

Mazda MX-5: The Urban Runner

By **TITUS HSU**
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The Mazda MX-5, once named "the Miata," is a small, light-weight, 2-seater roadster designed for sportiness but with modest engine power. Sportiness means snappy, responsive, and lively. The MX-5 delivers these in spades.

The MX-5 is available in GX, GS, and GT trim levels. The MSRP for the base GX is \$22,305. The test vehicle is a PRHT (Power Retractable Hard Top) Special Edition, which is basically a fully loaded GT with the PRHT option and some price discount bundled in the \$29,960 sticker price. The hard top itself is a \$2,000 option, which replaces the Z-Type manual vinyl soft top. To lower the roof, one needs to release a latch before pressing the "open" button.

The roof folds into a dedicated compartment between the passenger seats and the trunk, so opening the roof does not take up any trunk space. Completely opening or closing the roof takes about 10 seconds. One thing worth mentioning is that with the roof raised, it is a little tricky to back into a parking spot, since you don't have rear door windows to look out of. You will have to rely on side mirrors and the back windshield.

The MX-5 is perceived to be a tiny car, but it actually has a reasonable amount of cabin space. With the tilt-adjustable steering wheel and slide-adjustable seats, most people should sit comfortably while driving. The leather seats are low and provide good support. It is also surprisingly wide, and the interior cabin space definitely benefits from the width.

The MX-5's width is officially stated as 67.7 inches. For comparison, a Mazda 3 sedan is 69.1 inches wide, and the 2009 Toyota Corolla is spec'd at 69.3 inches. So this car is only 1.4 inches narrower than a regular sedan. However, it is very low at a height of 49 inches compared to 57.7 inches for both the Mazda 3 and the Corolla. As would be expected for a 2-seat roadster, the wheelbase is only 91.7 inches compared to 104 inches for the Mazda 3 and 102.4 inches for the Corolla.

Despite its smallish size and weight, the MX-5 feels quite solid. The steering wheel is slightly on the heavy side, which feels solidly connected to the front wheels, and the car feels like it's firmly planted on the road when it's in motion. The engine is a 2.0L inline-4, producing a peak power of 166 bhp at 6,700 rpm and a peak torque of 140 lb.-ft., and 5,000 rpm in models equipped with a manual transmission.

The test vehicle was equipped with the optional 6-speed manual transmission. That may not sound like much power, but with a curb weight of 2,527 pounds and six gear ratios, the engine can haul the car into motion with remarkable ease.

When I received the car, it had only about 4,400 miles on the odometer. The engine sounded really rough, which puzzled me. Fortunately, after a few days, the engine became much smoother. But even then, it still emanated a low roar as soon as it revved above 2,000 rpm. The engine did not sound strained at all, but rather, it was just the sound of the engine power at work.

If you are used to quieter cars, for a little while at first you may think you are pushing the engine when in fact you are only going at an easy 3,000 rpm. The low ride height and this audible show of power give you the illusion of going faster than it really is.

Just like its sibling, the RX-8, the MX-5's throttle response and clutch are both light and quick. Engine rpm drops like a rock when you take your right foot off the gas pedal and disengage the clutch with the left foot, so the shifting needs to be quick. The clutch pedal has a short travel, and little details of the plate making contact with the flywheel come through very clearly to the left foot. Because of the lighter weight, it's fairly easy to engage the clutch at low rpm.

The design philosophy of this car is a minimalist "less is more." The dash is surprisingly simple, with traditional analog gauges. The FR (front engine, rear-wheel



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drive) power train layout is a natural choice for this car. This car is not about maximum horsepower and top speed. It may not be the fastest rocket going down a straight line, but 0-60 km/h at 7.2 seconds and a top speed of 130 mph are still highly respectable,

and certainly more than enough to get your license suspended if you so wish to try.

What the MX-5 does have, is spirit, liveliness, and fun. The light weight, short wheelbase, rear-wheel drive, suspension, and 205/45R17 tires let you plow into a corner, sling around the apex, and

accelerate out of the turn with the engine happily humming. In the city, it's not very often that you can enjoy the full acceleration and top speed of a sports car, but the liveliness and cornering ability of the MX-5 will always keep the fun in driving.

