

# ACCESSIBLE BY JOE SAGE

After 25 years, you might think the Mazda MX-5 Miata speaks for itself, and in many ways it does. But what's notable is that this has not pushed it off anybody's radar. Our week with the Miata drew more praise and head-turns than most anything we've driven lately.

This was a 2014 model, which we were driving 25 years after the original car's 1989 introduction. That, though, was a 1990 model, and the 2015 model will mark the actual anniversary (see sidebar)—arriving at dealerships about the same time you read this. They are essentially the same, still just the third generation of a car that was executed pretty much perfectly in the first place.

There are not many variables when buying a Mazda MX-5 Miata—the foundation is so strong. Start with three trim levels: Sport, Club and Grand Touring. Ours is the top model, Grand Touring—with 17-inch aluminum alloy wheels, leather interior trim, upgraded Bose audio, and other trim items and creature comforts. The next variable is of a manual soft or power retractable hard convertible top (the hardtop is available on Club and Grand Touring only). Ours had the hardtop. Finally,

you can opt for a manual transmission (5-speed on Sport, 6-speed on Club or Grand Touring) or 6-speed auto. Ours had the 6-speed manual.

Really, you can't go wrong with any. The base Sport model starts at just \$23,720, but even its inclusion list is very complete, from the same two-liter inline-four as the full lineup, to the same aluminum-arm double-wishbone front suspension and multilink rear with mono tube dampers front and rear, to AC essential in our climate, with a very decent level of trim overall. We liked the car we received and would happily order the same. As outfitted, it's 33 percent more expensive than the base model, but that's a dollar difference less than just, say, a radio in some of the competition.

An automatic transmission would add \$2260 to the Sport model or just \$1090 to our top trim Grand Touring. Regular readers will have already guessed that we consider a lower price for a manual transmission to be

a win-win, all the moreso in a classic lightweight sports car like the MX-5 Miata, and all the more-so when this transmission is as smooth, tight, easy and effective as we found it to be.

The retractable hardtop added \$1900 to our Grand Touring (it's \$1760 on the midrange Club and not available on the Sport model). You accomplish several things by adding that top. First off, it's power operated, whereas the fabric top is manual. It also suggests increased security while parked, better soundproofing while driving (although rain on a soft top can be fun), more body rigidity and certainly a longer materials life. On ours, it added just 82 pounds—negligible for what is gained, in a car that still just totals 2593 pounds. Fuel mile-

age is unchanged at 21/28 MPG city/highway.

Retractable hardtops can get pretty complex, involving multiple panels, intricate mechanisms, decklid and trunk operations (not even counting the trunk-emptying prep a lot of them require), all of which can slow down their operating time. Operations of 15-20 seconds are generally among the best. But the Miata amazes: bringing the top up takes only about 10 seconds till effectively raised (enough to escape a sudden rain), or 15-16 seconds until totally latched. Dropping the top starts with one press of a button and release of a latch (these two could be more comfortable if swapped on lefthand-drive US cars). Starting with windows up, we timed just 11 seconds all the way down, sealed, done. This would be remarkable for a fabric top; for a hardtop, it's stunning.

The MX-5's 167 horsepower may not strike you as much, at a glance, but bear in mind the Miata weighs about 40 percent less than, say, a 911. Its power and torque deliver a lively, balanced sporting ride. The car is light, tight and strong.

Power is readily on tap, steering and shifts are smooth and engaging, controls and interfaces are intuitive, and cost of entry is very reasonable for a sports car. This is a very accessible experience.

As it has done since day one, the Mazda MX-5 Miata delivers bang for the buck. What else can you get for this price, in this category? Not much.



Maybe a 10-year-old Boxster or Z4 with no warranty and much higher service costs over time. (No sooner did we conclude this, than we were dusted by a 15-year-old Firebird Trans Am worth \$4-5000. But that'd be a whole 'nother comparison.)

Eyeballing our fuel gauge over a week of Valley driving and calculating against our trip odometer, we could see we had driven aggressively. By the car's computer, we had averaged 18.6 MPG. A colleague in a different part of the country, whose core mission is maximizing fuel efficiency, pulled off a 47 MPG figure from a Miata in the same time frame. As they say, "your mileage may vary." If you have a foot and a grip like ours, hypermiling is generally not your primary mission in such a car. ■

## 2014 MAZDA MX-5 MIATA GT TOURING POWER RETRACTABLE HARDTOP

ENGINE.....2.0L DOHC 16v I-4 VVT  
TRANSMISSION.....6-speed manual  
LAYOUT.....front midship engine, RWD  
POWER.....167 hp / 140 lb-ft torque  
WEIGHT (GT/PRHT/MT).....2593 lb  
MPG.....21/28/24 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE.....\$29,450  
SUSPENSION PACKAGE: Sport suspension, Bilstein shocks, limited slip diff.....650  
PREMIUM PACKAGE: Anti-theft alarm, keyless entry, Bluetooth phone, xenon headlights, Sirius satellite radio.....1390  
DESTINATION CHARGE.....795  
TOTAL.....\$32,285



## MX-5 25TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

To commemorate the MX-5 Miata's 25th anniversary—as they had its 10th and 20th—Mazda created a special edition model, in Soul Red paint with hand-selected engine parts, power hardtop, mirrors, lamp bezels and other trim in Brilliant Black, and 17-inch Dark Gunmetal aluminum wheels, plus a special interior, all topped off with a Tourneau Swiss watch in coordinating colors. The car's limited run of 100 copies went online for a scheduled 11-day pre-order program—and sold out within just 10 minutes. All Anniversary Edition models have a power retractable hardtop—with the only option being manual or automatic transmission (\$32,205 M/T or \$32,655 A/T).

*Our Mazda MX-5 Miata had a one-line audio readout with no touchscreen, very appropriate to the car's lux-minimalist character. (This means no backup camera, but either the top is down or the rear window is just inches from your gaze when you turn your head, anyway.)*

- Despite its low slung nature, the Miata's tight, sporty suspension navigated typical speed-bumps far more comfortably than most of what we drive.
- Its turning circle is just 30.8 feet.

