

Mazda MX-5 RF First Impressions (and a little bit of history...)

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the latest in a long line of impressive Mazda MX-5 models, in the elegant and eye-catching shape of the latest 'RF' or 'Retractable Fastback' version.

(All words and photographs by Kim, except single image of roof half-open, from Mazda).

First introduced 27 years ago, Mazda's MX-5 model has long been renowned as one of the best two seater sports cars in the world. It has certainly been a world beater in terms of



production longevity, long-term reliability, cost-effectiveness and ownership pleasure. It has also done wonders for the company, becoming the best-selling two seater convertible in the world - ever!

At a time when British Leyland and other sports car makers were stepping back from the challenges (admittedly daunting) of producing an up-to-date sportster which would be fun to drive yet would also comply with increasingly tough emissions legislation (etc.), Mazda saw a brilliant opportunity and took it. The original MX-5 of 1990 (and every version since) has been hailed as THE sports car that other manufacturers should have produced - if only they had been able to take the chance during the 1980s...

At the recent press launch of the RF, Jeremy Thompson, Managing Director Mazda UK, told motoring writers, 'Since 1990 more than 120,000 MX-5s have been sold in the UK... and during those 27 years it is estimated that half a million people in Britain have owned one'.

Just over 10 years ago I was privileged to attend the U.K. launch in the north of Scotland of the Roadster Coupé (a folding 'metal' hardtop version), so I was delighted to be offered the chance to test-drive the latest RF version this month, in Devon.

Interest in two seaters with retractable 'hard top' roof systems seems to be increasing (not least because of security, weatherproofing and refinement issues), and Mazda is no exception to this trend, with demand rising for the previous version (third generation) of the MX-5 so equipped.

So, joining the already widely acclaimed latest (fourth generation) versions of the MX-5 two seater convertibles, the new RF variants feature fastback styling and a cleverly-engineered retractable hardtop that opens and closes at the touch of a button (and even when driving - at up to 6 mph). With the exception of a tiny increase (5mm or about one fifth of an inch) in roof height, compared with the Convertible, the new car has the same external dimensions.

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The hardtop assembly incorporates three roof sections - front, middle and rear - plus a rear screen. When the top is open, the forward and centre overhead panels 'disappear' and are stowed together, while the rear window glass is automatically lowered and positioned behind the seats. The rear section of the roof remains in position, so that occupants benefit from open air motoring, yet also have the feeling of a more sturdy/secure bodywork set-up than is the case with a conventional open top car.



Photo courtesy Mazda.

The sophisticated roof system, unique to the RF, has no detrimental impact on available boot space, compared with the normal Convertible MX-5 models.

Features that I find fascinating about the RF's construction are the use of aluminium (light



in weight but strong) for the centre section of the roof, plus the adoption of sheet moulded plastic for the distinctive rear 'buttresses' on either side of the body, towards the rear of the cockpit. The overall set-up of the retractable roof assembly is designed to minimise wind buffeting too.

The way that the roof operates to be opened or closed when the button is pushed is, to me, a bit like automotive poetry in motion. Within a few seconds the precision-designed and exquisitely-engineered support arms and multiple pivots spring near-silently to life and the roof set-up moves to the required position. Wonderful!

Of course, Mazda has a long and proud history in terms of sporting hardtop Coupé models that have a reputation for being visually appealing and great to drive. Going back nearly half a century, the attractive Cosmo, dating from 1968, still looks superb, and it was innovative for its time in being powered by a low-mounted rotary (Wankel) engine, which helped endow the car with a low centre of gravity for impressive handling.

The RX7 was another legendary rotary-powered Mazda coupé, and the model came to eminence in the 1970s (with Mazda UK commencing imports in the late 1960s). Successes in the British Touring Car Championship in 1981 and 1982, plus in the Spa 24 hours event, and at other important races in the USA and Canada, also in Australia, all helped to ensure increased public interest in the model.

There followed the stylish MX-6 of 1987 (imported to the UK from 1992; Ford's Probe used the same platform), also the MX-3, powered by a 1.6 litre in-line four cylinder engine, or a 1.8 litre V6 unit - said to be the smallest automotive V6 motor in the world.

Three versions of the new RF are available (with the first of the newcomers going on sale from 4th March 2017), starting with the SE-L Nav model, offered with a 131 PS 1.5 litre engine, or a 160 PS 2.0 litre unit. Among many goodies, standard kit includes climate control air conditioning, an integrated satellite navigation system, and LED headlamps. Prices start at £22,195. The 160 PS version, costing £23,095, also incorporates a limited slip



differential, larger diameter 'Gunmetal' aluminium alloy wheels (17 inch instead of 16 inch types) and 'Piano Black' door mirrors.

