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Mazda MX-5 2.0i Sport Tech



Jeremy Clarkson

There's a farm shop near where I live. Actually, it isn't really a farm shop at all because the floor is made from oak rather than fertiliser bags and all of the staff look like supermodels instead of burst walnut trees.

Inside you can buy jumpers made from exotic goats, bread that would make a Frenchman faint and apples so shiny, they could double up as disco balls. It's called Daylesford and it's the subject of much mockery, principally because everything is so bleeding expensive. As a friend of mine said recently: "I went to Daylesford to get some cheese this morning. But I only had £162 on me."

The thing is, though, it is excellent value for money. When I go there on a Saturday morning, I always meet someone who invites me round for dinner that night. This means I don't have to buy supper, or cook it.

What's more, without Daylesford I'd have to go to London to buy my groceries, which would cost £50 in petrol, £8 for the congestion charge and £100 to get my car back from the pound. So, all of a sudden, 25 quid seems the bargain of the century. Especially when you consider that Daylesford has started to affect house prices. People will pay considerably more to live near it, which means that every time someone buys a loaf of bread, I'm earning about £500,000.

And on top of all this, without Daylesford I'd have to go to a local supermarket to buy my ham. Yes, the ham there is only 4p, but it's Barbie pink and about as nutritional as the plastic bag it's sold in.

We see the same sort of thing with cars. I recently drove something called a Perodua Myvi, which sells for £7,600. That's cheap when you consider it has the same number of wheels and glove boxes as a Rolls-Royce Phantom. But it is extremely expensive when you work out how miserable and dreary it makes you feel. It's a car built utterly without joy. Buying one of these would be like buying a nylon dog simply because it's cheaper to keep.

There are lots of cheap cars on the market but only a very small number offer truly excellent value for money. The Fiat 500 is one, for sure, because just seeing it makes you happy. And the Skoda Roomster is another, provided you avoid the three-cylinder diesel version. Yes, you will save money when you buy it, but the savings will be offset by the cost of the funeral you'll need shortly after you first try to build up enough speed to join a motorway.

The Jaguar X-type is perhaps the best example of cost having nothing to do with value. Yes, it was very cheap for a Jaguar. But since it was nothing more than a Mondeo in a rented suit, it was extremely poor value for money. That's why it never sold well. And that's why 300 poor souls at the Halewood plant are now facing the dole queue.

And then there's the new Vauxhall Insignia VXR. On the face of it, this looks excellent value. The Insignia is a good-looking car and the hot version is even better. What's more, it has a long list of standard kit, a 321bhp twin-turbo engine and four-wheel drive, and since prices start at a whisker over £30,000 it is way less than its rivals from Audi and BMW.

Yes, but the money you save in no way compensates for the fact that you must spend the next year or so telling your friends that you have a Vauxhall. Which is a bit like saying you have genital warts. People will raise their eyebrows and edge away.

Buying a Vauxhall to save money is like going on holiday to Northampton to save money. You will, for sure, but you will not be as happy as if you went to France.

And all of this brings me naturally to the Mazda MX-5, which I think represents better value for money than any other car on sale in Britain today. A 1.8-litre soft-top version, as opposed to the one that comes with a folding metal roof, is £16,345, and for that you get almost exactly the same amount of fun you would get from a Ferrari 430 Spider.

This is the thing with convertibles. When the roof is down, the buffeting and the racket mean that any speed above about 80

is unpleasant. So you really don't need a million horsepower or a gearbox that can swap cogs in a billionth of a blink.

With the Mazda you get the engine at the front, rear-wheel drive and skinny tyres. This, then, is a car designed to thrill and excite and put a massive smile on your face at the sort of speed that won't mess up your girlfriend's hair.

My old mate Tiff Needell, from commercial television, is perfectly capable of power-sliding a space shuttle but argues to this day that the most fun he's ever had is in a Morris Minor, because it can be provoked into some tail-out action at about 2mph. So it goes with the Mazda. In short, you don't need to be an astronaut with titanium hair follicles to get the best out of it.

Put simply, an MX-5 feels more alive at 30mph than most other cars feel at 100.

So, every time Mazda changes something on its little sports car, I'm worried the end result will be a bit more serious, a bit more "driver-oriented", a bit more anal. And that the original recipe will have been ruined.

I realise, of course, that an original can be improved, no matter how good it may have been. You have only to listen to the Hothouse Flowers' version of I Can See Clearly Now to understand this. But, for every original that's improved, there are a thousand that are ruined.

That's why I approached the recently facelifted version of the MX-5 with a heavy heart and a sense of foreboding.

Let me give you an example. Mazda has fitted the engine with a forged crankshaft, floating pistons and new valve gear. It all sounds like the wet dream of a diehard, adenoidal car bore. But don't worry. Despite all the work, the amount of power the engine produces remains exactly as it was before. And it's the same story with the torque. The only real change is that you can now rev to 7500rpm before you need to change gear. And it all sounds a bit more sporty.

The company has changed the front suspension too, and that worried me as well. There was absolutely nothing wrong with the setup in the old car, so why fiddle? Plainly it was simply to keep the engineers out of Hiroshima's love hotels, because it is just as sparkling and brilliant as it was before. Maybe it's a bit more focused, a bit sharper. But only if you concentrate, and that's the thing about the MX-5. You don't concentrate: you're way too busy having a nice time.

Inside, you now get Recaro seats and higher-quality switches, but I didn't notice these either.

I said recently that the BMW Z4 is the best of the open sports cars, but after a couple of days with the Mazda I realise I was talking nonsense. The BMW is excellent but the MX-5 demonstrates that its extra speed, extra grip and extra size is all a bit wasteful. In the little Japanese car you get exactly what you need, and exactly the space you need, and nothing more.

I realise that the hairy-chested among you will be scoffing and tutting and heading straight for this column on the internet so you can speak your mind. You will say "girl's car" and "gay" and all sorts of other things.

Well, that's fine. You waste your money on a Mustang or a Ferrari. The fact is that if you want a sports car, the MX-5 is perfect. Nothing on the road will give you better value. Nothing will give you so much fun. The only reason I'm giving it five stars is because I can't give it 14.

The Clarksometer

Mazda MX-5 2.0i Sport Tech

Engine 1999cc, four cylinders

Power 158bhp @ 7000rpm

Torque 139lbft @ 5000rpm

Transmission Six-speed manual

Fuel 37.2mpg (combined)

CO2 181g/km

Acceleration 0-62mph: 7.6sec

Top speed 132mph

Price £19,695

Clarkson's verdict



I'd give it 14 stars if I could

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