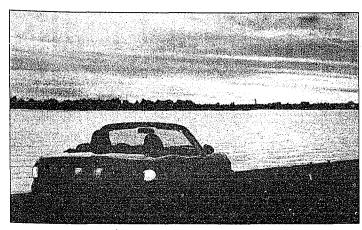
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Road Taken



Burning the tires in a Mazda Miata?



Brian Early

Autumn is almost over and the days are growing shorter and cooler. It's the perfect time of year for a convertible.

A convertible? Sure, you might have to drive a little south at this point — sounds like a perfect excuse for a weekend away — but once you're there, you are free to take in the panorama of fall colours, unfettered by the interruptions of a roof or any obstructions save for the wind-shield's frame.

You're also better able to enjoy the scents of the season: the crisp, cool air of a fall morning, the sweet smell of damp leaves, or even the aroma of those leaves burning.

If your chosen ride happens to be the Mazdaspeed MX-5 Miata, you can include the pungent tang of tire smoke. Yes, it's true, Mazda has finally un-

leashed a Miata that can overpower its rear tires without the need to resort to a

high-rpm clutch drop.

This newfound power is courtesy of a turbocharged and intercooled version of the Miata's 1.8-litre, four-cylinder engine. Despite the loss of the naturally aspirated Miata's variable valve timing, horsepower jumps 25 per cent (178, up from 142), and torque climbs nearly 33 per cent — and both peaks occur much lower in the rev range.

On paper, this suggests a much more relaxed power delivery, but it must be reted that these outputs only occur.

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while the engine is receiving boost. Off-boost, the Mazdaspeed's motor is a little weak in the knees, just what you'd expect from a relatively small dis-placement four-cylinder.

Don't let that concern you too badly, though. At the times at which you'd be most likely to need the extra power say overtaking, or on the highway turbo lag is minimal to nonexistent, and you'd swear there was a healthy V6 under the hood. Anywhere above 3,500 rpm, the MX-5 pulls hard, right up till it hits the soft rev limiter at 6,500.

You'll be shifting pretty frequently, and not just because this Mazda's quick. As with all Miatas, a steep final drive ratio means that the tranny's close ratios seem even closer expect to use them all, even in the city.

It also means that on the highway, revs are very high. The Mazdaspeed is no exception, though the more robust power output of the boosted four would suggest it could tolerate more relaxed gearing. Don't look for an automatic transmission either; your only choice is a reinforced version of the Miata's op-

tional six-speed manual. At an MSRP of \$34,395, the Mazdas-peed MX-5 GS is \$4,295 more than a comparable Miata GS, but the modifications are fairly extensive. Mazda claims that more than 1,000 parts have been changed, and the Mazdaspeed does get some equipment that is optional or not available on the Miata GS.

In addition to cosmetics such as ground effects, smoked headlight housings, trunk lid spoiler and 17-inch chrome wheels, Mazdaspeed has changed the springs (lowering the car 7 mm), the shocks (Bilsteins), added thicker stabilizer bars, and brought back the '99 Miata's Bosch torquesensing, limited-slip rear differential.

Together with the added grip of 205/40 Toyo Proxes tires, the Mazdaspeed MX-5 becomes an exaggerated version of the Miata. Though still blessed with excellent but forgiving handling, the limits are now high enough that you'll

seldom explore them on the street.

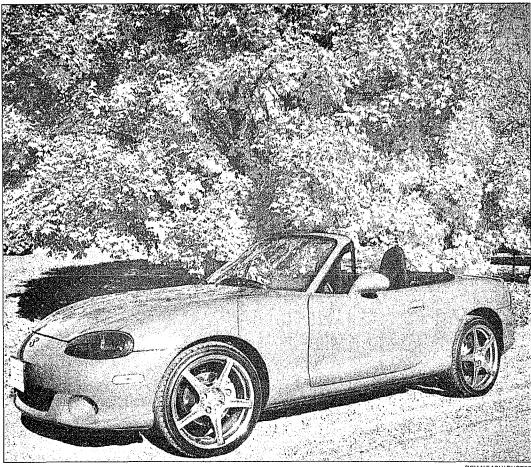
As a daily driver, any Miata requires certain compromises. Like nearly any convertible, top-up visibility is poor. Trunk space is minute, you conform to the interior — not the other way around, since there's no tilt steering and for anyone over 5-foot-9, the windshield frame is in your line of sight.

In return, the little Mazda makes a fantastic commuter vehicle; nimble enough to take advantage of openings in traffic, small enough to fit in the best parking spots, and friendly enough to take the edge off any indiscretions. I am surprised that not only does the

Mazdaspeed MX-5 not offer the Miata GT's cruise control, but that Canadian spec cars do without air conditioning as well — weird, since the U.S. model comes with A/C. At least they all have the same crematorium-strength heater that helps you to stretch the season just that little bit longer!

Still, with the top down, the autumn sun shining in and the sensations of machine and nature so close together, it's easy to forgive the Mazdaspeed's vices and just focus on its virtues.

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With fall winding down and colder days ahead, Brian Early and his wife Barb drove east to Wolfe Island, near Kingston, for a weekend getaway. The turbocharged Mazdaspeed MX-5 Miata proved a great way to take in the sights and smells of autumn leaves, although Early admits that the heater was running full blast whenever the top was down.