The more luxurious Sport Nav (from £25,695) offers buyers such additional niceties as heated, leather-trimmed seats, rain-sensing screen wipers and dusk-sensing headlamps, a Premium Bose sound system, smart keyless entry and many more features. The 2.0 litre version is also equipped with Bilstein sports suspension and a strut brace, plus 17 inch bright sports aluminium alloy wheels.

Apart from the very special 'Launch Edition' (more of which below), the range topper will be the Sport Nav model, and it is expected that 29 per cent of buyers will opt for this version.

Customers preferring automatic transmission can specify this (for the first time in the current MX-5 line-up) in conjunction with the Sport Nav trim level and the 2.0 litre engine. It is expected that the six speed auto version, priced at £27,095, will account for around 15 per cent of RF sales.

With a limited run of just 500 examples, the 'Launch Edition', powered by the 160 PS 2.0 litre engine, is (in my opinion) bound to be regarded in the future as a classic of its time. Among other items, the specification list includes the uprated suspension of the 2.0 litre Sport Nav model, plus Recaro seats, alcantara trim, 17 inch BBS wheels, a two tone roof (with a Piano Black finish contrasting with the vehicle's main body colour), a Safety Pack and metallic paintwork ('Soul Red' or 'Machine Grey').

This version costs £28,995. Interestingly, when the original MX-5 was launched 27 years ago in the UK, it was priced at £14,250, representing £34,000 today...

Compared with the 'normal' convertible versions of the MX-5, the RF variants feature suspension and electrically-operated power steering set-ups specifically tuned for the RF. In addition, the front and centre roof sections incorporate sound-deadening, and the rear wheel housings have also been treated to minimise noise intrusion.



It is said that Mazda's unique 'TAKUMINURI' paint finish process imparts 'glossy depth and nuanced shading' that intensifies the contrasts between light and shading. Okay... on all the examples I looked at closely, I just thought that it represented a superb, flawless, beautiful paint finish!

Mechanical Sophistication...

Both the 1.5 litre and 2.0 litre petrol engines used in the RF are Mazda 'SKYACTIV-G' in-line four cylinder units, enhanced for application in the MX-5s. The 1.5 litre unit features lighter and more compact inlet and exhaust systems, to provide better performance and enhanced sounds, plus a special steel crankshaft and modified cam timing. The net result is a motor that provides more power than those used in the Mazda2 and Mazda3, and which will readily rev to over 7,000 rpm. It is said to deliver more power and performance than the previous 'Mark 3' 1.8 litre MX-5, with improved emissions and fuel consumption.



The 2.0 litre unit was developed with low and mid-range torque in mind, and compared with the previous MX-5 RHT's MZR 2.0 litre motor, the new engine is 8 kg (17.6 lb) lighter, more torquey, provides faster acceleration and is more economical to operate. Unseen within the new motor are a lighter crankshaft and a lighter flywheel, with built-in enhancements similar to those applicable to the 1.5 litre engine.

The MX-5 retains its front engine (longitudinally-mounted) and rear wheel drive layout, with power being delivered via a six speed manual gearbox (lighter than in the previous MX-5) and a revised final drive unit that is smaller than hitherto. Clutch pedal weighting/movement is said to have been amended to enhance driving satisfaction too.



Space-saving electrically-operated power steering is employed, and the set-up has been modified to enhance feedback and 'feel'.

The RF's platform and suspension, steering and braking systems are similar to those of the Convertible, but the 'chassis' incorporates additional bracing to aid front to rear stiffness, also the engine mounts have been amended and the rear suspension towers reinforced. The new cars are necessarily a little heavier than the Convertibles (40 kg or 88 lb in the case of the 1.5 models, 45 kg or 99 lb for the 2.0 litre models), but Mazda says that in building the RF versions it retains the company's renowned emphasis on lightness for its models.

On the Road

I was able to drive two versions of the new MX-5 RF over a very wide cross-section of types of road and in varying traffic situations, around the beautiful county of Devon, which was bathed in winter sunshine after some heavy rain. The long and very useful test drives included motorway driving, country lanes and twisting B roads, and included some challenging conditions which, apart from dry tarmac on main routes, included rain-soaked/mud-covered, rutted side roads and meandering moorland by-ways. I was able to sample cars fitted with both the 1.5 litre and 2.0 litre engines; both feature identical gearing.



I first took to the wheel of a 160 PS 2.0 litre Sport Nav model, with a price tag of £25,695, and was immediately impressed by the car's comfortable, smart, beautifully-detailed cockpit and the willingness of the 2.0 litre engine. I particularly liked its strong pulling power at low engine speeds, helping to make the car a delight to drive in traffic or - especially - on the open road and on hilly/twisting routes.

