

## MX5 MK 1 Buyers Guide

There is a range of Roadster models available, all well described elsewhere. The three major types are S-Package; the "standard" car, S-Special; slightly sportier version (uprated suspension) and V-special;

tan leather edition. There are various special editions, most generally derivatives of the S-Special.

For the Mk1 Roadster, there are 4 main iterations. From 1989-mid-1991, there is the Phase 1 NA6CE, effectively the original 1.6 model. From 1991 to mid 1993, there is a Phase 2 car, with a modified rear subframe, modified crankshaft (to address a weakness) on the 1.6 and some trim improvements. From mid 1993, the 1.8 was introduced (and the 1.6 dropped), and the car is often referred to as NA8C (the code being derived from the chassis number). Besides the engine change, there are also significant changes to the interior, and exterior (new wheels). A revised model (called Series 2) was introduced in mid-1995, which featured a lightly revised engine, revised trim (though in truth, in some ways it was more cheaply made), revised final gearing (to ape the special edition RS-Limited of 1994); the original 1.6 was 4.300. The original 1.8 and all UK 1.8s were 4.100. The Series 2 Roadster 1.8s went back to 4.300, along with a lightened flywheel.

There is a fair amount of evidence that Mk1 values are now firming up; there are cheap cars about still, but they're often of poor quality. If anything, import values seem to holding better than UK model prices; though that might be more to do with relative differences in average condition than any market snobbery. With UK cars, in general, you need to be aware of potential rust damage. With imports, you need to be aware of potential poor accident repair. Values are now generally based on condition; not age. An excellent 1.6 car may well cost the same as a later model. Which is better is down to personal preference. I prefer the 1.8, but acknowledge the 1.6 is a sweeter engine.

If the dealer is an importer, ask to see the Auction Sheets. Although it is mostly in Japanese, you can use it to partially confirm mileage (on the auction sheets, only documented mileages are noted), condition (a cartoon representation of the car indicates any body damage. "X" or "XX" indicates a replaced or repaired panel) and chassis number (the Roadster/MX5 bears the chassis number in two visible places; directly behind the engine, stamped on the bulkhead, and on a screwed-on ID plate above the brake master cylinder. Check the numbers match! Also, keep a crib sheet handy of the paint codes (see [miata.net](http://miata.net)); at least it will flag up a resprayed car, or, worse, a car with a ringer VIN.

As I said, cheap cars can be still had, but they often disappoint. Some dealers sell very expensive cars; the more reputable ones will spend some time giving these cars a decent refreshment; new trim, and nicely prepared bodywork.

Check:

1. Panel alignment; in general, all the panel gaps should be very even. Headlight lids can often be out of line along the back edge with the bonnet; that's usually down to a careless mechanic leaning on the lid. But, beware of one which is significantly proud of the bumper line. It might mean front accident repair. Repaired cars often have odd bolts and missing fittings. Seized bonnet hinges can often cause the rear edge of the bonnet to become misaligned.

2. Run a hand along the dimpled stone chip on the lower halves of the panels. It should be an even, Hammerite-like finish. Unevenness, or a sandpaper like texture indicates remedial paintwork, pointing to accident damage. But it could also be a simple paint repair; remember, all of these cars are now getting on a bit, and the paint wasn't that resilient in the first place (one of the first water-based paints to be used anywhere). With the bonnet open, check the underside for various stickers; if not present, the bonnet has almost certainly been replaced.

3. On UK cars, and some imports that have been here a while, check the condition of the sills in front of the rear wheels (also the rear wheel arch, especially the nearside) for rust. You can also get rusting on the A-pillars, though this seems to be mostly associated with windscreen replacement. Earlier cars with the factory sill covers, can have a bit of bubbling rust at the edges. This is usually just surface rusting, caused by poor pads on the sill covers. On later cars, the pads were revised, and this doesn't seem to happen.

4. Quite a few imports will have modified panels, such as aftermarket bumpers. Usually these are fibreglass; check the quality of the paint carefully, and look for any cracks, either on the bottom edge, if its been hit into a kerb, or on the corners, indicating a poor fit.

