

The 2004 Mazda RX-8
Six Days and a Ton of Fun
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I recently had the pleasure of taking temporary possession of a glowing red Mazda RX-8 for the enviable task of filming a high performance driving video for Hooked On Driving. Part of the mission, and I chose to accept it, was to use the Mazda as the demonstration car in a film segment showing incorrect lines compared to correct lines around Thunderhill Motorsports Park in Willows, CA. I'll break down my discoveries into three areas: Form, Function and Fun Factor.

Form: This is the toughest area for me. I like quirkiness – even root for the underdog most of the time in the SuperBowl. And I have to respect the Mazda designers for going out on a limb with the RX-8. To say that it is different is a flair for the obvious. To call it interesting is just not helpful. Certainly, my comments later about function have a lot to do with its form, as it is one of the most convenient sports cars ever built. But back to looks. I think its best to break it down its looks by perspective and angle, as J. Lo may get different reviews from different perspectives and angles. From the front, the RX-8 provides a toothy grin with a sense of height that betrays its true sports car roots. But this is not a bad thing. The front is clean, angular and strong. The imprint of the rotor theme prominently stamped in the hood gives it a functional feel and probably adds to structural strength. I give the look from the front a B+, as unique, handsome, and not like every other aero coupe on the street. From the side (at 90°) the car has character. This is an appealing shape with purpose. No, it may not make the set of the next James Bond movie, as this car was built for the real world and reflects this reality. Clearly though, the designers of the RX-8 were committed to have a sports car with back seats that are functional for those with heads. So we cannot disparage the fact that the roofline has a tear drop effect to accommodate four adults. Simply put, the world has enough 2+2's for amputees and headless rear passengers. While this roofline does cause the observer to adapt their perspective and ask, "Is this really a sports car?," as the world discovers this car the answer will be known to be an unequivocal "yes." Considering the practical matters addressed here, we give the side view of the RX-8 and A-. Very pleasant, and not sure how we'd do it differently considering the overall goals set for the car and its use. I like the rear of the car, and it's apparent that the Mazda designers do too. The other day I pulled up behind a Mazda 3 and thought I was behind an RX-8. Certainly this rear end represents a design treatment intended to blend into other Mazda models. As the RX-8 carries the sports car image, the carryover theme would seem to be a good idea. As the shopper peruses the Mazda sales lot with a modest budget for a sporty car, this theme as applied to the 3 should only help make sales. This is not to take away from the RX-8's rear end. The term "high and tight" comes to mind in studying the backside of the 8. In fact, if you look closely at the back glass, you'll see a definitive family resemblance with the back window of the Miata hardtop. Its clean and precise, and they didn't overdo the taillights – I think they're just right. Given that we have to come down a long way from that roofline, we can't exude too much here, but this is a pleasant and clean design – a solid B. There is one perspective of the RX-8 that has me troubled. Standing, or riding the next lane over, at a four o'clock angle, looking forward at the car from the side, those

front fenders become polarizing in nature. Either you love 'em or hate 'em. Rushing to defend, this is not a deal killer, however the forties era protruding fender look does surprise one in reviewing a 2004 hot rod. Bottom line for this observer/enthusiast, the front fenders are too prominent. Not knowing the engineering requirements for wheel clearance and the like, there may be a designer screaming at this criticism, but we have to call 'em like we see 'em. We don't like the "separateness" of the fenders, but would think that blending them into the body, which is quite pleasant would be safer while retaining the sought-after uniqueness that is the RX-8. OK there I said it – I feel much better and have kept my integrity in tact. This is because I still really like the looks of this car and hope it lasts a long time in the market.

