

# ARIZONA DRIVER

THE ENTHUSIAST'S GUIDE TO LIFE BEHIND THE WHEEL

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## Mazda MX-5

JINBA ITTAI—BEING AT ONE

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# Being at one

By Barbara and Bill Schaffer



*"Jinba Ittai"—in western terms that means "Rider and horse as one," and that's how Mazda describes the development of the third generation Miata (MX-5) sports car. Any time the process of developing the new Miata came to a crossroads, "Jinba Ittai" was the guiding principle.*

**W**e've always heard that good things come in small packages, and that is certainly true of the Mazda Miata. (Note: Mazda now wants us to call it the MX-5.) Even though the new version is a little larger than the previous generation, it's still a small package and one of the best value sports cars on the market.

The universe of sports cars is made up of legendary sporting names like Corvette, Porsche and Ferrari, but the car that has touched more people (literally) is the Mazda Miata. In 2000, the *Guinness Book of World Records* recognized the Miata as the best-selling two-seat convertible sports car in history. And for 2006, the third generation builds on 17 years of achievement to become the best ever.

Since the Mazda Miata first came on the scene in 1989, it has captured the hearts of car enthusiasts including young, old and the young at heart. The new third generation Miata builds on the familiar look with great

character lines that feature strong fender arches, a shorter and rounder hood and a rounded grille.

Inside is a simplistic arrangement of instruments, along with comfortable seating. The small diameter steering wheel has three metal-accented spokes and—for the first time—audio and cruise-control switches are mounted on the spokes.

Developed from the zoom-zoom philosophy, the new Miata is trimmer, more rigid and safer than its predecessors. Weight reduction was paramount for the new model, with a concerted effort to drop every gram possible from the street-ready vehicle. The result is a svelte 2,498-pound roadster with near-perfect 50/50 weight distribution.

The development process started with an all-new, advanced front-mid-ship layout and improvements to the Miata's already impressive suspension, steering and brakes.

The new MX-5 comes in five trim levels, but they are almost impossible to define. The



five levels include the Club Spec, MX-5, Touring, Sport and Grand Touring. The interior is available in three distinct levels. The entry-level interior is a monotone package with black fabric seats and silver-finished accents. The black leather interior is a little more elegant with a high-tech look and prominent stitching on the seats. The third interior has saddle-tan leather with a designer luggage look. All interiors feature a console trim that has a ribbed surface finish that is contemporary looking and provides great durability.

The new 2.0-liter four-cylinder engine derived from the Mazda 3, 5 and 6 is rated at 170 hp. A crisp exhaust note flows from a new dual exhaust system. A five-speed manual transmission is standard, but a new six-speed manual is optional. It has a shift pattern so tight that shifts are made with a flick of the wrist instead of an arm movement. Those preferring to drive without a clutch can have their Miata with a new six-speed automatic transmission with paddles mounted on the steering wheel in case the driver still wants to shift.

The MX-5 (Miata) that we tested for a week was the Sport (the next-to-top level). It came equipped with standard features and conveniences that include air conditioning, leather wrapped steering wheel and shift knob, AM/FM audio system with CD player, cruise control, power windows and door locks along with floor mats for the base price of \$23,495 including destination charges. The

entry-level model starts at \$20,995 while a loaded special limited edition called 3rd Generation is priced at \$26,700.

Few drivers will complain about the performance of the new MX-5, which produces 0 to 60 mph times of 7 seconds and a top speed estimated to reach 130 mph. We hit 77 mph in our unofficial acceleration test which we run from where we pull onto the road and accelerate about one-eighth mile.

The EPA estimates fuel economy at 24 mpg for city driving and 30 mpg highway. We averaged 27.5 during our driving time.

As with most convertibles, rear visibility is a constant challenge with the cloth top up. The manually-operating top is released by one center-mounted lever, before making a Z-fold to end up behind the seats, with a section of the top forming a hard tonneau cover. Wind is diverted from the cabin when the top is down by small quarter windows behind the A-pillars and an aero board mounted between the seat back safety hoops.

We're a little confused as to why Mazda has decided to change the Miata name to MX-5. Miata is a good name with lots of recognition; and you know what they say about old dogs and new tricks. To us it will always be the Miata.

The Miata engineering team deserves kudos for not taking a good thing and ruining it. This third generation Miata is superlative—everything we could hope that it would be and even a little more. ■

## Mazda MX-5 (Miata) Sport

### STANDARD EQUIPMENT

Standard Equipment:  
Air conditioning; Cruise control; AM/FM stereo; Antilock brakes; Power locks & windows; Keyless entry; Six-speed manual transmission.

Base Price: ..... \$22,935  
Options:  
Run flat tires and tire pressure monitoring .....\$515  
Suspension package .....\$500  
**Total Options .....\$1,015**  
Freight .....\$560  
Price as Tested.....\$24,510

### DIMENSIONS

EPA Size .....Two-seater  
Weight.....2,498 lb.  
Wheelbase .....91.7 in.  
Length.....157.3 in.  
Width.....67.7 in.  
Height .....49.0 in.  
Fuel Capacity .....12.7 gal.  
Cargo Capacity.....5.3 cu. ft.

### MECHANICAL

Engine .....2.0L DOHC 4-Cyl.  
Horsepower .....170@6700  
Torque .....140@5000  
Transmission .....6-spd. man.  
Drive .....Rear wheel  
Brakes .....Disc ABS  
Tires .....205/45R17

### PERFORMANCE

0 to 60 mph.....7.0 sec.  
Top speed .....130 mph  
EPA economy rating .....24/30 mpg  
Our actual fuel economy .....27.5 mpg

### COMPETITORS

Pontiac Solstice