

California Cruising

Speedy car for the cash

A modified Miata, a sunny day in spring, the Pacific Coast Highway, Stevie Ray Vaughn cranked up to 11 on the Bose sound system.

Does it get much better than this?

Okay, names like "Charlize" and "Theron" might come to mind as the map reader, depending on your tastes and preferences, of course.

This Miata is the Mazdaspeed edition, detailed by Laurance Yap on the opposite page.

The key to Miata's brilliance has always been "balance."

Sure, you could probably stuff a Chevy small block under that curvaceous hood — somebody probably already has — but you'd have a nose-heavy car whose power would totally overwhelm the car.

The modest increase in power and the vastly beefier mid-range torque makes the Mazdaspeed Miata that much more pleasant to drive quickly.

The bigger tires add grip without extracting sacrifices in ride quality.

The nimbleness, the ready-to-please handling, the slight nose tuck-in when you lift in a hard corner all remain.

The fabulous Velocity Red paint scheme, the same colour as used on the RX-8, plus unique wheels, chrome exhaust tip and uprated interior trim make the car look — and you feel — just a bit special.

Complaints? Very few.

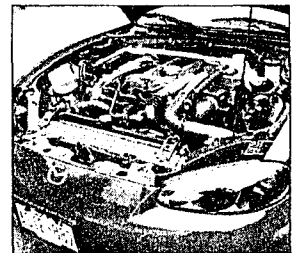
The six-speed gearbox requires care, especially when finding sixth. And the ratios were obviously optimized for the less-powerful non-turbo engine.

This version could surely pull taller gearing, which would bring the revs at 100 km/h in sixth down from 3,100 rpm into a quieter, more fuel-efficient range.

If you're thinking of a Miata, and considering the relatively small price hit, the Mazdaspeed Miata seems like a slam dunk.

Too bad there'll only be 300 of them for Canada this year.

— Jim Kenzie



Here's where the difference is, 28 hp up on the stock engine.

Crossfire natural as convertible

Chrysler's march upscale continues

Mercedes pieces include 3.2 L V6



Laurance Yap
 Wheels Preview

LAGUNA BEACH, CALIF.—The problem with most convertibles, particularly those based on stylish coupes, is that they always look like they haven't been designed that way.

And the way you look at them is always tinged by your memories of the coupe: you end up judging the folding top by how close it is to the outline of the metal one, and unconsciously compare the two cars' profiles.

An Audi TT roadster, for instance, may be way cool, but it's not nearly as iconic a design object as the TT coupe, with its low, low roofline; a Porsche 911 looks better with a roof than without; and the fabric roof of a BMW 3 Series looks like a shed compared to the coupe's arcing glasshouse.

There are many reasons for which the new Chrysler Crossfire convertible doesn't work that way, but the primary one is that Chrysler has simply sweated the details, creating a car that's as close to the look of the coupe as is possible with a folding fabric top.

For a start, the car's profile is near identical, with the same near-vertical windshield and the roof sweeping back in a long, gentle arc towards the rear of the car. View it from above, and you note that even the Crossfire's trademark boat-tail shape has been retained, the fabric roof tapering to a point (though a bit less of one) at the rear of the car. Still in place are the car's distinctive humpback rear end, electrically controlled rear spoiler and square central exhaust pipes.

A look at the Crossfire's genealogy would explain this, of course. It's based on the platform that underpinned the old Mercedes-Benz SLK, which was designed as a convertible from the outset (which is one reason that the Crossfire coupe, with its metal roof, has one of the stiffest structures of any car going).

So "lopping the top off" a Crossfire isn't so much lopping the top off as it is reverting the car to its natural state. With the roof down, this is as elegant and sleek a convertible as you could hope for, its rounded rear haunches filled to perfection



LAURANCE YAP PHOTOS

Based on the old-generation Benz SLK roadster, Chrysler's Crossfire is a natural as a soft-top (it also comes as a coupe). A choice of six-speed manual or five-speed automatic is offered. Below, Crossfire's interior suffers some lapses in quality, Laurance Yap says.

with 19-inch tires, the distinctive crossing character lines on the side working even better than they do on the coupe.

While the Crossfire convertible's roof isn't a folding metal unit like that in the SLK, it does still disappear totally when you touch the switch over by the shift lever. Why not a folding metal roof? Chrysler's official line is that the roof folds into a more compact package, allowing more trunk space.

