

2006 Mazda MX-5 Miata
Landmark Car for the Enthusiast
For: The Wheel
By: David Ray, www.hookedondriving.com

We feel a deep sense of duty to the SCCA community to provide a factual and thorough review of the third generation of this beloved icon of automotive passion. As a result, we've included, breaking from our traditional subjective viewpoints, specs, stats, and other numbers relevant in making sense of the new Miata MX-5. On the other hand, this is a car that was built for one purpose – to have fun driving it. And to do this in a world aimed at those who are trying to live within their means, or on the way to other goals. This is a car that is not only a blast for the driver, but is at least conceivable to purchase for anyone with a regular paycheck.



First, let's compare this long awaited new Miata to its predecessor. Mazda engineers have done a stellar job in updating the looks, performance, user-friendliness and quality of the package, while holding fast on the heretofore natural creep of weight AND price that killed off cars like the VR4 Mitsubishi, Supra, and until the 350Z arrived, the 300ZX. The new MX-5 is an excellent execution of how computers combined with passionate engineers can do wonders in improving the breed. Many had said that the Miata was just a tad tight for folks over six feet. There were also those who wanted a bit more grunt. And lastly, many clamored for an updated look, as the gen two car was a only a slight update of the original. Mazda gets an A+ in all areas that have been approached. Here's a quick comparison of some key stats:

Specification:	2005	/	2006
Length:	155.3"	/	157.3"

Wheelbase:	89.2"	/	91.7"
Weight:	2447lbs.	/	2474lbs.
Weight Distrib:	50/50	/	52/48
Height:	48.3"	/	49.0"
Engine:	Cast iron 1.8L DOHC	/	2.0L DOHC (Alum. block/head, cast iron sleeves)
Power:	142HP/125ft/lbs	/	170HP/140ft/lbs
MPG:	23/28	/	23/30
Head room:	37.1"	/	37.4"
Shoulder room:	49.7"	/	53.2"
Leg room:	42.8"	/	43.1"
Hip room:	49.2"	/	50.6"
Trunk	5.1 c/ft	/	5.3 c/ft
Optional wheels:	16"	/	17"
Brake rotors:f/r	10.6"/10.9"	/	11.4"/11.0"
Both cars have similar double wishbone front and independent rear suspensions			

Mazda is making a major commitment to promoting the engineering that is built into this clearly better Miata. We read in the press kit about a weight reduction challenge that brought about over 500 ideas on how to shave grams. Many were implemented. Examples include a simplified rear view mirror, higher strength but lighter steel, get this one – shorter fasteners, nuts and bolts, and shaving any overhang of body sheet metal to a bare minimum. From the SCCA to Mazda: THANK YOU for the extra effort – it was worth it! And in light of the current gasoline shortage and increased cost, it is truly a dream come true to see increased power, torque AND fuel mileage on the list of comparisons to the previous very good car.

OK – enough with the numbers. It's time to meet our much anticipated new guest in the garage. The first thing that will hit most of you – wow did they nail the looks. Somehow, without changing the scale of this trim sportster, they made it look much more mature, muscular and fresh. Borrowing the prominent fender flares from the RX-8, they made them a bit more restrained and got them “just right.” This car looks great from any angle. We parked the 06 next to a Z3 at the school parking lot and it looked like it was worth every penny of the Bimmer. Climbing in, the room for a big person is a much appreciated and obvious improvement. Having the privilege of driving many cars with HOD, I can compare the new Miata to the Boxster for interior room. With the Boxster, I take the seat adjustment all the way back immediately. With the Miata I found that I had one more adjustment to the rear that I did not need. Driving position is excellent with a tilt wheel that is of only marginal value with limited movement – we just set it at the top and it worked for all who drove the car in our group. Next, we have a true confession here – we were stunned by the craftsmanship – yes, craftsmanship. The tomato red paint had zero orange peel and had the luster of a high dollar custom hot rod. Fit and finish was as good as we've seen with any brand. Yes, this is a \$24,000+ car so the quality of materials does not fall in the category of Bloomingdale's, but with the budget allotted, Mazda designers showed very good taste in what they have deployed in the interior. Impact plastic with a lustrous sheen, quality vinyls and/or leathers, and very well thought out ergonomics make this car an example of simplicity and excellence in design. We

only discovered one glitch that presented this simplicity as downright confusing. The HVAC knobs all look alike and after a week I still had to focus my tri-focals on each knob to tell the temperature from the fan speed – I'm sure with more familiarity this annoyance would fade.