The six speed manual gearbox was, quite simply, first class - with a light, slick gearchange requiring just short, near-effortless movements of the lever.

At 60 mph in sixth (top) gear, the tacho needle in the car I tried was indicating 1,800 rpm, and progress was smooth and quiet.



The ride quality was surprisingly compliant, yet the car handled well too; the steering felt perfectly balanced, the Mazda held its line on tight bends (even in slippery conditions) and the brakes were excellent - highly effective without feeling over-sensitive.

Above all the car felt responsive in every way to driver input, and this writer found it rewarding and great fun to drive. It was the perfect vehicle too for hood-down cruising across Dartmoor on a sunlit winter's afternoon...

I liked the supportive and comfortable seats, the clear instrumentation, and the reasonably large (for a two seater) boot - accommodating weekend luggage for two should be no problem (although I was disappointed that there are few spaces for stowage within the cockpit - not even a glovebox is provided). I also thought that the special 17 inch bright aluminium alloy wheels fitted to this version looked superb.



I was impressed by the crystal-clear instrumentation and the way that the controls were set up with intuitive ease of use in mind. For example, rather than integrating most operations into a touch screen system, as with some of today's cars, Mazda has provided separate controls for the heating and sound systems... Personally I feel that this is easier, better and safer (especially for drivers new to the vehicle) than having to decipher how a particular touch screen system works, and to find the appropriate menu in order to vary settings. Similarly I was pleased to see that a conventional manually-operated handbrake lever was retained for the latest MX-5; simple, positive and unmistakable in action!



I also sampled the 131 PS 1.5 litre Sport Nav version, again over a wide variety of Devon roads with many different types of surface.



Priced at £24,795 this MX-5 RF was also similarly and heavily loaded with standard equipment and, as with the larger-engined car, I enjoyed its comfort, its positive road manners and its eagerness to perform.

By contrast with the 2.0 litre car that I had tried first, I found that the 1.5 litre version required higher revs to perform at its best. Not that this is a problem, but with maximum torque output of just and exactly three-quarters that of the 2.0 litre car (150 Nm or 111 lb.ft rather than 200 Nm or 148 lb.ft), and delivered at higher revs (4,800 rpm instead of 4,600 rpm with the 2.0 litre engine), I found it necessary to keep the motor spinning at higher rpm to gain optimum momentum when tackling steep gradients, overtaking etc.



That said, the 1.5 litre car likes revs and is a very capable and willing performer, and I found it was a joy to drive over the circuitous test route through Devon. Unsurprisingly, it is also more economical on fuel than the 2.0 litre model. Official 'Combined' figures indicate 40.9 mpg for the 2.0 litre, and 46.3 mpg for the 1.5 litre models respectively. During my test drives, in each case readouts for overall consumption shown on the on-board information display were not far short of these figures.

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VERDICT

Brilliant.

Whichever version is chosen, the MX-5 RF is a thoroughly competent, fun to drive true sports car. It's very cleverly styled - and in an age of conformity the MX-5 RF manages to dare to be different, and, like me, fellow writers also commented favourably on the car's looks - from the front, side or rear, and with the roof open or closed.

Performance levels are impressive and both versions I tried were comfortable and refined too. However, importantly they both retain the feel of a sports car, but with the added



sophistication of a hard top roof when desired.

Not-so-good points? It's difficult for me to find anything to carp about, but I feel that It's a pity there is not more stowage space within the vehicle; that's about it.



Wheels-Alive Tech. Spec. in Brief:

Mazda MX-5 RF



2.0 160 PS Sport Nav

Price: £25,695.

Engine: 1998 cc 16 valve four cylinder SKYACTIV-G petrol, 160 PS @ 6,000 rpm; 200 Nm (148 lb.ft) torque @ 4,600 rpm.

Transmission: Six speed manual gearbox; rear wheel drive.

Performance:

0-62 mph: 7.4 seconds.

Top speed: 134 mph.

Emissions: Euro VI compliant. CO 161 g/km.

Fuel consumption (Official 'Combined'): 40.9 mpg.

1.5 131 PS Sport Nav

Price: £24,795.

Engine: 1496 cc 16 valve four cylinder SKYACTIV-G petrol, 131 PS @ 7,000 rpm; 150 Nm (111 lb.ft) torque @ 4,800 rpm.

Transmission: Six speed manual gearbox; rear wheel drive.

Performance:

0-62 mph: 8.6 seconds.

Top speed: 126 mph.



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Emissions: Euro VI compliant. CO 142 g/km.

Fuel consumption (Official 'Combined'): 46.3 mpg.