

PHILOSOPHY SESSION By Joe Sage

People consistently rave about the Mazda MX-5 Miata. Always have. And why not—it's the perfect sports car (and that, to some, is *the* perfect car, period). Then again, people with a McLaren rave about that. But the MX-5 Miata is so affordable, on top of all its other pluses.

For 2016, the MX-5 Miata is all new—generation four of the diminutive heartthrob that first hit our shores in 1989 (for \$14,000).

The basic formula remains the same: a small, tight, nimble chassis; two seats; front engine; rear drive; open top; simple but complete controls and features; and the right balance of spartan comfort. Add to that an affordable price of entry; economical operating costs; economical (and minimal) maintenance; and bombproof reliability. And best of all: fun, fun, fun.

The 2016 MX-5 (known as model ND) was massaged through a couple of years of anticipation and clues; revealed globally on a single day in September 2014; and shown to us in person at an off-campus event before the LA Auto Show soon after that, a year ago November. By now, many of our readers are up to speed on it. To recap, the new model is 4.1 inches shorter and 220 pounds lighter than gen three. The skin is all new, and it's easily spotted by its slit headlights and its round-plus taillights. The 2.0-liter SKYACTIV engine is basically the same as in the newest Mazda3, but longitudinally mounted, and it has a rarity in con-

temporary cars—a metal valve cover capping off the engine, so you can show it off. Steering has a highly responsive rack-mounted electric unit.

There are three trim levels: Sport, Club and Grand Touring. There have also been a couple of special editions for the new model's introduction.

Sport starts at just \$24,915 with a tight and enjoyable 6-speed manual (or \$1480 with an automatic). Even at this level, you have A/C, power windows and locks, six-speaker audio with multiple connectivity, and leather on your multifunction steering wheel, shifter and handbrake grip (yes, it still has that great classic feature).

Club (\$28,600) has bigger wheels, stiffer suspension, Bilstein shocks, beefier front shock towers and a limited slip rear end. For the drive to your weekend circuit, audio moves up from Sport's six-speaker to a Bose nine-speaker system.

Grand Touring—the model we are driving here

(\$30,065)—upgrades the wheel finish, adds leather hides and heat to the seats, includes blind spot and lane departure warnings, and adds back-up sensors. The ragtop is insulated, and climate control is automatic, as are mirrors, wipers and headlights. (The Bilstein shocks and limited slip differential of the Club are not on this model.)

A few packages and options add performance and/or style points for reasonable amounts.

We had really liked the power retractable hard top (PRHT) on the previous Miata. It took only about 10 seconds to effectively raise, 15 seconds totally latched, and just 11 seconds to put back down. This would be good even for a fabric top.

We've timed a Porsche Boxster with soft top in the 15-second range and a BMW Z4 with retractable hardtop in the 20-second range.

Thus we were at first disappointed to see the

new Miata arrive with a return to a cloth top. We were more disappointed when we first started to tackle the thing, seeming to take more steps to unlatch, requiring an awkward body twist in a confined space to lower and more contortion to latch down. Or so it had seemed, at first.

We compared notes with colleagues and pored over opinions in online forums. Colleagues tended to think it was easy and great. One, in fact, insists he can do it at 50 mph. This is at odds with Mazda's owner's manual, which tells you to pull over, stop and turn off the engine for the operation—a big loss of convenience when a shower hits while you're at a red light on a six-lane boulevard. Forums were full of people who were going to hang onto their old Miatas (not an unusual attitude in any forum) or perhaps get a close-out deal on the gen-three with PRHT. We were leaning toward that, ourselves, at least philosophically.

Forums were also full of people who figure Mazda will reintroduce a power soft top for 2017, a power retractable hard top for 2018, perhaps a Mazdasport model after that—always something new to make news about. Possibly that's the plan.

As time went by, however, we found the process much simpler than the manual suggests. Before you even get in, reach in, unlatch, push down, click, done. It's so quick, it would take longer to press the stopwatch twice, than it takes to do.

The more we appreciated the fast ragtop, the more we wondered what we'd opt for if it were a choice. Certainly a hardtop is more urban-secure.

Philosophically, a lightweight, affordable sports car like this is a minimalist drill at its core. We might have liked more storage bins or more accessible power outlets at times, but living with a car like this should be more akin to, say, backpacking or long term cruising in a small sailboat.

Ultimately, it might make more philosophical sense if the leather-upholstered Grand Touring model had the power retractable hardtop, while the Bilstein-and-limited-slip Club model had the quick and light, purpose-built manual canvas top.

Most MX-5 shoppers probably won't let themselves get too deeply bogged down in these deeper points. As it is, the variables are several, yet simple and complete, and a decision should come easily. The yes/no decision, easiest of all. Yes. ■



SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE	SKYACTIV-G 2.0L DOHC 4-cyl
HP/TORQUE	155 hp / 148 lb-ft
TRANS.	6-spd manual, short throw shift
DRIVETRAIN	RWD
ZERO-TO-60	(third party info) ±5.8 -6.4 sec
TURNING CIRCLE	30.8 feet
WEIGHT	2332 lb
WEIGHT DISTRIB	53/47 front/rear
FUEL CAPACITY	11.89 gal
MPG	27/34/30 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE	\$30,065
REAR LIP SPOILER	350
KEYLESS ENTRY	130
DESTINATION CHARGE	820
TOTAL	\$31,365

Thoroughly revised inside and out, the Mazda MX-5 Miata has one of those personalities that always remains immediately recognizable.