Firing the 2.0 liter four to life, we hit the road for an extensive run over a variety of tarmac environments. Immediately (having raced an SMT with NO pull for a year) one feels a healthy pull from the stoplight. With the optional limited slip differential, we even got a very healthy tire chirp as we left. If you're not used to the low gears, you might not realize that to make this car motivate, you have to shift it...a lot. While many sports cars will take you to 60MPH in second gear, the Miata will take a bit more work. You'll be in 4th gear as you pass 60MPH. However, with the combination of light weight, low gearing, and 140 ft lbs of torque, we can truly say that going through the gears is fun. Just don't do it within sight of a GTO or Mustang GT – this would be a serious mistake for anyone who is dealing with self-esteem issues. That said, the 06 Miata has enough power to enjoy driving without waiting for it to catch up with where you want to be. Also, on an editorial note, the Miata returns many of us to sanity. As many of the new performance cars are engineered to put us in Cell Block C if we really use what they have given us to play with. You can actually hot rod the Miata a bit and not be that terribly illegal!! You'll also find that this car is very tight. We noticed the stout windshield frame – and realized that it is a major structural support. Without knowing exactly what is under the frame's cladding, it appears to be nearly 5 inches in diameter and certainly combines with other engineering features to virtually eliminate cowl shake. Moving forward on our trek, we begin to get to know the true MX-5, and it surprised us just a bit. The new Miata is not just a sporty car. This is a serious sports car that is built for the serious sports car driver. Ride is very firm – we would not choose the Miata for the One Lap of America – it would mean certain kidney failure. And we're

certain that the Mazda engineers, many of them enthusiasts, did not really want to make compromises for those American counties and cities that have not kept up with their pothole repairs. The first spirited run we made was over a favorite kinky section that is plagued with a host of dips, chunks, holes, and cracks to test the heaviest duty pickup truck. Well – shooting straight here, the Miata felt a bit like a go kart on macadam. Driving it hard into turns was no challenge at all, but when we hit the bumps we got a fair amount of shimmy and shock transfer from side to side and in one favorite dippy spot, I think we got some air where most, more docile “sporty” cars would settle and take the punishment. We felt that, not only might the 17” wheels we were carrying be a factor here, but that a bit more damping might be in order for the real world. Of course – we’re just guessing that the Miata was engineered more for a smooth sheet of asphalt with pylons adorning it, rather than County Road J. In a more civilized and stable environment, the Miata flat STICKS. OK, another true confession: On a favorite, remote perfectly safe banked 300 degree entrance ramp, it took three runs to get close to tossing or sliding this car. Verdict? Mild understeer on entry, feather the throttle (not much) and bring her around – this car is built for this stuff!! And our conscience is almost clear as the speeds are not just plain crazy. Let’s just say our goal was to match the speed of the freeway which we were entering and we consistently and easily achieved our goal. By the way, here’s some purchase advice. If you’re going to be on the freeway AT ALL, buy the model with the 6 speed. It’s definitely worth it. We’re certain that if you plan on competing with the Miata that the “Club Spec” model would be right. We had the “Grand Touring” model with the 6 speed and we used it a lot. The brakes? The Miata stops with the best of them with no fade at all in real world situations. Another feature that must be mentioned is the lovely steering the Miata provides. This is a key element of the fun that the Miata is about. A light, speed sensitive rack and pinion system, with a lock to lock of 2.7 and a turning radius of 30.8 feet, the steering is so quick that you just feel fast as you maneuver this car anywhere from the freeway to the parking garage. On the other hand, we’ll throw out the one item that we think could be improved upon with the new Miata. The engine. Yes, it functioned flawlessly, and reflects a major improvement in the performance of the Miata. But we did not fall in love with it. Some time ago, we were fortunate enough to drive both the RX-8, and the entry-level Mazda 3. Obviously the Wankel in the 8 had a completely different feel. But the 2.3 liter engine in the 3 was silky smooth and just sang as it revved. The Miata’s new aluminum DOHC VVT 2.0 liter does not sing. And the engine noise, while we’re nit picking a bit here, overpowers the dual exhaust note. The exhaust note may be great, but the driver doesn’t hear it. Don’t get us wrong – this issue is not a deal breaker by any means – but it was a mild disappointment that stole a bit of the feel of refinement from this very slick roadster.

So there you have it. The landmark, third generation Mazda Miata MX-5. The Mazda engineers deserve major kudos for this huge leap forward in sports car fun and value. They have not only kept the car affordable and true to its original mission, but made it better in every way. The Miata is a serious sports car for those who are looking for more than image, more than utility and will appreciate an uncompromising drive at an affordable price.