

Road Beat: Miata MX-5 RF, a true sports car



The MX-5 Miata will not disappoint. Photos/Larry Weitzman

By Larry Weitzman

Mazda's new fourth generation MX-5 Miata combines tradition with the contemporary. Tradition in the sense of a raw sports car of yesteryear and contemporary in the sense of being built with high tech, state of the art components wrapped in a chiseled, sensuous body as if carved by a Samurai sword.

While rippling with bulging muscles and deeply flared fenders, its flanks are sharply trimmed and defined. It is the best Miata design yet in the KODO-Soul in Motion design philosophy of Mazda which has brought us the best looking compact car in the Mazda 3 and mid-size car in the Mazda 6. If it were produced, the RX-9 would blow people's minds.

My RF (retractable fastback) model is more targa top than open air convertible as the flying buttresses won't come down without a hacksaw. The power top system and extra metal adds about 100 pounds.

Going back to its traditional roots, the new Miata is trimmer and a bit smaller paring weight by nearly 150 pounds, only sacrificing mass, but not safety, structure and/or ability. Riding on a 91-inch wheelbase the Miata stretches out less than 13 feet at 154 inches while width is a trim 68 inches. It stands an inch over four feet.



Specifications

Price \$24,915 to about \$34,000

Engine

2.0L DOHC, 16 valve, direct injected inline four 155 hp @ 6,000 rpm

148 lbs.-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
Weight 68.3 inches
Height 49.0 inches
Track (f/r) 58.9/59.2 inches
Ground clearance 5.32 inches
Weight 2,485 pounds
(RF/automatic)
GVWR 2,892 (RF/automatic)
Fuel capacity 11.89 gallons
Trunk capacity 4.48 cubic
feet
Wheels 17X7 inch alloys
Tires 205/45X17
Steering 2.7 turns lock to
lock
Turning circle (wall to
wall) 32.9 feet

Performance

0-60 mph 7.08 seconds
50-70 mph 3.48 seconds
50-70 mph uphill 5.54
seconds
Top speed plenty fast
Fuel economy EPA rated
26/35/29 mpg
city/highway/combined.
Expect 33-34 mpg in rural
country driving. 44 mpg on
the highway at legal speeds.

Powering the new Miata is Mazda's Skyactiv 2.0L inline four used in many of its other models. Stomping out 155 hp at 6,000 rpm and 148 pounds of twist at 4,600 rpm, this somewhat long stroker is still a screamer, red lining and pulling strong to 6,800 rpm. But instead of the "mandatory" manual, my ride was outfitted with their quick paddle shifting automatic which

adds 150 pounds along with the RF model and its 13 second folding power top over the base convertible.

Acceleration quickness with the auto cog swapper is slightly reduced, not only from the extra few pounds but more important, taller gear ratios. Consequently 0-60 mph times go from 5.75 seconds to 7.08 seconds. Passing times are less changed with a level 50-70 mph run taking 3.48 second, almost identical to the manual but climbing a grade that time slows to 5.54 seconds, an excellent time but a second slower than the manual as well.

But don't give up on the auto just because it's a second slower to 60 mph, it feels great and responsive, better than the performance times reflect. In actuality this Miata is still very quick equaling the manual in level passing and is easier to drive than the manual system. With the paddles or the floor shifter, it responds lightning quick and holds the gear selected and will not downshift or upshift under throttle pressure like other "manual autos," a great feature.

Most of the performance differences are due to the taller gearing of the automatic. The auto turns just 2000 rpm at 70 mph while the manual spins the engine at 2,900 rpm. That translates to improved fuel economy. At 70 mph in a two-way run the auto averaged 43.9 mpg a six-mpg improvement over the manual. In most situations, less rpm means improved fuel economy. In my Highway 50 run to Carson City and back, Miata averaged an excellent 38.7 mpg, better than most economy cars. The EPA rates the Miata auto at 26/35/29 mpg city/highway/combined although my fuel economy for 400 miles of mostly hilly, rural driving averaged 35.4 mpg. With only 11.9 gallons of max fuel, range is over 400 miles, probably most drivers' limits anyway.

Miata's forte is when the road bends. Most every car can go straight, but changing directions is where we separate the men from the boys and in the Miata's case, it's about the biggest

guy on the block and probably the neighborhood. In racing circles, more people race Miatas by huge numbers and one of the biggest winners lives right here in El Dorado County, Marc Hoover. His car, a race prepared Miata.

Having incredible credentials makes Miata what it is. Trick double wishbones up front and a multilink system in the rear with a stiff backbone frame. Track is a wide 59 inches and the electric power steering rack is a perfect 2.7 turns lock to lock while turning circle is a scant 33 feet, wall to wall. Not overtiring the car (205/45 rubber on 17X7 alloys) gives the Miata a playful attitude, still requiring driver skill and attention. You can rotate the car with throttle getting into a bit of oversteer and then use a "dab of oppo" all with total control and a huge smile on your face. This is what driving is all about and with the Miata's ability to communicate, it's almost telepathy. It doesn't get any better.

Ride quality is firm, not harsh mind you, but a muted, firm and very well controlled. Attitude remains pancake flat while noise is somewhat quiet, even with the top down. The tires do make some noise, especially on coarse surfaces.

Safety was all there including blind stop detection and lane departure warning. Miata's four wheel discs (front ventilated) are astounding, arresting forward progress in 36 feet from 40 mph. Of course, all the acronyms are standard. LED headlights are excellent as well.

Miata's new generation is a travel light interior. Seats are bathed in leather and offer great support and comfort. There are cupholders but must be attached to the inside kick panels. The good news is once attached they are located conveniently. There is no glove box, the center console is tiny and the rear vertical storage glove box between the seats requires a contortionist to access once seated. The trunk is limited to $4\frac{1}{2}$ cubic feet.

Instrumentation is lean and mean with a big tach and speedo plus an info center which includes a full trip computer and above the center stack is even more relevant info on the radio/nav screen. The system is easy to use but requires several steps with the center control knob, sort of like a mouse. But there probably isn't room for all the buttons and knobs that would be required otherwise. Considering the limited space, Mazda's system gets it done and works well.

Pricing for the new Miata RF starts at \$31,555 for a Club manual to \$33,825 for the Grand Touring Automatic. Everything else was standard including the seven-inch color touch screen. It was loaded, only the special paint called machine gray metallic was an extra \$300 bucks plus the \$835 for the boat from Hiroshima, Japan. It's the ultimate sports car for the buck.

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.