# Mazda’s latest MX-5 Road Test

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LIFTING THE LID ON A SECOND OPINION

# ‘Car of the Year’ in Japan – driven by David Miles (Miles Better News Agency)

Actually my colleague covered the UK press launch for the new fourth generation Mazda MX-5 a few months ago at its media launch, but these one day events only allow for a brief period of time in the car.

So what is the new MX-5 really like to live with? My week long test driving provided a few more answers.

The MX-5 through its four generations going back to 1990 has found homes with over 116,000 owners in the UK and this country is the largest in Europe for sales. It is popular in its home country of Japan as well where it has just been voted their Car of the Year.

The ultimate demise of a raft of two seater, mainly rear wheel drive compact sports cars from MG, Triumph and Lotus in the UK, and Japanese models from Toyota and Honda, was brought about by the introduction of more practical hot hatchbacks. These by and large replaced the aged design and sometimes poorly made, in particular, British products. For those who still wanted an open top sports car they resorted to grey imports from Japan of the early MX-5s, known as Eunos, or went down the track of buying Kit Cars such as the NG TC (and I own one of these), or they bought Lotus/Caterham 7s or similar.

Then the Mazda MX-5 came along and filled the gap for the considerable number of drivers who wanted an affordable, two seater rear wheel drive sports car with a soft top to retain their free-spirit, wind-in-the-hair motoring. Whether it was a new buy by a new generation of customers who had missed the open-top motoring generation the first time around, or a return to open-top motoring by older owners who had become empty nesters, the affordable MX-5 fitted the bill and had since become an iconic model of the Mazda brand.

The latest incarnation, due to new technology, is lighter and hence more nimble, it is wider and sits a little lower and is a shade shorter. Currently it is only available as a soft-top with the fabric folding roof manually and easily put up or down in a few seconds from the driving seat.

At the rear is a small boot giving just 130 litres of space for soft luggage. Inside there is some storage space but not very much. Although a Coupé version, which we have had in the past, is under consideration, Mazda has recently shown in the USA two further MX-5 concepts, the sportier lightweight and retro styled Speedster and Roadster. Hot off the

Press is news from Mazda that they have introduced a high spec Recaro limited edition version with 600 units for sale in the UK, fitted with Recaro seats, added equipment and sporty styling enhancements.

But for mainstream models we have two engine options and five main equipment levels, making a choice now from 10 models, including the latest 2.0 litre Recaro limited edition. Prices start from just under £18,500 and rise to almost £23,300 with the Recaro limited edition version costing £24,295.

The five main levels of trim and equipment are SE, SE-L, SE-L Nav, Sport and Sport Nav. Recaro sits on top of those levels. All models feature LED headlights, aluminium alloy wheels, a six-speed manual gearbox, electric windows, air-con, remote central locking, leather steering wheel and gear knob and a lightweight lined fabric roof. SE-L models add LED daytime running lights, climate control air-conditioning, DAB radio, Bluetooth and cruise control, plus Mazda's MZD-Connect connectivity and infotainment system with 7 inch Colour touch-screen display and Multimedia Commander.

SE-L models with the 2.0 litre 160ps engine are distinguished by 17 inch Gunmetal aluminium alloy wheels and piano black door mirrors, and benefit from a strut brace and limited slip differential. Step up to Sport trim and both the 1.5 and 2.0 litre cars feature rain-sensing wipers, rear parking sensors, smart keyless entry, Premium Bose sound system and heated leather seats. Specification levels with the Nav attachment of course include a satellite navigation system that comes with three-years free European map upgrades. The 2.0 litre Sport Nav version is also available with the optional £350 Safety Pack, which includes High Beam Control and Blind Spot Monitoring with Rear Cross Traffic Alert.

There are two petrol engine options, both with Mazda's award winning SKYACTIV technology which reduces weight, minimises internal engine frictions so lowering emissions, pushes up power and improves fuel consumption. With over 1,000 advance UK orders in the banks, just over half of the first buyers have chosen the 1.5 litre, 131hp over the expected long-term best selling 2.0 litre 160hp unit. Both units have four cylinders and are normally

aspirated. Versions with the 2.0-litre 160hp engine benefit from a more dynamic set-up that includes sports suspension with Bilstein dampers, a limited slip differential and strut bracing while visually they are marked out by their 17 inch alloy wheels and body coloured door mirrors.



