

[Mazda MX-5s]



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## Bunch of *s*

The new Mazda MX-5 bombed on our Car of the Year test, but was it a duff example or has our favourite junior roadster really lost its way?

It might seem melodramatic to report the death of a much-loved sports car, but that was how it felt to us on those testing Scottish roads. On this evidence, the MX-5 has become just another car in the Mazda range. Better built, better equipped, but they've misplaced its soul.

That was our conclusion after driving the mk3 MX-5 on eCoty 2005 (087), and it was written with a heavy heart. We've always been big fans of the MX-5, several of us have owned examples, but the latest version of the world's best-selling sports car felt ill-at-ease, uncommunicative and lacklustre.

Trouble was, most of our colleagues in the press and on television were in ecstasies over the mk3's dynamics. So, had we been testing a rogue car?

As soon as one was available from Mazda UK, we booked-in an identical-spec 2.0i Sport and drove it for a week on the roads we know best, the B-roads around our Northamptonshire base. And one by one we returned to the office with the same glum expression. It felt essentially the same as *The Scottish Car*: a jittery ride, glassy and inconsistent steering feel, occasionally snappy breakaway at the rear, and uninspiring power delivery.

The car went back to Mazda, and we could have left it at that. But then we began to wonder about the spec. Maybe a basic MX-5 with less kit, fewer gizmos and smaller wheels and tyres would feel better. So we asked Mazda's ever-helpful PR department if they could supply another 2.0i Sport, this time accompanied by a bog-standard 1.8i for comparison.

Once again they obliged, although even the 1.8 was on big wheels and wide rubber (no-one, it seems, wants small wheels and skinny tyres these days). There was a subtle difference, though. While the 2.0i Sport (which was the same car we'd had in Scotland) wore 205/45 Michelin Pilot Precedas on 17in rims, the 1.8i came with 205/50 Yokohama Advans on 16s. Smaller wheel diameter, deeper tyre sidewall. Combined with the standard suspension rather than the Sport's stiffer Bilstein set-up, maybe this would be closer in feel to earlier MX-5s.