

Road beat: Mirage gas mileage is impressive



The Mirage would make for a great commuter car. Photos/Larry Weitzman

By Larry Weitzman

Let's get one thing straight from the beginning, the Mitsubishi Mirage makes gas stations a mere mirage as it is the highest mileage conventional car for sale in the United States. EPA rates the Mirage at 37/44/40 mpg and in fact it did a bit better in my testing. It also has one of the lowest acquisition costs of any new car for sale in the U.S., with a starting MSRP of \$12,995.

And no, that doesn't mean that the front seats are recycled orange crates. That price includes niceties such as keyless

entry and power windows, locks and mirrors. Even seven airbags, ABS, a vehicle stability system, traction control, TPMS and a lot more are also standard. It is a well equipped car.

Mirage is a small car, a rounded two-box design to maximize its space efficiency. While devoid of lots of complex lines, the Mirage has a pleasant, softly rounded simple modern look with decent proportions. The sloping top line adds a dash of sport. It rides on a long 96.5-inch wheelbase, while its length is only 148.8 inches, making it about a hand longer than 12 feet. A Mini Cooper is slightly longer. Width is relatively wide at 66 inches while standing tall at 59 inches, dimensions almost fitting of a small SUV.



Specifications

Price

Engine 1193 cc DOHC 12 valve
inline three cylinder 74 hp
@ 6,000

74 lb.-ft. of torque @ 4,000

Transmission

Five speed manual

CVT automatic

Configuration Transverse
front engine/front wheel
drive

Dimensions

Wheelbase 96.5 inches

Length 148.6 inches
Width 65.6 inches
Height 59.4 inches
Ground Clearance 6.3 inches
Track (f/r) 56.3/56.7 inches
Fuel capacity 9.2 gallons
Trunk capacity rear seats
up/down 17.2/47.0 cubic feet
Tires 165/65/14
Turning circle 32.1 feet
Weight (ES CVT) 2,051 pounds

Performance

0-60 mph 10.52 seconds
50-70 mph 5.87 seconds
50-70 mph uphill (6%) 12.89
seconds
Top speed beyond sanity
Fuel economy EPA rated
37/44/40 mpg
city/highway/combined Expect
about 40-41 mpg in rural
county driving; 44-45 on the
highway at legal speeds

Under the short hood is unique three-cylinder long stroking DOHC, 12 valve 1,200 cc engine (1.2 liters) cranking out all of 74 horses at 6,000 rpm and an equal amount of torque at 4,000 rpm. The rule of thumb for estimating an engine's torque production is a pound per cubic inch. The 1,200 cc Mirage engine equates to about 74 cubes, the exact peak torque number for the Mirage. But remember the engine only has to deal with 2,051 pounds. Still not exactly a powerhouse as my Kawasaki ZRX motorcycle has 1,200 ccs in four cylinders and makes about 125 hp (at 10,000 rpm). Weighing 535 pounds the Kawi has the edge on performance. More on that later.

Power is transferred to the front wheels via a CVT tranny. A

five-speed manual is standard.

Performance is about as you would expect in that this vehicle wasn't designed with NASA in mind unless earthbound NASA employees wanted to save gas. Zero-60 mph times averaged 10.52 seconds which is about two seconds quicker than a 1955 Chevy V-8, a car once thought to be sort of a hot rod. Simulated passing times from 50-70 mph on a level road averaged 5.87 seconds and up a steep grade (6 percent) that time slows to 12.89 seconds. During a trip to South Lake Tahoe up Highway 50 I was able to make several passes in the many passing zones during the uphill climb; just do a little planning. For most people, especially flatlanders, the performance is more than adequate.

Throttle response is good, but one thing I noticed is the tranny keeps the rpms between 5,200 and 5,600 rpm during maximum performance which restricts hp by perhaps a few ponies. When you ask for flank speed the computer that controls the tranny should allow max hp which is 6,000 rpm. When you are at 6,000-7,000 feet and are already down 20 percent on max power an extra 5-7 hp would be nice.

