

California Cruising

Turbo engine adds muscle to enticing Mazdaspeed Miata

Roadster motors into performance realm

Traditional virtues like sharp steering remain



Laurance Yap
 Wheels Preview

EUREKA, CALIF.—There is no better Miata road in the world than California Hwy. 1, especially the part of it that winds up from San Francisco to this ocean-side city 450 km or so to the north.

You encounter some of the world's most gorgeous coastline, quaint little towns and spectacular redwood forests with trees so big you can drive a car right through them (after they've been doctored for the benefit of tourists, of course).

Narrow, undulating and perfectly paved, California 1 has always been a perfect match for Mazda's small sports car.

Its zippy engine, nimble chassis and responsive controls have always made it a giant-killer on winding roads.

To drive a Miata on a gorgeous day up the California coast is as close to automotive heaven as most of us are likely to get.

Nevertheless, I approached my first encounter with the new \$34,000 Mazdaspeed Miata with trepidation. You see, I've always maintained that one of the best things about the Miata has been its ability to make any drive fun regardless of its modest power outputs and skinny tires.

Because of its delicate balance of grip and grunt — with the latter just slightly overwhelming the former — this rear-wheel-driver has always been a hoot to drive at modest speeds, a thrill to slide around even at 30 km/h.

With 170 hp — thanks to the addition of a Garrett T25 turbo to the stock 142-hp, 1.8-litre engine — a six-speed manual transmission, limited-slip differential, uprated brakes and new super-sticky 17-inch Toyo radials, the Mazdaspeed is now suddenly a dead-serious machine, one with a sufficiently strong power-to-weight ratio to humble some pretty highfalutin machinery. The question for me was always going to be: the Mazdaspeed is faster, but is it as fun?

By and large, the answer is yes. Thanks to all those extra horses, there's still enough power and torque to break the rear Toyos loose, even if you have to be driving a lot more aggressively to do so. The steering is still the best this side of a Porsche 911.

The chassis is still as brilliant as ever: it responds instantly to inputs and corners flat as a pancake, but is also remarkably friendly, with a well-settled

ride, a solid feel and good stability on the highway.

Like other Miatas, you can drive the Mazdaspeed like an utter hooligan and still feel safe and secure, knowing the car's responses are forgiving when grip starts to give up, knowing that every slide is recoverable and that the brakes will work hard deep into every turn, with no fade, largely thanks to the car's light weight.

What the Mazdaspeed adds to this equation is serious *vitesse*, enough so that, during a day-long blast up Hwy. 1, I managed to make myself motion sick more than a couple of times.

Not only does the new turbo Miata stick like glue and corner as if on rails, but it also accelerates harder and faster than any stock Miata I've ever driven.

Power delivery from the low-pressure turbo engine is very linear, with little turbo lag, and once you're into the boost, the accelerative rush is pretty thrilling.

During one memorable stretch of my drive, I kept pace with a 300-plus-hp Camaro Z28 SS with not much effort, thanks to the six-speed's short-stacked ratios, the incredible traction of the limited-slip rear end and sticky tires, and the Mazdaspeed's perfect balance in the corners.

Miatas have always been great big fun; this new car is great big fun and fast, too.

Nothing is perfect, of course. Though I like the extra power, the base car's trademark razor-sharp throttle response has been dulled somewhat.

Once you're seriously into the boost at around 5,000 rpm, the turbo motor is as responsive as you could hope for, but at lower speeds, there's just a little bit of extra softness in the power delivery (a characteristic, it must be said, of all turbocharged engines I've ever driven) that robs the Miata of some of its immediacy and eagerness.

It's faster, no doubt about it, but when being driven *gently*, it doesn't feel quite as fast, which is too bad because feeling fast when going slow has always been one of the Miata's trademarks.

I've never been much of a fan of the Miata's Aisin-Warner six-speed shifter — the five-speed is so much sweeter — but the gearbox in the car I drove was particularly hard to get into fifth and sixth.

The rest of the package is, however, a treat, especially when you consider the base price, which is only a few hundred dollars more than a fully loaded, leather-lined, naturally aspirated Miata. The new front air dam and spoiler add some aggression without ruining the car's fundamental friendliness; the five-spoke smoked-finish alloy wheels are not only gorgeous, but hide brake dust really well.

The interior feels a lot more expensive than that of other Miatas, thanks to body-hugging sport seats finished with body-coloured seat inserts and ribbed side bolsters; and a patterned aluminum finish around the air vents and radio/HVAC controls.

Also doing their part are a new high-end, six-disc Bose audio system with speakers that blast directly into the

seats; a rear-view mirror painted to match the outside of the car and festooned with a Mazdaspeed logo; and contrasting red stitching on the Nardi leather-wrapped steering wheel, hand-brake and shift knob.

Given all this extra equipment and the vastly improved straight-line performance, the Mazdaspeed is a steal.

Would I take one over a naturally aspirated Miata? It's a tough call.

I love the turbo car's tougher looks, especially its big wheels and Velocity Red paint job. This variant lifts the Miata to a realm where serious sports car performance combines with sheer driving fun.

