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WITH ZOOMY
EXTERIOR STYLING
AND THE COCKPIT OF
A BRITISH ROADSTER,
THE COSMO
INTRODUCED THE
WORLD TO THE
REMARKABLE TWIN-
ROTOR 10A ENGINE.

mazda Cosmo

ROTARY ROCKET SHIP.

Even the most crazed car nerd in America wouldn't have known what to make of the Mazda Cosmo Sport 110S in the unlikely event

that one had driven past in 1967. With its zoomy, space-age styling, the Cosmo looked like a long, low-riding cross between a '61 Ford Thunderbird and an Italian show car filtered through post-Godzilla Japanese sensibilities. The steering wheel was on the right, the gearshift lever on the left. And although the engine was in the front, that was the only conventional thing about it. NSU may have gotten to market first, but the Cosmo was the world's first successful rotary-powered car. As such, it's ground zero for a company that rose from the rubble of Hiroshima to become Japan's most contrarian automaker.

Last year, to mark the rotary engine's fortieth anniversary, Mazda's North American Operations bought one of the two

Cosmos unofficially imported to the States in 1967. Climbing into it requires serious flexibility—the car sits almost as low as a go-kart—and while the cockpit isn't claustrophobic, the space is intimate. With switches and gauges galore and houndstooth seat inserts, the interior fairly screams British roadster wannabe. Still, closer inspection reveals a sort of early Japanese luxury car, generously equipped with items such as two-speed wipers, tilt steering, and a trip odometer.

Although the Cosmo is well-preserved, with only 8000 miles on the odometer, it's an artifact of an age when cars were mechanical contrivances that had more in common with the nineteenth century than the twenty-first. You can always feel the various components at work—there's power nothing on this baby—and when you come to a stop after some spirited driving, you can smell oil, brakes, and clutch. The large, skinny, wood-rimmed steering wheel has plenty of on-center slop, and the Cosmo rolls significantly on turn-in, but it never wallows, and it feels poised even when the grip-challenged 165-series tires start to give up. By modern standards, the handling is mediocre. But the car sure is fun to fling around.

And then there's the remarkable little rotary engine. The 10A was proof positive that Felix Wankel wasn't a complete crackpot (although it took



Mazda's persistent engineers to create the apex seals that allowed the engine to live long enough to serve as a production powerplant). The engine generates virtually no torque, which makes launching the Cosmo on hills a clutch-roasting study in frustration. But once the engine starts spinning, it just revs and revs and revs with the crisp, high-pitched wail that is the rotary's signature. These days, 110 hp and a 7000-rpm redline might not sound like much, but they made the Cosmo a match for just about anything in its day, and it still feels as though it's got enough punch to get the job done.

The quirky (and relatively expensive) Cosmo wasn't a giant hit—only 1176 were produced from 1967 to 1972—but it helped establish Mazda's high-performance credibility. You might say that there's a little bit of the Cosmo in every Mazda sold today.

— PRESTON LERNER