Now to the raison d'être for the Mirage, fuel economy. You already know the EPA numbers, but what is it like in real life. The Mirage averaged 41 mpg in 350 miles of driving with only 20 miles on a level freeway during highway mileage testing when the Mirage averaged 44-45 mpg, about equal to your average small hybrid. In that 150-mile roundtrip from Rescue to South Lake Tahoe and back where speeds averaged about 60 mph even up the Western Slope, the Mirage averaged about 45.2 mpg. Remember that Kawasaki ZRX1200 motorcycle? It averaged about the same mpg during the same trip averaging the same speeds. While the Mirage engine spins a low 2,300 rpm at 70 mph, that Kawasaki spins about 3,800 at the same speed.

Mirage achieved the highest fuel economy numbers of any conventional car tested by the Road Beat (about 850 cars) and

even beat most hybrids tested except for some later model Priuses. The Mirage not only outperformed the hybrid Honda Insight in acceleration, it returned overall better fuel economy by a couple mpg (Insight was tested in 2010).

Mirage's biggest handling asset is that it is lightweight. Light cars change directions easier than heavier cars all else being equal. Suspension is a state of the art MacPherson strut up front plus a semi-independent torsion beam in the rear, pretty standard for most compact cars and smaller. Wheels and tires are rather small at 14 inches with 165/65 rubber. I've seen bigger glazed doughnuts. Actually, 14-inch wheels and tires were standard on most 1957 and later U.S. made cars for about 10-15 years. That means most full size GM, Ford and Chrysler products, like Chevy Impalas, Ford Crown Vics and Plymouth Furies. Even my 1972 Camaro SS came with 14 inch/70 series wheels and tires.

Handling because of its size, weight and front and rear track of 56 inches is nimble up to about seven-tenths cornering. Yes, there is some body roll, tire squirm and understeer going into a slight oversteer, but unless pushed beyond eight-tenths, drivers will say the Mirage is nimble. If you want more, spend \$10K more for a Mini, lose a good 5-7 mpg plus the Mirage's 100,000-mile powertrain warranty. Wall-to-wall turning circle is a dime sized 32 feet. Steering had excellent on center feel as if it were locked on a target. It is fun to drive.

You might think a small car like the Mirage would have a choppy ride and find every expansion joint on the freeway. But that is not the Mirage. It rides like most every good quality compact car, smooth on the highway and it can smooth out more severe road punishment. It really surprised me. About the only complaint is a bit of road noise on rougher surfaces, but going down the highway at 70 mph is a pleasure, smooth and reasonably quiet. Even the engine is unobtrusive.

And safety is not compromised as the front disc/rear drum brakes stop the Mirage in 41 feet from 40 mph, one foot off the benchmark 40 feet. Seven airbags are standard as well as all the safety acronyms. A buffet of safety.

Now to the inside. It's purposeful with a simple binnacle dash with a large speedo and smaller tach plus digital readouts for fuel, fuel economy, trip meters and alike. In the ES model, entry is push button as is the start, no key necessary but the fob in your pocket. Seats are done in an upscale cloth and are comfortable. I spent nearly two hours each way to Tahoe with no fatigue and good support. And the back seat is amazing considering how small this car is. It is comfortable for two good sized adults.

With the rear seats up there is 17 cubic feet of cargo capacity. Fold the seats flat and cargo volume expands to 47 cubic feet which is close to the size of a compact SUV. Mirage has one small issue; it only has a 9.2-gallon gas tank. Another half a cubic foot would give it 13 gallons and much more convenience.

While pricing starts at a fin below \$13,000 plus \$810 for the boat from Thailand, my loaded tester stickered at \$15,395 plus \$900 for the trick NAV system and backup camera plus destination. Even Bluetooth is standard. Mirage is inexpensive to buy, inexpensive to run and really inexpensive to maintain, never mind that five-year 60,000 mile bumper to bumper warranty plus Mirage's 10-year 100,000-mile powertrain warranty. Even the tires for this Mirage are inexpensive, more than a large glazed doughnut, but probably about a quarter of the price of a full-size car or truck tire.

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.