Function: Where there have been some circuitous routes taken in speaking of the RX-8's design, there will be no hesitancy here: This is the most easy to use, comfortable, and flexible sports car that I've ever experienced. What may have been a compromise in design has yielded an outstanding overall package for the enthusiastic owner who has a real life. I lived and traveled with this car and can say that it's awesome. The seats are excellent (we had the cloth seats, which add almost 2" of headroom due to no power seat motors), the ergonomics great (my wife drove the car back to the dealer and said she immediately figured out all the controls without instruction – this is a good thing), and the rear seats are REAL. Yes, a real person could actually ride in them. From the nit-pick list, I never was able to pick up the speedometer on first glance. They've placed it inside the analog tachometer as a digital readout. Being below center in the circle caused me to double take to see my speed. This might subside with time, but may need a look see from the interior designers. I'm 6'2" and felt at home – the pedals are right, to include heel and toe downshifts, the shifter is perfectly placed, the adjustable steering wheel is in a good location, and visibility is excellent considering that it's a 2+2 – no its just excellent period. With regard to space – to heck with measurements. You can get a ton of stuff in this sports car. Yes, there is no spare (rather a tire pump/sealer) – but the risk is worth it. Not only is there plenty of room in the back seat, but the trunk is more like that of a small sedan. We had golf bags, hanging bags; easels and overnight bags in there and never sweat closing the lid. Oh yes, we can't forget the brilliant clamshell door arrangement. I trust that Mazda has done the 100,000-mile drive in the outback with this car to prove that this is not a source of future rattles. With this being said, why didn't they do this back in the forties? Oh yeah...they did. Whatever the compelling reasons for this concept falling by the wayside, this is a brilliant execution of design concept yielding a great everyday convenience for the RX-8 owner. I chuckled as I took the 8 through the car wash and sat watching the window cleaning crew fight to clean the quarter windows, until I pointed out the door latch – you would have thought they'd died and gone to heaven! One more point – this rear door will be used by most owners a lot. We all have attaches, laptops, laundry, a carton of milk or whatever. This door makes stashing a light load for the run home a breeze. Overall function rating for the RX-8 – an A+ and best in class.

Fun: I saved the best for last. The RX-8, with the sport suspension and six-speed, is not only a legitimate sports car, its an excellent sports car and a steal at around \$30K. Yes, the car feels light because it is. This car may not have some of the over-the-road many

hundred thousand mile engineering of its German brethren at twice the price. However, for the person who cannot afford a Porsche or BMW, has a life (maybe even small family, or grandkids) and still wants to feel the joy of driving when possible, this car fits perfectly. While we all know that the rotary is not a star at fuel mileage, this is a quick car that wants to be driven quickly, so mileage in the high teens or low twenties doesn't scare me too much. A larger fuel tank would be nice, but this is not a major concern. This car makes you smile. In fact, I thought that when I'd first seen the Mazda "Zoom Zoom" ads on TV, there was a marketing genius behind them. Nope. They had simply driven this car, or so it seems. Zoom zoom is one of the first things that comes to mind in revving this rotary to its 9,000 redline. While the sport suspension is predictably stiff, it did not offend, and that includes my wife who likes cars but is not a fanatic. And now for the rest of the story. We took the RX-8 to Thunderhill Raceway for three days of filming a high performance driving video. I prayed that the car had brakes when I picked it up, and I prayed that they would last for three days of filming. Not to worry. They were perfect when we got it, and while we certainly did not race the car, three days of hard driving did not cause any doubt that the brakes could be completely trustworthy. Handling – yes, it does. Seriously, we demonstrated improper driving lines and proper driving lines. There were times when I tried to upset the car, and found that you really have to be an idiot to have a problem. The RX-8 actually turns in. I kept waiting for the street car plow and was almost disappointed when I realized that this car turns in predictably, has controlled body roll (the sway bars are PHAT), and the tail will come around with very steady throttle through the turn. Can you punch it and drive it with the gas pedal? No – it's not a torque monster. But in a controlled, high performance driving, scenario you naturally stay above 6500rpm and this car pulls very nicely in this upper power band. In fact, the 8 seems geared to maximize these revs. At times, the RX-8 reminded me of my first generation M3, which was only truly at home on a racetrack, where you could consistently access those rpm's. A non-traditional test of ride/handling combination happened without us planning it. Twice we had cameramen strapped in the passenger seat, helmet on, with cameras pointed in a variety of directions while they viewed the monitor placed securely between their knees. It was a small victory for the driver and a significant achievement for the car that these brave souls retained their somewhat heavy breakfasts. This car is easy to drive quickly. While there are, I'm certain some minor alignment tweaks that could be done to save the front tires, and lowering the car an inch would do wonders, I do not hesitate to recommend this as a car to drive straight from Nancy's Diner to Thunderhill for a day of spirited track driving. In my final grade, to be responsible, I have to give credit for "bang for the buck" on the RX-8. While I'd love to have a bit more torque in the stoplight stuff, this car is a hoot and a steal...I give it an A for fun.

Our time with the RX-8 was too brief. Obviously, a long-term test would give the final verdict. We did have one technical problem as the trunk latch quit on us, but this was under warranty and is hardly a concern. The biggest problem is having a red RX-8 in your driveway for a week and then explaining to your neighbors where it went. This car definitely gets noticed – and its high on my list of enthusiast cars I will recommend.