

# Road beat: Miata good on twisties, not for commuting



The latest Miata returns to its roots with design and handling. Photos/Larry Weitzman

**By Larry Weitzman and Mitchell Weitzman**

It's hard to believe the Miata has been with us for nearly 30 years. The British-inspired Japanese icon started a revolution in motoring, bringing back raw, driving thrills in a small, lightweight, and most important, affordable package.

Not everyone is a fan of the Miata, it must be said. While some can't get over its image or lack of power compared to Miatas past, it's always been respected for its stubbornness to die off. Just when you think the Miata is finished, it gets reinvented again. The new Miata is, quite simply, the best ever and total production for this fourth generation should

pass 1 million total production. Additionally, Miatas have become the most raced car in the world with more than 5,000 competing, most of them here in the United States.



### **Specifications**

Price \$24,915 to about \$33,000 plus \$820 for the boat from Hiroshima, Japan

### **Engine**

2.0L inline four cylinder DOHC, 16 valves 155 hp @ 6,000 rpm

148 lb.-ft. of torque @ 4,600 rpm

### **Transmission**

Six-speed manual

Six-speed torque converter automatic

### **Configuration**

Longitudinal front engine/rear wheel drive

### **Dimensions**

Wheelbase 90.9 inches

Length 154.1 inches

Width 68.3 inches

Height (17 inch wheels) 48.8 inches

Ground Clearance (17 inch

wheels) 5.32 inches  
Track (f/r) 58.9/59.2 inches  
Fuel Capacity 11.9 gallons  
Truck volume 4.6 cubic feet  
Turning circle (wall to wall) 32.9 feet  
Steering lock to lock 2.7 turns  
Wheels (std/opt) 16X6.5/17X7 inches  
Tires (std//opt) 195/50X16//205/45X17  
Weight 2,332 pounds  
Weight distribution (f/r) 53/47 percent

### **Performance**

0-60 mph 5.75 seconds  
50-70 mph 3.42 seconds (3rd gear)  
50-70 up hill (6%) 4.55 seconds  
Top Speed Estimate 140 plus mph (have ear plugs)  
Fuel economy EPA rated 27/34/30 mpg city/highway/combined.  
Estimate 30-32 mpg in suburban driving, 35 mpg in rural driving and 37-38 mpg at 70 mph on level ground.

Surely, you must think, after having the aging period of a \$1,000 bottle of Scotch, it must be good. Truth is the Miata started off life as brilliant and then faded to the ranks of good in the midst of its own mid-life crisis, gaining weight and betraying the principles of the original. Luckily, that mid-life crisis has been resolved, as the 2016 has lost its

beer belly and updated its wardrobe. It's also taken dance lessons. So, yes, nearly 30 years has made it the Miata of Miatas.

So, you want some specs then? Try this: trim the weight several hundred pounds down to a lithe 2,300, add a compelling, Skyactiv, small-capacity (2.0) four-cylinder producing 155 HP at a low 6,000 rpm plus 148 pounds of twist at 4,600 rpm, a NASA-precise 6-speed manual, and you get 0-60 in just 5.8 seconds. For the record, the original took about 9 for the same sprint.

Essentially this is the same engine used in the Mazda 3, CX-3 and CX-5. And it is super high tech using direct injection, a sky-high 13:1 compression plus variable valve timing that allows the engine during low loads run as an Atkinson cycle.

But power isn't everything. This new Miata sips fuel. Rated at 27/34/30, fuel economy is up by 20 percent. Overall, we averaged 35 mpg and 37-38 mpg at 70 mph on the highway. That is almost the same as the super economical Mazda 3 (the 3 returned over 40 mpg on the highway). Brakes are also benchmark stopping the Miata in just 36 feet from 40 mph.

The rear-wheel drive chassis is Nobel Prize winning exhibit in physics and feedback. Climb down into the new, improved cabin featuring far better materials, position yourself firmly in the tight hugging seat with your hands on the finely wrapped wheel and it's as if you're connecting your brain and body into the car. All the motions are just that: telepathic. The steering, though now electrically assisted, has real feel and precision and is a quick 2.7 turns lock to lock. Possibly the best EPAS system I've tried yet, and far outshining those found on modern BMWs.

