

Road beat: Miata keeps its quality for 25 years



Miata retains its appeal 25 years after its introduction.
Photos/Larry Weitzman

By Larry Weitzman

When the first Miata hit our shores in 1990, dealers were commanding price premiums of thousands of dollars. The rumor was they were only going to make 3,000. Yeah, sure. That was then and Miata production is now in its 25-year life with more than 900,000 built, the most produced two-seat sports car ever.

It is also the most raced brand ever. More Mazdas are raced every weekend than any other brand in the world, and the Miata is probably No. 1. One of the best Miata racers and preparer of Miata race cars, Mark Hoover, lives right here in El Dorado

County. His shop European Performance is based in Cameron Park . They are amazing cars that just don't die; offering perhaps the most bang for the buck than any other roadster.

Lately Miatas have been going a bit upscale coming with more bells and whistles and even a power retractable hardtop. My 2015 Miata was a Grand Touring edition, six-speed manual, with that very cool power retractable hardtop. It's a great addition while only adding about 82 pounds. With the manual, its avoirdupois is still only 2,593 pounds.



Specifications

Price \$24,515 to about \$33,000

Engine

2.0L DOHC, 16 valve inline four 167 hp at 7,000 rpm

140 lbs.-ft. of torque at 5,000 rpm

Redline 7,200 rpm

Transmission

Five speed manual

Six speed close ratio manual

Six speed automatic

Configuration

Longitudinal mounted front engine/rear wheel drive

Dimensions

Wheelbase 91.7 inches

Length 157.3 inches
Width 67.7 inches
Height 49.4 inches
Ground clearance 4.6 inches
Track (f/r) 58.7/58.9 inches
Weight 2,511/2,593 (PRHT)
pounds
Weight distribution (f/r)
51/49 percent
Fuel Capacity 12.7 gallons
Trunk Capacity 5.3 cubic
feet
Turning Circle 30.8 feet,
curb to curb
Steering lock to lock 2.7
turns
Wheels (std/opt) 16X6.5/17X7
inch alloys
Tires (std//opt)
205/50X16//205/45X17
Co-efficient of drag 0.32

Performance

0-60 6.53 seconds
50-70 3.72 seconds
50-70 uphill 5.48 seconds
Top Speed Electronically
limited to a speed with
which if the Miata had wings
it would fly
Fuel Economy EPA 21/28 mpg
city/highway. Expect 27-28
mpg in rural mix driving,
better than 34 mpg on the
highway at legal speeds.

Styling has changed little. The original shape from 1990 is retained, but some of the slightly swoopy lines are gone from

the later generations, but overall it still has a British feel and that is good. Coefficient of drag is decent at 0.32.

Miata also retains its miniscule size. Its wheelbase is only 92 inches with an overall length of just 157 inches. But it is relatively wide at almost 68 inches; meaning the track is also wide at 59 inches while standing only 49-inches tall.

Under the low hood, which has the Mazda symbol created in the metal, is an oversquare 2.0L inline four-cylinder powerhouse knocking down a 167 hp at 7,000 rpm (redline is a high 7,200 rpm) and 140 pounds of twist at a 5,000 rpm. But don't think that because it makes its power at higher rpms that this is a peaky engine, it's not. If anything, it has a flexible power curve allowing rpms to drop to 2,000 in sixth gear and still accelerate away without shifting the six-speeder snick-snick manual down a gear or three. In lower gears with 2,000 rpm on the clock acceleration is rather smart.

Quantifying the Miata's performance shows that maximum performance 0-60 mph run stop the chronodex in 6.53 seconds, almost exactly the numbers of most magazines and that's with two shifts. Using only third gear in 50-70 mph runs, the Miata on level ground will require 3.72 seconds and the same run up a 6-7 percent grade only slows that time to 5.48 seconds. In town it is easy to use fifth gear in traffic below 40 mph. It is a beautiful engine, smooth, powerful and flexible. If you don't like shifting, there is a six-speed automatic that is hooked up to the same engine with a revised power curve that makes 158 hp at 6,700, but it should give you very similar performance with a little less effort and fun.

EPA ratings show the Mazda may use some gas at 21/28/24 mpg in city/highway/combined driving. However Road Beat testing says otherwise. Highway testing reflected a 34.9 mpg average in a two way 70 mph run and overall in 300 plus miles the average fluctuated between 27.5 and 28.4 mpg. The worst fuel economy recorded was 22-24 mpg which was during the extensively

performance testing. Maybe the EPA did its test during a racetrack evaluation? Driven reasonably, it should do better than the EPA numbers. The secret is to short shift below 4,000 rpm and get into sixth gear at 45 mph when not driving aggressively.

Most drivers who buy a Miata do so because it is fun to drive as it has incredible handling. That was confirmed during testing. Instead of MacPherson struts up front, Miata gets a more expensive and sophisticated double wishbone set up as used in most race cars. Out back is a multilink system and Bilstein twin tube shocks are in all four corners. Even the steering is a hydraulic rack for added feel and feedback. Weight distribution is a perfect 51/49 percent front and rear. My tester had the \$800 upgraded suspension package which was set up a bit firmer, had those Bilsteins and a limited slip diff. Buy it if you can.

All of the above adds up to one of the best handling cars in production. It goes around corners as good or better than any car I ever driven with feedback that lets you know when you approach its limits, which are hard to reach. Pushed hard you can actually feel the Mazda rotate under complete control with perfect turn-in and feedback. It doesn't get much better. Even though the Miata has added some weight over the years, it hasn't disturbed its perfect handling.

Ride quality is firm. On smooth roads with mild undulations it is wonderful, but harsher bumps, dips and potholes are not nearly as forgiving. You won't break any teeth, but you will locate a road's gross imperfections better than a GPS which my tester didn't have. Even with the power solid hardtop and windows up, there is some road noise. Asphalt is quieter than concrete. The engine, which spins a rather quick 3,200 at 70 mph, is pretty quiet, although it has a nice bark from the duals when you are on the gas.



A two-seater with limited trunk space.

Braking is nearly instantaneous from the four wheel discs halting forward progress from 40 mph in about 37 feet. Miata comes with all the braking and safety acronyms (ABS, EBD, TCS, DSC, TPMS) and more. Being a power hardtop there are only four airbags (front and side) and may you never use them.

Inside is a very attractive interior. In my tester it was dark mocha heated leather and the seats were on the firm side, but supportive and comfortable. The instrument panel was wonderful, all business, everything you need nothing you don't (meaning big tach and speedo) and it even had a trip computer. Also wonderful was the vertical stack with easy to use controls for the HVAC and sound system. That is appreciated by real drivers. While the trunk is only 5.3 cubic feet, it is well shaped.

Pricing for an MX-5 Sport starts at \$23,720, a car that with a few mods you could track on Sunday and drive to work on Monday. My tester, the Grand Touring with a power hardtop, stickered for \$29,450, plus the boat from Japan (\$795). It also had besides the aforementioned suspension package, the premium package that added keyless entry, xenon headlights, bluetooth, theft and more (\$1,300). With a couple of other items the total sticker shock was \$32,935. The base Sport model looks mighty inviting, but if you want things like cruise, power locks and some other upgrades opt for the Club at about \$3K more than the Sport.

Larry Weitzman has been into cars since he was 5 years old. At 8 he could recite from memory the hp of every car made in the U.S. He has put in thousands of laps on racetracks all over the Western United States.