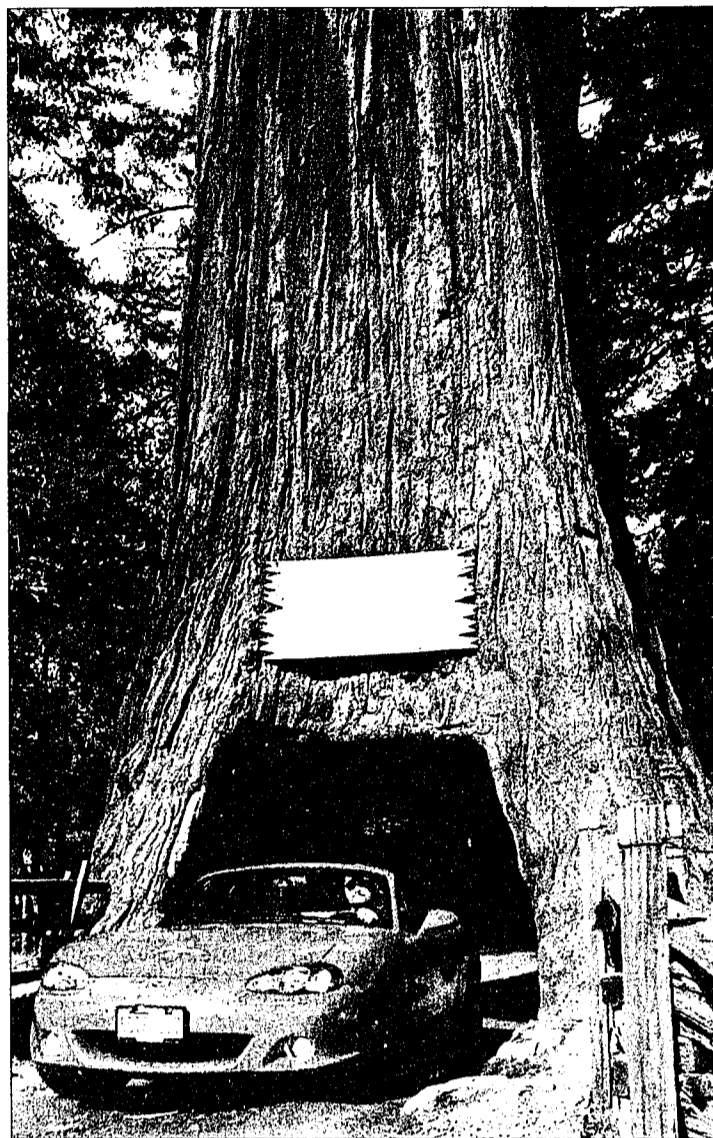
But the truth is, along California 1, I would have been able to go almost as fast in a base Miata, would probably have had more tire-squealing fun thanks to its smaller tires, and would have rounded corners almost as quickly, because the key to the way this car works is in how much momentum you can retain when you tuck into a bend.

Out of tight corners and in straight lines, the Mazdaspeed Miata is a lot more fun, and a lot more car, but the best deal in the lineup is still a base-model five-speed on skinny 15-inch tires, which lists for well under \$30,000.

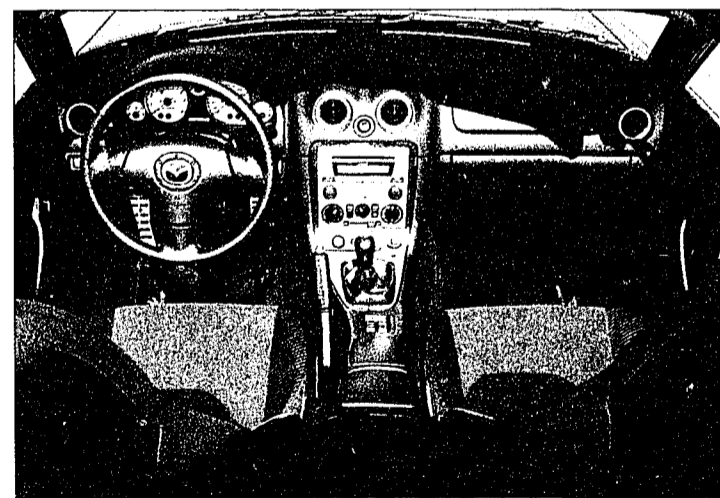
If you want more Miata than that, want more gears in the manual box, more distinctive looks, more cornering grip and more features, then go whole hog and get a Mazdaspeed.

On the right day, with a more stretched-out road, I would probably do the same.

Laurance Yap, a freelance journalist (yap@mac.com), prepared this report based on travel provided by the auto-maker.



The hot Mazdaspeed Miata takes time out from charging along California's majestic Hwy. 1 coastal road to do the tourist thing with a giant redwood.



Interior upgrades offered in the Mazdaspeed Miata include body-hugging sport seats and aluminum dash accents. A new front air dam and rear spoiler toughen the look, while a turbo boosts the 1.8 L four's horsepower to 170 from 142.



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