Positioned in the center console is a snick-snick 6-speed butter smooth manual. A purist might think driving a car like this with an automatic would render you a heretic. If you have

a bad hip, sure, but otherwise get the manual. The way the gear lever passes through each gate into gear is a real thing of beauty. Like a blacksmith forging a sword for a samurai, it's an art that must not be forgotten.

Speaking of swords and samurai, the whole car looks like it's shaped by one. Sharp creases sliced down the front and rear flanks with a chiseled front end. Did I mention it's the best-looking Miata to date as well? It's a design that oozes star quality and a premium price; such are the intricacies of the design used. Italians take note.

Back on the road though, this is what the thrill of driving is supposed to be. With the top down, wind rustling quietly beside you and exposed to the outside of the world, it feels as one with the road. And while we're at it, though the top is manual, it can be put up or down in 5 seconds or less each way, it's that easy. It also helps make this car as light as it is.

Wind up the motor, go through the gears, hit a few apexes and it's startling to think that some people don't like Miatas. They clearly need to drive this one. Though not a 300 hp powerhouse, this trick four-banger revs eagerly through each of its six short gears with amazing flexibility as it pulls smartly from 1,500-2,000 rpm in the first four gears. Even on sweeping 50 MPH mountain roads it never leaves you wanting for more power. Third gear rocks.



The two-seater even has some

truck space.

Seeing a sign for a 15 mph hairpin clearly illustrates that, as throwing it into second gear allows for easy, deliberate over steer on corner exit, courtesy of the 205/45X17 summer rubber that permits this level of exuberance. What was more surprising was on a left-hander taken at 60, 25 over the posted recommendation. Nearing the exit, aim the nose toward the apex and instantly the back end gave up, requiring a “dab of oppo” and you are on your way again with the power down.

The power doesn't overcook the tires, but rather the chassis itself broke into a beautiful slide of over steer at the limits of its handling. This is good news and I'll tell you why. Today, too many cars have too large of tires in the pursuit of ultimate grip. Grip is good; grip is safe. But grip isn't always fun. Here's the Miata, showing that smaller tires matched with supreme balance is the most fun way around a corner. Because you don't have to be going a million miles per hour to push boundaries where things really start to go silly. All of the handling depictions above were performed with the TCS and DSC switched off. If on, the systems intercede with the fun.

So, it's perfect then? No, not quite. Through 50 miles of winding country and mountain roads it was supremely sublime. But following that up the next day with 200 miles of freeway driving and the memories of sliding quickly fade. With the roof up and at highway speeds (70 mph plus), the noise can be intrusive. It's might be improved with the top down. Conversations have to be held at higher than normal volumes and the stereo must be turned up halfway for it to be heard, but by then the road noise and music make for a very tiring experience. The seats momma-bear hug that was so welcome before becomes too tight as well. A GT car this is not. The sat-nav and infotainment system is far from the best. And in time of trouble having missed an exit, I found using my phone

for an alternate route was easier than trying to make the nav comply.

A base Sport model stickers for \$24,915 plus \$820 for the boat from Japan. The high end Club Miata lists at \$28,600 with its state of the art Bilstein suspension. The Brembo/BBS package adds \$3,400 and includes Brembo brakes (calipers and rotors) and gorgeous 17X7 inch wheels pushing the price with the boat ride close to \$33 large. That's a bit more than another driver's tool known as the FR-S/BRZ, which also require a hacksaw to take the top off. A base Miata is a couple of grand less and you don't have to buy a hacksaw. However, the go-faster bits are great on the Club such as the hard-stopping Brembo front brakes, but the creature comforts such as the infotainment system can be passed over. The cheapest Miata is the Miata to have. The price of my tester betrays its core value too, of being affordable.

Confusing verdict? Yes, slightly. The new Miata on a good road is an experience worthy of a bucket-list. But at high cruising speeds its lack of comfort is exposed. For those looking for raw, open-top motoring thrills look no further. But if looking for a commuter, I would suggest elsewhere, unless your commute includes Wentworth Springs Road. Don't get me wrong, we loved driving the new Miata. Just be sure to take the twisty route to work.

*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. Mitchell Weitzman has been around cars most of his life, and has hundreds of hours of lap track experience. He is a recent graduate of UC Santa Barbara, with a degree in English.*