



## A Miata with muscles, for a pittance more.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID DEWHURST

Perhaps the biggest surprise we got from the new Mazdaspeed MX-5 Miata—other than its remarkable bargain price—is how much of the elemental Miata flavor has been retained. We suspected that a higher-output Miata would require heavier transmission components, a harder ride, and a heavier feel. But the car doesn't manifest any of those characteristics in enough quantity to dilute the essential charm of Mazda's iconic roadster.

From the moment it appeared in 1989, we've been big fans of the little Miata. It made our 10Best list in its original form, and then again when the fixed-headlight version debuted in '98. The Miata was never a powerful car, but it has always been light and nimble—and very entertaining. Evidently, we were not alone in our admiration. From the car's debut until last New Year's Day, Mazda has sold 311,666 Miatas in the U.S.

But here's the best reason ever to buy one: an IHI ball-bearing turbo blowing

seven-and-a-quarter pounds of boost into combustion chambers with fractionally reduced compression ratios (9.5 versus 10.0:1). That gives the Mazdaspeed Miata 178 horsepower—36 more than its tamer sibling—to spur it through the quarter-mile in 15.2 seconds. The turbo car has a red-line 500 rpm short of the standard model's 7000, but it rips to the red in quick blasts.

We recorded a 6.7-second sprint to 60

mph and expect slightly faster results from production cars. We had to promise to be gentle with the prototype vehicle you see in these pictures, but even so, the car was 1.4 seconds quicker to 60 mph and over a second faster through the quarter than the last Miata we tested.

Mazdaspeed's Miata is based on the normal model's LS trim level and is equipped with the optional six-speed transmission. Beefing up this gearbox for its bigger job involved shot-peening of internal gearwheels along with a fourth-gear ratio change so slight you have to go to three decimal places to appreciate it. The action is thus as light and direct as it has ever been and preserves one of the car's most important entertainment assets.

Gear shifting is critical in a car that gobbles ratios during hard acceleration like a bear in a Burger King Dumpster, and the

Miata can be shifted as fast as is humanly possible. But since midrange engine response is stronger in the turbo Miata, too, there is less call for down-shifting on the open road. A top-gear 50-to-70-mph time of 7.6 seconds is pretty respectable and four seconds better than the 142-hp model's.

On a purely subjective level, the Mazdaspeed car feels wholly transformed, capable of top-gear traffic slaloms at just a jab of the pedal. The turbo itself





## THE VERDICT

**Highs:** Good power, nimble handling, charming character, fantastic bargain.

**Lows:** Limited cockpit space, tire roar on poor surfaces.

**The Verdict:** The best reason ever for buying one.



is virtually transparent—you can't even hear it with the top up—and it suffers so little lag that the car mostly feels naturally aspirated.

Unlike the Mazdaspeed Protegé, which has a turbo kit supplied by Callaway, Mazda's hot-rod Miata wears a factory-developed and -installed turbocharger kit, as well as a heavier-duty clutch and revised suspension. Both cars are big fun, but we've observed the Protegé's performance to fluctuate from one vehicle to another, hinting at production variations. We doubt this will be a problem with the Miata.

The installation is what you'd expect from a big-name factory: tidy and professional, with neat touches such as induction resonators to cut obnoxious noise. Certainly, the car is endowed with a wonderful sense of integration, offering crisp throttle response and clean transitions even when being shifted violently at the redline.

Mazdaspeed's chassis modifications have been equally careful, and the car suffers little, if any, extra ride harshness from its shortened and stiffened (and repainted) springs or its bigger anti-roll bars. The car wears Bilstein shocks, too, which are extraordinarily good at snubbing unnecessary body motions while soaking up bump shock.

The ride quality isn't a problem on any half-decent surface, but tire noise from the

17-inch Toyo Proxes R28s can be, especially since the fabric top does not provide an enormous amount of acoustical attenuation. But this is a sports car, right? And a hot version of one at that. If you want a quiet ride, you might want to buy something else.