Mazda MX5 At Goodwood. 21st – 22nd June 2015. Photo: Drew Gibson

With its low stance, short front and rear overhangs, lower bonnet and bulbous wheelarches the MX-5 looks every bit a sporting roadster and inside it is no different with its cockpit design which is very much focussed to the driver with most of the controls and dials within easy reach. Right in front of the driver are the three analogue dials with the large rev counter being in the centre. In the centre console between the seats is the Multimedia

Commander, a turret type control for the infotainment system. Some minor controls are however hidden behind the steering wheel and its associated control stalks. The seating position, even for me being over six feet tall with long legs, is good with sensible alignment to the pedals allowing for heel and toe operating. Being tall still didn't cause any issues in the cabin for headroom, although with the roof closed headroom in and out of the cockpit required suppleness on my part.

It just so happened that my week long spell with the car was one of the wettest weeks we have had for a long time, not ideal. However, this showed that even with the torrential rain, dense fog and then gale-force winds the interior stayed dry and relatively quiet. However in the morning after standing in the rain all night the windows soon misted up until the heater and air-con removed the condensation. The insulation provided by fabric roof does have its limitations in really damp weather.

The wet weather and heavy slow moving traffic curtailed most of my enthusiastic driving opportunities but nevertheless it was obvious the MX-5 the roadster is exceptionally agile and nimble due in part to its light weight, just 1,075kg including the driver. The steering gave reasonable feedback and was precise and fast-responding. Ride comfort is on the firm side as I expected and I suspect the larger 17 inch wheels play a part in that. Understeer during cornering was predictable and the move to rear wheel drive oversteer, even on wet roads, was predictable too, with no sudden 'snap' as the rear end slipped out of the desired line. Overall it felt a fine and well balanced car.

The 2.0 litre non-turbo petrol engine provides 160 hp, enough to live up to sports car image. Top speed is an impressive for its size 133 mph and the zero to 62 mph acceleration time of 7.3 seconds was adequate given today's congested motoring conditions. Never did the engine sound stressed, and it responded well to high gear driving at low speeds which helped with fuel economy – but more of that later.

The new MX-5 bodyshell feels as though it could easily handle more power. The engine produces 200 Nm of torque at 4,600 rpm with drive to the rear wheels through a close ratio

six-speed gearbox with a limited slip differential, which in dry or wet weather is an advantage. The gear changes were a delight with the very slick, short throw and precise gear lever.

This engine produces 161g/km of CO2 emissions which means VED road tax is currently £180 every year. Officially the Combined Cycle fuel economy is 40.9 mpg but it is hugely variable depending on traffic conditions. My wet weather, heavy traffic test driving week returned a figure as high as 48.5mpg due to being in 40 to 50 mph lines of slow moving traffic on A roads. On a longer 180 mile motorway journey, cruising where possible at the legal speed limit, the fuel consumption was still 45.7 mpg and during short trips into my local town the economy went down to 35.5 mpg. The overall average of 43.2mpg was better than the official figure and that rarely happens.




VERDICT

The MX-5 has a long history of appealing to roadster customers wanting an affordable sports car; the all-new generation impressively continues that tradition.

For: Iconic 2 seater sports car at an affordable price, slick gearshift, impressive fuel economy, nimble, agile and well balanced handling, comprehensive specification, easy to use manual fabric folding roof.

Against: Small boot, snug interior, low headroom for six-footers getting in and out of the car with the roof up, firm ride over poorer surfaces, minor switches hidden from view.

MILESTONES AND WHEELS-ALIVE TECH. SPEC. IN BRIEF:

Mazda MX-5, 2-seater, 2.0 litre, SE-L Nav.

Engine: 2.0 litre, 4 cylinder normally aspirated petrol, 160hp, 200Nm of torque at 4,600rpm Transmission: 6 speed manual gearbox, rear wheel drive with a limited slip differential Performance:

0-62mph: 7.3 seconds

Top speed: 133mph

Fuel consumption: Combined Cycle 40.9mpg (on test 43.2mpg)

CO2 emissions: 161g/km, VED road tax £180, BIK company car tax 27%.

Insurance group: 29E

Warranty: 3years/ 60,000 miles.

Dimensions/capacities: L 3,915 mm (12.84 ft), W 1,735 mm (5.69 ft), H 1,230 mm (4.04 ft), boot 130 litres (4.59 cu.ft).

Price: £20,695.


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