For a car to handle well, the

suspension is a crucial part of the equation. The MX-5 uses independent double wishbone with coil springs in the front, and multi-link with coil springs in the back. The car exhibits little body roll around tight corners. Braking power is supplied by power-assisted 4-wheel disc brakes with diagonal hydraulic circuits. Anti-lock Braking System (ABS) is a standard feature on all models. Limited Slip Differential (LSD) and Dynamic Stability Control (DSC) are standard on the GS model and part of the performance package option for the GT model. Standard safety features include dual front airbags and side impact door beams.

A small lightweight car with a 4-cylinder engine and a 6-speed manual transmission can be very fuel efficient if you don't mind doing a bit more shifting in the city. The gas consumption for 6-speed manual models is rated at 21 mpg in the city and 28 mpg on highways. With a bit more shifting work to keep the car cruising at less than 2,000 rpm, I managed to squeeze more than 106 miles of mostly city driving out of 3.2 gallons of premium gas.

As it is a small car with a retractable hard top, you might

expect that some trunk space would be sacrificed. Rated at 5.3 cubic feet, it can still carry some groceries and a few pieces of luggage, but it is still about half of the 11.5 cubic feet trunk capacity of the Mazda 3 sedan.

The Mazda MX-5 roadster is a racetrack-worthy car that will also spice up your daily drive in the city. With only two seats and a small trunk, there are major drawbacks in the practicality department, but it will serve as a great second vehicle providing a fun drive and good fuel efficiency.

The base model price of \$22,305 is attractive, but I would personally choose the GS for an extra \$2,100 and get the 6-speed transmission, LSD, DSC, and 17-inch wheels. The \$2,000 optional hard top may be a tricky decision. Sure, it's really great to have and the technological sophistication definitely justifies the price, but budget-conscious buyers would likely think carefully whether they want it badly enough to add \$2,000 to a \$25,000 car. Either way, there is something irreplaceable about driving a convertible on a fine day with the roof down, and the MX-5 has the performance to make the drive something special.

2009 Nissan Full-Line Trucks

By **DURHL CAUSSEY**
Special to The Epoch Times

The truck market is in serious trouble in the United States. Consumer confidence remains low and uncertainty about gas prices remains high. The large as well as the light truck market is falling, fed by a weak economy that affects everything from housing and industry to banking and business construction. Yet, auto companies like Nissan realize that such industries as construction, farming, ranching, and other outdoor-related businesses still need viable options that will require selections for full-size power and utility trucks.

At a driving event held last week in the mountains of southern Washington, American journalists were introduced to the new 2009 Nissan truck lineup. The five vehicles presented to us were the Armada, Titan, Pathfinder, Frontier, and Xterra. Getting to drive all five was really a treat, but my favorite was the Frontier.

The Nissan Frontier has always been a solid player in the mid-size pickup segment. In fact, Frontier has been highly competitive in the segment and one of the bright spots for Nissan in the truck market.



2009 Nissan Frontier has great style and performance. COURTESY OF NISSAN MOTORS MEDIA DEPARTMENT

Although Frontier customers tend to be younger, better educated, and more diverse than other segment averages, this

graying, old, car reviewer with average intelligence found the Frontier to be the best midsize truck I have driven this year.

The Frontier looked nice inside with the new seat cloth and large instrument panels, HVAC controls, and white-faced gauges.



2009 Nissan Frontier from driver's seat. COURTESY OF NISSAN MOTORS MEDIA DEPARTMENT

Combine the interior with a new grille, front fascia, headlights, and a terrific blue color body sitting on 16-inch wheels (SE), or 18-inch wheels (LE), and you have one attractive truck.

I drove a V6 that had great torque, towing, and payload capacity. The full-sized hardware, including fully boxed frame, made for excellent off-road capabilities. On highways that were narrow, elevated, curved sharply, and sometimes in a lazy S configuration, the Frontier handled smoothly and with little bounce. When the terrain changed quickly from smooth surface to gravel and boulder-shouldered pathways, the Fron-

tier took whatever I drove it over. I failed to get good miles per gallon, but did drive a great distance in one day over difficult terrain, around mountains, and through small towns, yet never stopped for gas.

The Frontier has a starting price at \$22,210 for the SE CC V6 4X2 and goes up to \$29,740 for the LE CC V6 4X4 LWB. So for about \$25,000 you can get a powerful V6 4X4, filled with amenities, that rides comfortably, hauls and tows a lot—all with an air of style.

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