On any interesting road, the only tire noise you need to hear is the song of the Toyos as they approach their limit, and the rasp of the turbocharged four takes precedence over the 225-watt Bose stereo, even with the additional speakers now built into the wind blocker's base. We expected the MX-5 to be a little quivery atop its new stiff springs and bars, but the front shock-tower brace seems to have kept the usual Miata compromise between structural

rigidity and lightness about where it was.

Certainly, the extra roll stiffness and the stringent body-motion disciplines are welcome in the canyons along with the quick steering, everything contributing to decisive turn-in and a great sense of stability.

Although the Mazdaspeed car was pretty loose on the skidpad, where it could be throttled into a rear-wheel slide at any time (aided perhaps by the Bosch torque-sensing limited-slip diff), it felt simply responsive on the road. There, it was quick to heed the wheel and able to change direction nimbly. Throughout these little games, the Mazdaspeed Miata revealed a surprising degree of civility.

And now for the best part: the price. With a generous load of standard features—power windows, a CD changer, a wind blocker—the Mazdaspeed Miata costs \$26,020. A standard Miata LS—with leather, but without a six-speed, turbo, or suspension upgrades—costs just \$827 less, or \$25,193. It's a screaming deal because any decent aftermarket turbo kit would cost at least three grand and wouldn't come with Mazda's warranty *or* the suspension bits.

Mazda also boasts that the car's performance is almost equal to that of a BMW Z4 2.5 at a price that is thousands of dollars lower. At first it seems an inappropriate comparison. But the latest Miatas





## MAZDASPEED MX-5 MIATA

**Vehicle type:** front-engine, rear-wheel-drive, 2-passenger, 2-door roadster

**Price as tested:** \$26,720

**Price and option breakdown:** base MazdaSpeed MX-5 Miata (includes \$520 freight), \$26,020; Grand Touring package (consists of red-stitched leather interior and black cloth softtop), \$700

**Major standard accessories:** power windows and locks, remote locking, A/C, cruise control, rear defroster

**Sound system:** Bose AM-FM radio/CD changer, 6 speakers

### ENGINE

Type ..... turbocharged and intercooled inline-4, iron block and aluminum head  
 Bore x stroke ..... 3.27 x 3.35 in, 83.0 x 85.0mm  
 Displacement ..... 112 cu in, 1840cc  
 Compression ratio ..... 9.5:1  
 Fuel-delivery system ..... port injection  
 Turbocharger ..... IHI RHF5  
 Maximum boost pressure ..... 7.3 psi  
 Valve gear ..... belt-driven double overhead cams, 4 valves per cylinder, variable intake-valve timing  
 Power (SAE net) ..... 178 bhp @ 6000 rpm  
 Torque (SAE net) ..... 166 lb-ft @ 4500 rpm  
 Redline ..... 6500 rpm

### DRIVETRAIN

Transmission ..... 6-speed manual  
 Final-drive ratio ..... 4.10:1, limited slip  

Gear	Ratio	Mph/1000 rpm	Max test speed
I	3.76	4.4	28 mph (6500 rpm)
II	2.27	7.3	47 mph (6500 rpm)
III	1.65	10.0	65 mph (6500 rpm)
IV	1.26	13.1	85 mph (6500 rpm)
V	1.00	16.5	107 mph (6500 rpm)
VI	0.84	19.6	127 mph (6500 rpm)

### DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase ..... 89.2 in  
 Track, front/rear ..... 55.7/56.7 in  
 Length/width/height ..... 155.7/66.1/48.0 in  
 Ground clearance ..... 4.0 in  
 Curb weight ..... 2540 lb  
 Weight distribution, F/R ..... 52.8/47.2%  
 Curb weight per horsepower ..... 14.3 lb  
 Fuel capacity ..... 12.7 gal

### CHASSIS/BODY

Type ..... unit construction  
 Body material ..... welded steel stampings

### INTERIOR

SAE volume, front seat ..... 46 cu ft  
 luggage ..... 5 cu ft  
 Front-seat adjustments ..... fore-and-aft, seatback angle  
 Restraint systems ..... manual 3-point belts, driver and passenger front airbags

