

*MX-5 Miata*

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## Comparison Test: 2006 Pontiac Solstice vs. 2006 Mazda MX-5 Miata



**The Miata walked away with this one.**

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## Introduction

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**A**ccording to Pontiac, its 2006 Solstice roadster is already a huge success. After it appeared on NBC's *The Apprentice*, the carmaker says 1,000 examples of the two-seater were sold in only 41 minutes and more than 7,000 found owners in the following 10 days.

Great, it's about time GM's Screaming Chicken division had

something to crow about. But before Pontiac's new poster child can become the darling of America's sun worshippers, it has to get past the 2006 Mazda MX-5 Miata first.

Mazda's Miata has been the small, affordable rear-wheel-drive roadster of choice since it first landed on American soil in 1990, and it isn't going to hand over its crown without a fight. For 2006, Mazda has redesigned its ragtop, perhaps in anticipation of this very shoot-out. It's now more powerful, a little larger and much better appointed. It's also, for

the first time, macho on the outside.

But the Solstice, too, comes loaded for bear. The startup from Detroit also packs rear-wheel drive, along with more sex appeal than a Jessica Simpson video, huge wheels and tires, and a larger engine than the import.

As Michael Buffer likes to say,  
"LLLLlet's get ready to rumbLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLL-  
LLLLle!"

## The Cars

Since we had just tested a very gray top-of-the-line Miata Grand Touring,





this time Mazda sent over a bright red Miata Sport, which has a base price of \$23,495 and is one notch under the Grand Touring model on the Miata food chain. Options were limited to a \$500 suspension package that adds a sport-tuned suspension, Bilstein shocks and a limited-slip differential.

We never missed the Grand Touring's leather seats, slightly fancier interior trim or its standard seven-speaker Bose® sound system, which we gave a lackluster review. The Sport model comes with all the good stuff you get with the Touring package, things like keyless entry, foglamps and the upscale-looking silver on the roll bars, and then adds a six-speed manual transmission (lesser models have a five-speed), a strut tower bar for increased chassis stiffness and 17-inch wheels and tires. Every Miata gets ABS, a CD player and a tilt three-spoke steering wheel.

Power comes from a normally aspirated 2.0-liter, double-overhead-cam four-cylinder that makes 170 horsepower at 6,700 rpm and 140 pound-feet of torque at 5,000. That's only 8

horses less than the 2005 turbocharged Mazdaspeed Miata offered.

It's also 7 ponies shy of the Pontiac's output. The larger 2.4-liter Ecotec four-cylinder, which also sports two double-overhead camshafts, is rated at 177 hp at 6,600 rpm. The additional displacement also gives the Solstice quite a torque advantage

over the Mazda. Pontiac says the Ecotec cranks out 166 lb-ft at 4,800 rpm.

But that additional power is there to compensate for the larger Pontiac's 350-pound weight disadvantage and GM's decision to fit the Solstice with a five-speed manual instead of a six.

**All tallied up, the Pontiac cost about a grand more than the Mazda . . .**

This Cool Silver Solstice, which we recently road tested on its own, arrived on our doorstep loaded with options, hiking its sticker price well above its \$19,950 base price. It had everything, and it all costs extra, including air conditioning, ABS and leather seats. All tallied up, the Pontiac cost about a grand more than the Mazda, while they were more or less comparably equipped.

### The Test

We had fun.



First we spent most of the week banging around L.A. in both. Top down, of course. Joy rides were plenty, but we also used these little roadsters as our daily drivers to see which makes the drive to work more palatable. This was also when we evaluated their fuel mileage, their cargo-carrying abilities and their cupholders.

Then we headed north to our double secret test facility where we ran them through our grueling battery of instrumented testing. You know, 0-60-mph acceleration, slalom, that kind of stuff.

From there it was off to some of central California's best driving roads, including Routes 33 and 166, which snake through 100 miles of lush canyons before ending up in the desolate flatlands to the east. There, surrounded by nothing, is the Buttonwillow road course, where we set up a tight 11-turn configuration to further evaluate the athleticism and smile factor of the two two-seaters.

