-7) after slashing people and even their proposed luxury division called Amati. The reason was simple, the recession finally caught up with Mazda and its lineup of vehicles that were very much oriented to the sporting side of the spectrum.

Mazda dug deep, held on, and for 1999 they sold 41,279 cars - up 45 per cent over 1998. No other firm had a net sales increase like that in Canada. It was a true turnaround. Leading the charge was Protege with 25,147 units sold, making it one of the top ten best selling cars in Canada last year.

The Protege has actually been around for more than a decade. Stoutly built, Proteges also come with the Mazda warranty that remains one of the best in the business.

The last generation Protege was a standout to me. At a hair over \$14,000 the SE came with a roary 1.5-litre engine, a good 42 miles to the gallon, and space for five people. The back seat, instead of being a thin little plank, was actually wide enough for three adults to sit on. It was part of what Mazda called "Optispace" designed to carve out space where it didn't exist. The system worked and people started buying. So we come to the current generation that carries over all the attributes, but is improved in many ways.

The first improvement is the so-called Triple H chassis that uses three sets of H-shaped pairs of girders to make the safety cage for occupants. Added to this are side impact door beams, a catch pin on the rear door to keep it from opening, rear and front crumple zones, three-point belts for all five passengers, and dual power air bags are standard where they could be deleted in the previous entry model.

Optional three-channel anti-lock brakes on the SE and LX version adds in Electronic Brake Force Distribution that automatically controls brake distribution between the front and rear wheels according to the number of passengers, road conditions and speed.

Thanks to Optispace and more scooping out of door panels here and seat backs there, interior volume is 92.6 cu. ft. plus 12.9 cu. ft. of trunk space which is mid-size sedan country.

The Protege is available in three models. The entry level DX and the SE come with a 1.6-litre inline four-cylinder producing 105 hp and 107 lb. ft. of torque. The LX offers a 1.8-litre inline four making 122 hp and 120 lb. ft. of torque. A five-speed manual transmission is standard



and a four-speed automatic with lock-up torque converter is an option.

Don't think because the DX and SE have a 1.6 they are slow. Top speed of these cars with the five-speed is 178 kmh and 165 with the automatic. The manual hits 0-100 kmh in 11.4 seconds (automatic is 13.3 seconds) which ain't bad. The 1.8, by the way, hits 192 kmh with the five-speed and 175 with the autobox. The five-speed does 10.3 seconds from 0-100 kmh while the automatic posts 12.2 seconds.

Gas mileage remains very good. The DX/SE with five speed posts 8.5L/100 km (33 mpg) city and 6.7L/100 km (42 mpg) highway. The auto version of the 1.6 shows 9.3L/100 km (30 mpg) city, 6.9L/100 km (41 mpg) highway. The 1.8L five-speed is 8.9L/100 km (32 mpg) city and 6.7L/100 km (42 mpg) highway. The autobox recorded 7.2L/100 km (39 mpg) highway. The identical 42 mpg highway rating on both cars has been a big selling point.

MSRP for the DX is \$14,995, the SE is \$15,715, and the LX is

\$17,390.

All Proteges come with 14-inch wheels as opposed to the 13-inchers on the last generation entry SE model. Every Protege comes with power steering, front and rear stabilizer bars, rear seat heat duct (very important this time of year), body color bumpers, tilt steering wheel, intermittent wipers, low washer fluid warning light, adjustable front seatbelt anchors, and factory-installed children's seatbelt anchors (three) for the back seat.

The SE adds a tach and a stereo with four speakers, clock and CD player. You also get rear 60/40 split seats and a trunk light (don't knock it on a sub-zero night beside the highway looking for a jug of washer fluid).

There is also a 2000 Protege Touring Edition (\$19,300 as tested) with 15-inch alloy wheels, wider all-season radial tires, antilock brakes, power moon roof, map lights and rear spoiler. A lot of the sporting heritage Mazda engineered into the RX-7, MX-6, MX-3 and the current Miata have migrated into the Protege. Even with the 1.6-litre engine, it is quite a little handler with MacPherson independent front with sway bars while the rear suspension incorporates Mazda's patented Twin Trapezoidal Link like the MX-6 sports coupe. That results in an econobox with a roll rate of just two degrees in 0.5g of cornering. That's right in there with the BMW M3. The shocks have ultra-low speed valves that make the chassis absorb kinetic road inputs. That results in a more stable and flat platform for the driver.

It's hard to find much wrong with the Protege. Besides a somewhat rubbery feel to the five speed shifter and a very light clutch better suited to the Miata (probably from which it came) the Protege offers a lot of zip, a lot of room, and a lot of kilometres for the litre.

The only thing missing from the Protege sedan is a stablemate like the 323 Familia (what they call the Protege) Wagon sold in Japan. We can only hope.

(MAZDA PROTEGE 2000 AT A GLANCE)

BODY STYLE: Four-door sedan, front engine / front drive

ENGINE: 1.6-litre DOHC inline four-cylinder (105 hp, 107 lb/ft); 1.8-litre DOHC inline four-cylinder (122 hp, 120 lb/ft)

FUEL ECONOMY: 1.6-litre, five-speed, 8.5L/100 km (33 mpg) city, 6.7L/100 km (42 mpg) highway; 1.8L five-speed, 8.9L/100 km (32 mpg) city, 6.7L/100 km (42 mpg) highway.

PRICE: DX, \$19,995; SE, \$15,715; LX, \$17,390; Protege Touring Edition as tested \$19,300.



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