

2006 Mazda MX-5 Miata -- the Freewheeling Youth of the Sports-Car World Matures

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Mazda has done it again. First, they reinvigorated the sports car market a decade and a half ago with the introduction of the Miata for 1990. Then the company followed that up with a redesigned version that was good enough to make Miata the biggest-selling sports car in history.

Now, for 2006, they've topped that with a third-generation Miata that's as sophisticated as far more expensive sports cars, despite keeping its reasonable low-20-thousand-dollar price tag.

Compared to the two previous versions, the 2006 MX-5 Miata is a little larger in most dimensions, and gains about 50 pounds. It continues with its four-cylinder engine but now it's a 170-hp 2.0-liter instead of a 142-hp 1.8.

Slipping into the interior, it's obvious that Mazda's junior sports car has grown a bit. Instead of the window sills having a sort of elbow-height feeling, you now feel as though you're sitting low in the car, instead of sitting on it. Along with the cabin's extra room comes a more upscale look to the interior. Although still not exactly plush feeling, the new Miata replaces its predecessors' retro spartan style with a somewhat more opulent look. The leather seats are both easy on the eyes and posterior. The convertible top has a cloth surface and a glass rear window, and it folds neatly into a smooth bunch that latches down to form a smooth profile without a separate cover.

Overall, the cabin pleases in both design and execution. There's a subtle, high-quality feel to it that speaks of cars costing far more than our tester's \$25,000 sticker price.

Firing the engine up brings forth a sporty purr that's maybe a tad more subdued than Miatas past, but nonetheless satisfying. Once rolling, planting your foot into the gas yields one of the bigger delights of the new Miata. The engine feels somewhat stronger than its power rating might imply, providing gutsy acceleration at low speeds and very nice passing power without downshifting. It never feels high-strung or fussy.

Complementing that pleasure is the shifter. Traditionally a strong suit of Miatas past, the new version continues to be noteworthy. Although not quite as pleasingly mechanical feeling as before, the shifter is precise, with appropriate springing and well-defined gates. Tying it all together are pedals that are well spaced for easy heel-and-toe downshifts.

Once acclimated to the new Miata's basic control personality, it's time to tackle some twisty roads. And you'll quickly find that this aspect of the new car is where the new Miata differs the most from its predecessors.

While the generation-one and -two Miatas were well known for having low handling limits and almost toylike tossability, the new Miata feels heftier, more serious, and obviously more capable. In earlier Miatas the idea of slipping and sliding the rear end was as obvious and basic as putting the top down on a sunny day -- Miata practically begged for such exuberance behind the wheel.

The new Miata responds to such tail-happy shenanigans with all the control and communication of Mazda's earlier little sprites. But now the car just doesn't seem to ask for it with such a strong voice. This version's vastly higher grip and more potent engine instead make it happier with high corner-entry speeds and smooth, even steering-wheel inputs.

Those things said, this Miata is really happy in that environment. Whereas previous Miatas tended to have a wild, freewheeling personality on winding roads, the new version hauls through turns as if locked onto rails, with minimal body lean and very high limits that aren't as easy to upset.

It's still terrific fun. It's just a little different kind of fun.

It's clear that Mazda has once again crafted a true little gem of a sports car. There's not a squeak or rattle to be heard, the engine has a smooth, almost exotic personality, and the driving controls are precise and solid. You find yourself double checking the sticker to see if this is really a \$25,000 sports car -- plenty of rivals costing \$15k more than Miata don't get these things much (if any) better.

As for how this new Miata design overall compares to its predecessors, picture a guy that was loveable but slightly over-eager in college. Now he's been out in the real world for few years and maybe gotten a graduate degree.

He's not really the same guy anymore, but he commands more respect. And he's still a whole lot of fun to be around. For more articles on sports cars, along with drive-tests of today's hottest performance cars, go to <http://www.autiv.com/>

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