

DISTINGUISHED BY JOE SAGE

In the crowded midsize sedan segment, the Mazda6 has always been distinctive, in any number of small but significant ways.

Our sample is the top of three trim levels. Base prices range from \$21,495 for Sport, to Touring at \$23,945, to ours, Grand Touring at \$30,195. All have the same 184-hp engine and offer a 6-speed automatic, but the base and middle models also offer a manual.

The interior is above par. Horizontal emphasis of its instrumental panel is distinctive, and its officially black leather interior is highlighted by rich mahogany brown door inserts and console, with subtle contrast stitching. Soft touch black surfaces have highlights in brushed aluminum. It's a sharp high-end feel at a mainstream price. The screen bumps up to 7 inches this year. We appreciate a heads-up display, and this one amazed us by being fully visible through polarized sunglasses.

We've become used to Mazdas in their Soul Red metallic. This came in Sonic Silver, which neutralized some

of its pizzazz. To make up for this, we drove to Sedona's red rocks for some photos.

In town, the automatic was powerful, sure, well-spaced, accurate and smooth, with all the shifts in all the right places and the power curve maintained. On a dead start or a steep climb, the car benefits from using the manual. We like Mazda's manual shifter, which you pull back for plus and push forward for minus. It feels intuitively aircraft-like, and we're not even pilots.

Climbing on I-17, we had two or three times we felt as though we had dropped anchor, right in the thick of things. We pondered possibilities from bumping the shifter into manual to having our big feet hooking a pedal, but did not come up with any consistent explanation. Our best guess is adaptive cruise picking up rock walls on curves, that kind of thing. But this remains a guess.

We never conquered slightly

insufficient cabin cooling. We were often a bit warm and exited with a wet back.

Mazda6 just took top honors in the owner-surveyed JD Power APEAL Awards for its segment, its second consecutive win.

In a world of lookalikes, Mazda6 is immediately recognizable, and it is feature rich. ■

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE	SKYACTIV 2.5L 4-cyl
TRANSMISSION	6-spd sport automatic
DRIVETRAIN	front-wheel drive
POWER/TORQUE	184 hp / 185 lb-ft
TURNING CIRCLE	36.7 ft
TRUNK CAPACITY	14.8 cu ft
WEIGHT	3250 lb
MPG	28/40/32 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE	\$30,195
GRAND TOURING TECH PACKAGE: Radar cruise control, regenerative engine braking system, smart brake support, high beam control, lane departure warning, active grille shutters.....	2180
CARGO MAT:	75
DOOR SILL TRIM PLATES:	125
DESTINATION CHARGE:	880
TOTAL	\$32,890



We wish manual shift were available in this trim level. We'd be tempted to save six grand and buy the middle Touring model, for that.