When we felt their eight tires and 16 brake pads were sufficiently cooked, we hammered each down the dead-straight Interstate 5 for a 150-mile return trip to L.A.

After that, it was one last romp of a weekend in each.

### The End

Check the stats and the similar performance numbers of these two cars, and you'd expect this test to be a dead lock, maybe even a squeak-out win for the Pontiac.

Didn't happen, the Miata walked away with this one.

Don't get us wrong, we like the Solstice. In fact, if the Pontiac was



competing with a 2005 Miata we're pretty sure it would have come out on top.

**... the biggest reason the Miata took this one is the simple fact that it's 10 billion times more fun to drive.**

But this new Miata, or MX-5, or whatever Mazda is calling it, is really something. Its interior is better finished than the Pontiac's, its performance is a bit better and it's the better convertible, with superior wind protection for its passengers and a far superior top design.

But the biggest reason the Miata took this one is the simple fact that it's 10 billion times more fun to drive. It's more responsive. Its engine is livelier and its gearbox feels like it was plucked from a shifter kart. It also has more steering feel, and it stops better.

The Pontiac, although fast, just doesn't offer the same connection to the machine. It feels distant, more like a boulevard star than a true two-seat sports car.

Well, in our world, these roadsters are supposed to be true sports cars. And sports cars are supposed to be fun. The more fun the better. And cars just don't get any more fun than the 2006 Mazda MX-5 Miata.

# First Place: 2006 Mazda MX-5 Miata



Over the last 15 years, Mazda's Miata has accumulated a goodly number of kill stickers on it flanks. Affordable drop tops that have taken on the Mazda only to have gone down in flames include the front-wheel-drive Australian-built Mercury Capri of the 1980s and the front-drive Lotus Elan of the mid-'90s.

Well, the 2006 Pontiac Solstice put up a good fight, but you can add it to the list of the Miata's fallen foes.

A little larger, a little more refined and a lot more powerful than its predecessor, the 2006 Mazda MX-5 Miata is without a doubt the best of its breed. Mazda has taken everything that was always right with previous generations of the roadster and improved upon all of it.

## Still Tossable

Still under 2,500 pounds, the Miata is as tossable as ever. Mazda's engineers were able to improve the car's ride by increasing its wheelbase by 2.6 inches and increasing its rear suspension travel, but without sacrificing its athleticism.

They also completely rethought the car's balance. Despite the new version's additional size, by using aluminum instead of iron for the engine's block and mounting it 5.3 inches farther back in the chassis, they kept the car's overall weight increase to only 22 pounds, while shifting some of the mass rearward. Mazda says the car is now slightly nose-heavy at the curb, but comes back to 50/50 with two aboard.

These changes have made the Miata easier to drive fast. No longer does the rear end want to snap around during trail braking, a situation which was only made worse by its super-short wheelbase. More than one Miata has been backed off the road over the years. Now the car rotates just enough for advanced drivers to get a thrill, while the longer wheelbase and larger tires have slowed the transitions so the slide is much easier to catch.

A little less body roll during hard cornering would be nice, but the setup works so well, we're hesitant to even suggest a change.

Combine those moves with quick and communicative steering, a stiff chassis and trustworthy brakes, which stop it from 60 mph in just 117 feet, and the new Miata is sinful on a mountain road, and just flat-out addicting on the racetrack. Although its pace could be matched by the Solstice in the slalom (64 mph), as well as on the road and racetrack, the Miata's is the more engaging and ultimately more rewarding drive.

Basically, the Miata does exactly what its driver asks it to, right or wrong. We like that. But the tradeoff for all that response is a busier highway ride than you get in the Pontiac. This is still by far the most open-road-friendly Miata there has ever been, but it's still too small, too noisy and too choppy on the interstate to make driving across states fun.

## Fast Enough, Finally

It's faster, too. Faster than its predecessor and faster than the Solstice.