This seems legitimate, given that the Crossfire's luggage compartment isn't that big to begin with, thanks to the huge rear tires and the sloping rear end, but I suspect that corporately, DaimlerChrysler still wants to retain a bit of feature and technology separation between its more-expensive Mercedes-Benz arm and the up-and-coming Chrysler division.

Despite the car's sporty looks, the Crossfire isn't a sports car

The old-SLK underpinnings may or may not be a manifestation of the same thing, as the current model has yet even to reach our shores. What is clear is that, in the Crossfire coupe, they were very much a part of making the Crossfire feel like a cruiser rather than an outright sports car, the slightly woolly-feeling suspension and slow re-circulating-ball steering conspiring to make it drive less sporty than it looked with its big wheels and hood strakes.

On the Crossfire convertible, this is much less of a problem, because, after all, convertibles are about cruising. In their natural ambling state, you're much less concerned about the car's behaviour on the limits of ad-

hesion or its ultimate accelerative urge than you are about the way it sounds at part-throttle, the way it isolates you from bumps in the road, and how well it manages wind to allow you to maintain a conversation as you drive.

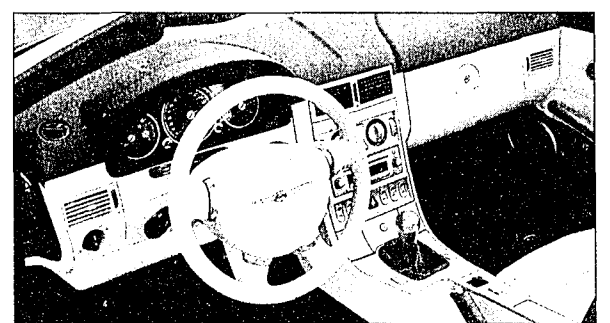
On all these counts and more, the Crossfire convertible does a fine job. With 215 hp, the Mercedes-sourced 90-degree 3.2-litre V6 is more than powerful enough to waft you away from stoplights, to breeze past slower expressway traffic and to maintain a decent pace on winding roads.

More important, though it's not conventionally smooth, the V6 does have a rich, tuneful exhaust note, loud enough to remind you that you're enjoying yourself, but unintrusive enough that it doesn't drown out the radio or your passenger.

The car rides surprisingly well too, thanks not only to a well-tuned suspension (and despite those steamroller tires), but also to independently suspended seats that are a legacy of old-style Benzes.

So is the interior, which for the most part is no bad thing. The slightly reshaped dash (the binnacle over the three large instrument faces is new, as are the glovebox door and the door panels) is of very high quality, as are the lavishly upholstered leather buckets and the thickly lined roof.

Not so good are some of the "sporty" touches that Chrysler's added on top of it all: While all the switches and knobs move with that well-oiled precision you might expect of a \$51,595 car like this, they're all finished with a layer of glossy silver paint that makes them look straight



off a Radio Shack boom box. I'm not talking brushed aluminum here, either, which would have been fine. This stuff looks sprayed on, and in some places, not sprayed on with any particular skill.

One particularly discordant point: the ridge running down the centre of the dash — a nice continuation of the ridge down the middle of the hood — continues down the console and bisects the shifter as well, which would be fine if it didn't look so much like a bad moulding seam. Oh, well.

Sporty looks or not, this isn't a sports car. Sure, the Crossfire grips well in corners — how could it be otherwise, with tires as it has, especially if you go for the summer performance tires that are a no-cost option? — but the chassis' responses are slow, you don't get a lot of feedback through the steering wheel and the brake pedal has a long, long travel, even though the stoppers themselves are just fine.

Certainly, you're never going to be troubling the standard stability and traction control systems unless you're being really stupid — though it's nice to know that they're there.

No surprise, then, that this is a car that works far better with

the five-speed automatic transmission than it does with the six-speed manual, which is notchy, imprecise and flops between its gates reluctantly.

Good news is, however, on the way for both the Crossfire coupe and convertible in the form of the supercharged SRT-6 models, which feature a 330-hp AMG-tuned engine, stickier tires and improved aerodynamics.

If speed and sportiness — as well as style — are what you're looking for, you'd be well-advised to wait for the SRT-6 models, which should arrive in showrooms later this year.

But let's face it, 330 horses, and the fuel consumption that goes with them, are simply too many for most everyday driving tasks, and in most everyday driving, style and comfort matter as much as anything else does, particularly in a convertible.

For sheer head-turning ability and warm-weather cruisability, the standard Crossfire convertible is unparalleled. It's also solid, safe and just sporty enough to be a lot of fun.

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

Alarm clocks are for people who have no reason to wake up in the morning



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