

# Standard vs Sport

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To kick things off, I took both mk3s around one of our local test-routes, a decent mix of quickish B-roads and slower, more nifty back-roads with occasionally broken surfaces. The 1.8 felt reasonably brisk, despite its humbler 124bhp engine and five-speed gearbox (the 2.0 has 158bhp and, in Sport form, a six-speed 'box), though, as with the 2-litre, the engine note was pretty uninspiring.

Almost immediately, though, the 1.8 felt different, and it was mostly down to the ride quality. Here, at last, was some of the pliancy and fluency that we recalled from earlier models. With greater small-bump absorption came the feeling that the car was flowing through the corners rather than merely gripping its way around them. Even after just ten miles or so, I felt I'd bonded with it far more quickly than I had with either of the previous 2.0 Sports. I came back feeling pretty good about the 1.8, particularly as it costs a keen £16,400 with the must-have alloys and cloth top (as opposed to vinyl), a saving of

£1000 over a similar-spec 2.0 and a substantial £2500 less than the 2.0 Sport.

Then I took the 2.0 Sport around the same route. It was usefully quicker than the 1.8 (and with 2000 miles on the clock, noticeably punchier than it had been when box-fresh on Car of the Year), though the ultra-linear power delivery and humdrum exhaust note meant making speed was still a pretty joyless business. Apparently this engine also sees service in various Mazda saloons, which figures.

But it was still the steering and suspension causing most concern. The ride was a heck of a lot more fidgety than in the 1.8, and on one crumbly-edged road that I'd driven fairly comfortably in the 1.8, the 2.0's wheel control just went to pieces. On smoother, faster roads it was initially more impressive, but once I'd built up enough confidence to really attack a corner, back came the same weird feeling we'd experienced in Scotland. Detachment. An almost eerie lack of feedback from the steering. Initial turn-in bite was sharp enough, but in the moments immediately before and after the initial movement I had little

sense of connection with the road.

There was more. The two ends of the car seemed oddly out of tune with each other. Where the front felt sharp and stiff, the rear seemed to have extra compliance built in. And it seemed to be trying to steer the car. Not power oversteer, but a kind of turn-in rear-steer effect. It was as if the rear suspension had several layers of rubber bushing in it. (The RX-8 has a similar feel, not surprisingly since the mk3 MX-5's multi-link rear is derived from the RX-8's. As well as providing anti-dive and anti-squat in the geometry, it also allows more suspension travel.) The front end, meanwhile, felt much tauter, even pattering sideways across the road if the wheels hit imperfections – not understeer in a conventional sense, but a skittering motion.

When the weekend came and I had a choice of MX-5s, I had little hesitation in taking the 1.8. Come Monday morning, however, I wouldn't be so sure.

Saturday was spent enjoying all the things the new MX-5 does so well: running various offspring to various activities, a quick blat into town, enjoying the simple pleasures of a ragtop, raising and lowering the excellent hood one-handed. The structure felt stiff, the trim robust. Mrs T took it out a couple of times and loved it (much better, she said, than the lowered, stiffly-sprung, bucket-seated Eunos Roadster 'RS' we'd owned a couple of years ago).

Then, on the Sunday, I went for an early-morning drive. It was chilly, the roads were damp

Half a mile outside our village, around a gentle left-hander, a squeeze of throttle in third gear and *zzoooooob!* From nowhere the back end slid round a good 30 degrees. The unintended excitement was over with a slight lift and an instinctive twist of lock (traction and stability control are both omitted from the 1.8), but it was the way it had happened with no warning whatsoever that set alarms ringing. Later, on a dual carriageway, a series of roundabouts gave me a chance to experiment a little more, and on several occasions the rear stepped out suddenly and dramatically with little provocation.

This sort of tail-happiness can be a lot of fun of course, provided you can read when the car is approaching the limit of grip, but it's not so good if you're trying to second-guess what's about to happen, and the 1.8's steering was only slightly less inert than the 2.0's. For drivers unused to oversteer, we'd say the stability and traction control systems of the 2.0 versions are a must.

My perception of the 1.8 as the slightly softer, friendlier car had been turned on its head. What we had here were two versions of the new MX-5 with significant differences but also with significant flaws. Neither felt a patch on the old MX-5s of fond memory. But had we been looking back through rose-tinted specs? A call to the MX-5 Owners Club bore immediate fruit, with two owners willing to bring their earlier cars along for comparison. A few days later we were ready to go again, this time with dep ed Bovingdon along to add his voice. ●

1.8i (on the left) wears 16in alloys, while 2.0i Sport gets 17s, Bilstein dampers and a strut tower bar (visible right). Both appear to ride at least an inch too high. Below: on-limit handling of 2.0i is fine, but feedback lacking. Bottom: wooden spoon at Car of the Year 2005