**. . . the new Miata is sinful on a mountain road, and just flatout addicting on the racetrack.**

Power comes from a 170-hp, 2.0-liter, double-overhead-cam four-cylinder that heads for the top of the tachometer like New Yorkers head for the Hamptons on summer weekends. Redline is a heady 6,750 rpm, and the power peaks at 6,600 rpm, but the engine feels so good up there, and the gearing of the six-speed is so short, Mazda lets the engine reach past 7,200 rpm before any sort of rev limiter kicks in. Sometimes holding a gear



and saving a gear change makes a whole lotta sense, and those extra revs come in handy.

But you don't have to ring this engine out like a dishrag to find power. It's surprisingly strong off idle and has a nice punch in the middle of its rev range. Its torque peak of 140 lb-ft hits at 4,800 rpm, which may sound high, but with the ultrashort gearing in the Miata's six-speed it's easy to find.

Just how much shorter is the gearing in the Miata's six-speed compared to the five-speed in the Solstice? Listen to this. The Miata finishes the quarter-mile at the top of fourth gear, while the Solstice hits the traps in third. And out on the highway the difference is really jarring. The Miata revs close to 4 grand at 80 mph in sixth gear, while the Solstice is revving under 3,000 rpm in fifth. This makes passing on the highway easy, while passing in the Solstice requires a downshift, maybe two.

It also gave the less powerful and lighter Miata bragging rights at the drag strip, where it sprinted from zero to 60 mph in 7.5 seconds and through the quarter-mile in 15.5 seconds at 89 mph. Both performances are better than the Solstice can manage.

Throw in the fact that the Miata's engine sounds better, is smoother and out-sprints the Solstice through a lighter clutch, and it's clear which car's drivetrain we prefer.

### Upscale Interior

The redline on the Miata's tachometer completely disappears at night.

That's the biggest complaint we can lodge at the Mazda's new interior. Sure it's cramped compared to the interior of the larger Pontiac, but it's also better appointed, offers a better driving position and has far superior fit and finish.

Jump from the Solstice and into the Miata, and the first thing you notice is the Mazda's full instrumentation, which even includes a real oil pressure gauge with a needle that moves and everything. Then you notice its artfully finished three-spoke steering wheel, its firm and supportive seat, and that perfectly placed stubby little shifter. We also really like the upscale piano black trim on the dash and the fact that the window switches are on the console behind the shifter where they should be.

There are four cupholders, two behind the shifter and one on each door. Don't plan on doing much shifting if you load up the two behind the shifter. Otherwise, it's a masterpiece of packaging. But we do question the need for redundant radio controls on the steering wheel when the faceplate of the sound system is just 4 inches to the right. We'll reach over.

To drop the top, you don't even have to leave your seat. Just reach up, unlatch a single central latch at the windshield header, and toss the top back. It even folds so cleverly as to form its own boot, much like the top on a Porsche Boxster does. By comparison, the top design on the Solstice is...OK, we'll be nice... "wanting."

Wind noise and turbulence with the top down is also considerably better in the Miata. By reshaping the windshield header, adding small front-quarter windows and providing a wind blocker behind the seats, Mazda masterfully steers the rushing air away from the



car's occupants. In the Pontiac that same 70-mph gust curls around the A-pillar unopposed and slams the driver flat in the face.

**... the 2006 Pontiac Solstice put up a good fight, but you can add it to the list of the Miata's fallen foes.**

### Conclusion

And it's those details, and there are quite a lot of them, that give the Miata the edge over the Solstice. When you drive the Mazda, it becomes obvious that every aspect of the car was designed and engineered by people who love cars and love to drive. You can tell they told the bean counters, the suits and all the other stuffed shirts how it was going to be and not the other way around.

This is rare in the car business, and the results speak for themselves.

Mazda has managed to make the Miata more comfortable, easier to drive and just plain faster, but without sacrificing any of its purity or affordability. The 2006 MX-5 isn't only the best Miata ever, it's still a Miata and it's still the affordable sports car of choice.

Please call Mazda at 1-800-639-1000 for more info,  
or visit MazdaUSA.com