Mazda MX-5 RF Road Test

Published: May 18, 2017

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Online version: https://www.wheels-alive.co.uk/mazda-mx-5-rf-road-test/



Keith Ward test drives Mazda's latest MX-5 with a retractable roof...

SUMMER ahoy and here is the latest version of what has long been billed, virtue of its rave reputation in the huge market of the USA, the world's all-time best selling two-seater sports car, with a crop of awards to its name, including World Car of the Year 2016.

The RF (for Retractable Fastback) is a new eye-candy hard top edition of the little Mazda MX-5, with an electrically folding metal roof and priced at around £2,000 above the familiar soft-top. Its cute, come-hither looks are enough to draw admirers wherever it ventures, particularly females, it was noticed.

The MX-5 is not outstandingly quick, being credited, even with its larger 2.0 litre, 160 PS petrol engine as tested here, with 0–62 in 7.4 seconds, so lagging behind a Golf 2.0-litre

GTI, for example, roughly in its price bracket.

But it offers that traditional and beloved stamp of a sports car: The hard, iron-bedstead ride, accurate steering, lightweight feel with limpet roadholding, enthusiastic exhaust note, the balance of front engine driving the rear wheels and a super-slick, short-throw, firmly slotted gearchange. The MX-5 platform is shared with the Fiat 124 Spider.

Plus, of course, the top-down experience of wind in the hair and all the sounds and smells of the countryside – sweet (new mown grass) or sour (farm silage). Such is the visible air pollution on crowded motorways, they have become a no-go area for topless motoring, despite the opportunity for speed between the frequent traffic jams. Better to head for open country – and there's plenty of it in "overcrowded" Britain, as we found.



That folding roof is a balletic work of surprising beauty. At the press of a button, in four stages, its two sections fold and lower gracefully and neatly into concealed storage. The rear frame of the roof remains protectively in place. I fantasised a dozen MX-5's de-roofing in a perfectly choreographed chorus line. It's all over in 13 seconds and can be done on the move in a sudden shower.

I was in fact able to brave a light shower without it intruding into the open cockpit, raindrops supposedly swept up and over by the angle of the windscreen. Noise and draughts do intrude. If you want any chance of listening to the nine-speaker Premium Bose sound system, the twin headrest speakers for each seat are a must.

But an exhilarating 100-mile drive to and around the Peak District National Park ensued, taking in two favourite stretches of road – the A623 from Chapel-en-le-Frith to Baslow, near Chatsworth, and the A515 between Ashbourne and Buxton, with a network of B-roads between. There was time also to stop for a slice of home-made, genuine Bakewell tart – an added treat – at a countryside cafe swarming with Sunday afternoon walkers and cyclists.

Of course, the MX-5 has practical issues. I watched people of varying stature struggle to get in and out. Best to manually push your seat fully back before exiting, and on re-entering adjust your driving position all over again. It cries out for a seat position memory like you find on posher saloons.

The MX-5 stands about four inches longer than a Mini convertible but markedly narrower by 200 mm or around eight inches. Those even of average build will find the cabin a snug fit. Elbows and knees brush against the structure, despite the absence of door pockets. No conventional glovebox either, in favour of a small lidded box for a phone and coins between the seats, plus a larger lidded cubby sited over your left shoulder. The steering wheel adjusts for height but not reach.



It is a strict two-seater with no space behind the seats, although they do recline a little. So most of the time, to house even a small briefcase, it means opening the boot via a button obtusely hidden, offset, below the rear bumper housing. I learned to grope in line with the last digit on the number plate.

The boot itself, unlike those of some convertibles, is not intruded upon by the lowered roof, which enjoys its own separate storage – a virtue. Nevertheless, on first encounter that boot claiming 127 litres (4.84 cu.ft) appears little more spacious than a large window box, perhaps accepting the weekend shopping or a large suitcase or a couple of weekend bags. In fact, putting our tape to it revealed a generous width of 1,060 mm (3.48 ft) extending into the wheel arches and a depth of 370 mm (1.21 ft) below the sill, so surely able to take a set of golf clubs (not tried).



The full 10-strong, all-petrol MX-5 range starts at £18,795 for a 131 PS 1.5 SE traditional soft-top; the equivalent MX-5 RF at £22,295. Our top-spec RF with the alternative 2.0 litre, 160 PS engine in Sport Nav trim at £25,695 came with special Bilstein sports suspension, limited slip differential, exclusive 17-inch alloys, navigation via the seven-inch colour touch-screen, DAB radio (location dependent), climate control, cruise, black leather trim, heated seats, lane departure warning and internet app integration. The £400 optional Safety Pack added alerts for blind spot overtakers and rear cross traffic.

VERDICT

The new RF is expected to account for seven out of 10 MX-5 sales in the UK. Meaning sheer top-down summer joy for British drivers – but with a wary weather eye open.

Wheels-Alive Tech. Spec. in Brief:

Mazda MX-5 RF Sport Nav 160PS

Type: Two seater sports coupé; electric retractable roof.
Size: Length 3,915 mm (12.84 ft); width 1,735 mm (5.69 ft); height 1,236 mm (4.06 ft); kerb wt 1,295 kg (2,855 lb).
Boot: Depth 370 mm (1.21 ft); width max 1,060 mm (3.48 ft); vol 127 litres (4.84 cu.ft).
Engine and transmission: Petrol; four cyl; 1,998 cc; front-mounted; rear wheel drive; six speed.

Power: 160 PS @ 6,000 rpm; max torque 200 Nm (148 lb.ft) @ 4,600 rpm.
Pace: 134 mph; 0– 62 mph in 7.4 secs.
MPG: On test 43.7; Official Combined 40.9; tank 45 litres (9.90 gallons).
Emissions and taxation: CO2 161 g/km; VED Band I (£500 1st year then £1400; BIK 31%.
Tyres: 205/45; R17.
Insurance Group: 28E.
Warranty: 36 months/60,000 miles.

Service: 12 months or every 12,500 miles

PRICE: £25,695; as tested £26,645 including Safety Pack £400; Mica paint £550.

Rivals (prices from): MINI £18,925; Fiat 124 Spider £20,905; Lotus Elise 1.6 Sport £27,500; Audi A3 Cabriolet £27,535; BMW 2-series £27,000.