### SUSPENSION

Front ..... ind, unequal-length control arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar  
 Rear ..... ind, unequal-length control arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar

### STEERING

Type ..... rack-and-pinion with variable hydraulic power assist  
 Steering ratio ..... 15.0:1  
 Turns lock-to-lock ..... 2.3  
 Turning circle curb-to-curb ..... 30.2 ft

### BRAKES

Type ..... hydraulic with vacuum power assist, anti-lock control, and electronic panic assist  
 Front ..... 10.6 x 0.9-in vented disc  
 Rear ..... 10.9 x 0.4-in disc

### WHEELS AND TIRES

Wheel size/type ..... 7.0 x 17 in/cast aluminum  
 Tires ..... Toyo Proxes R28, 205/40R-17 80W  
 Test inflation pressures, F/R ..... 29/32 psi  
 Spare ..... high-pressure compact

have poise and refinement brought by numerous structural upgrades, painstaking chassis tuning, and patient tweaking of all the integrated systems.

Even the interior has been upgraded to first-class. MazdaSpeed's so-called Grand Touring package—leather seats and red-stitched wheel and gear-lever covers—teams with a silver-colored center stack and white-faced gauges to push the Miata's interior upmarket. The other MazdaSpeed signatures—an exhaust tip, a unique front air dam, Racing Hart wheels—put the finishing touches on a desirable product. At the price, this car's almost an unbeatable deal, but be aware that production is limited to just 4000 a year.

Hey, nothing's perfect. ■

## C/D TEST RESULTS

ACCELERATION	Seconds
Zero to 30 mph	2.3
40 mph	3.5
50 mph	5.1
60 mph	6.7
70 mph	9.0
80 mph	11.3
90 mph	14.7
100 mph	18.3
110 mph	24.1
120 mph	32.0
Street start, 5-60 mph	8.1
Top-gear acceleration, 30-50 mph	9.1
50-70 mph	7.6
Standing 1/4-mile	15.2 sec @ 91 mph
Top speed (redline limited)	127 mph

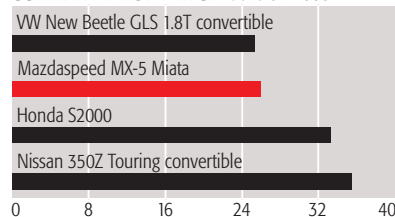
BRAKING	70-0 mph @ impending lockup
	168 ft

HANDLING	Roadholding, 300-ft-dia skidpad	Understeer
	0.90 g	minimal moderate excessive

FUEL ECONOMY	EPA city driving	EPA highway driving	C/D-observed
	20 mpg	26 mpg	21 mpg

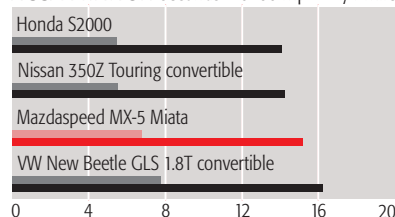
INTERIOR SOUND LEVEL	Idle	Full-throttle acceleration	70-mph cruising
	47 dBA	79 dBA	75 dBA

### CURRENT BASE PRICE\* dollars x 1000

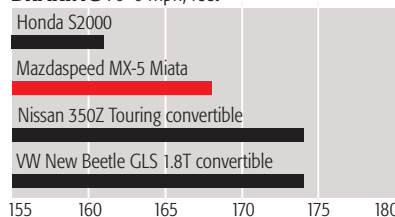


\*Base price includes freight, any performance options, and applicable gas-guzzler taxes.

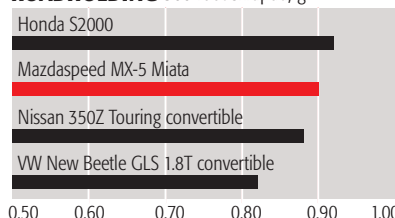
### ACCELERATION seconds ■ 0-60 mph ■ 1/4-mile



### BRAKING 70-0 mph, feet



### ROADHOLDING 300-foot skidpad, g



### EPA CITY FUEL ECONOMY mpg