5. Mechanically; listen for excessive tappet (actually HLA) rattle on start-up. Often cars at dealerships that have been sitting around a while (and some of these imports might not have been driven much at all for 2-3 months), will rattle alarmingly on cold start-up. Take the car for a good run. If it is still rattling when you get back, walk away. The engines are generally reliable; do usual checks for oil in water, and water in oil. Cars that have been standing a while may have some mayonnaise on the underside of the oil cap. Look for blue smoke, but you might not see much even on a worn engine, due to the catalytic converter. In general, import mileages will be far less than on UK cars (remember, import odometer will read in kms; 100kms~ 61 miles). Top end oil leaks (from around the cam cover) are common place; cheap fix. On a 1.8, minor leakages from the back of the cam-cover can soften then heater hoses, causing them to split. Imports tend to be well serviced in Japan as far as oil changes go, but don't have much else done to them during their first 100k kms. Cam belts seem to be rarely changed in Japan, but if a belt breaks, it doesn't kill an engine. If getting an import, bank on getting all fluids changed; that's engine oil, radiator coolant, brake fluid, clutch fluid, diff oil, gearbox oil. Also assume new tyres will be needed; even if the car gets through an MOT,

they'll likely be in shocking condition. Check the condition of the radiator; the plastic top can fail with age, so look for signs of fine cracks around the filler spout. Check that there is coolant in the expansion tank; if its low, or empty, the car is probably loosing coolant somewhere.

6. Check the operation of the clutch; the bite is generally mid-travel. Worn clutches will have a bite point near the top of travel. If the bite is at the bottom of travel, suspect a worn clutch slave cylinder or clutch master cylinder (confirmed if the clutch fluid looks low). The gear change will feel quite notchy compared to most cars. When cold, it might be especially stiff, especially 1st to 2nd. Earlier cars are worse in this respect than later cars, which had a minor modification to the gearbox.

7. Brakes; The brakes will stop the car well, but they will feel poor compared to many more modern cars, due to what feels like excessive pedal travel. 1.8s will stop better than 1.6s, due to larger discs and pads, (but the callipers are identical). Check the operation of the handbrake, a notorious weak point in any cars using the same basic Lockheed-Girling design. If it slips on a hill, it might just need adjustment, but assume (for the purposes of negotiation) a new calliper is needed. Obviously look for uneven braking. Check discs for scoring, or heavy wear; but they are cheap to replace.

8. Suspension; usually the shock boots will be all torn up. No problem; its not a MOT requirement, and does not affect shock operation. If the rubber bits are missing entirely, the car will not handle well due to lack of bumpstops. Quite a few imports will have lowered suspension, with fairly exotic/expensive setups The basic setup can be recognised as a black shock, and a black spring (on a fresh import, these will look like nearly new). There were factory optional Bilstein (yellow) and KYB (orange, quite rare, not to be confused with aftermarket KYB s). These cars ride a little lower. Many Roadsters will have aftermarket lowering springs on; you might not like the hard bumpy ride these will have. Some dealers will rather sneakily portray a modified car as a standard model by fitting scrapyard parts (sometimes a giveaway are scrawled paint marks on the parts). A giveaway of a car's past life is a quick check of the "chassis members" that run along the floorpan (strictly speaking, not really structural); a lowered car will have scrapes and other scars. Quite alarming dents are not uncommon, but not to be too worried over; beware of splits though; some of these cars are moved around by forklift! Rattles during a test drive are probably indicative of worn bushes.

9. Steering; the jury is out over whether power or manual steering is best. I have both, and prefer the former, finding the manual rack too dead about the centre, but its horses for courses. Generally, imports have power racks (though they can be had with manual racks). Power racks are prone to worn track rid ends; due to people turning the wheel without moving the car. Some cars will display a certain vibration around 60mph; its difficult to say what this is down to. It might be the tyres, some find the fitment of a front spoiler improves things. On a standard car, tyre wear should be even; the cars will have a slight negative camber on the rear. On lowered cars, this negative camber is exaggerated, and possibly you might see more wear on the inside tread, but not excessively so. The choice of wheels can also affect the ride and handling. In general, the smaller (14" and 15") diameter

wheels work better than larger wheels, especially on lowered cars (though there are exceptions). Aftermarket wheels fitted in Japan can often appear very grotty and corroded, but are usually fundamentally very good (expensive) wheels, and worth saving. Check if wheel spacers are fitted (quite popular in Japan); these generally don't do anything for the handling.

10. Interior. Generally, the standard cloth stands up to wear very well. The bolsters can look a bit fuzzy on high mileage cars. Post -95 cloth seats had a slightly changed cloth, and wore very badly. For factory leather seats, the leather doesn't last too well, but they can be inexpensively repaired. Most imports will have nice factory overmats; check the carpet underneath for holes and wear. Check behind the seats and under the carpet for signs of a rollbar being fitted. Again, some dealers, in the interests of selling a standard car, will strip out extras like rollbars. Knowing a car has previously had a rollbar fitted might change how you view a car. On the other hand, Japanese rollbars will often rob seat travel.

11. Check the aircon works; with the engine running, the revs will kick up slightly as the compressor kicks in. If the revs dip with the aircon, there could be issues to do with the ECU, that can be difficult to pin down. With the engine running, you'll note the oil pressure will read high when the engine is cold. As it warms, it will drop to 2.5-3.0 kg/cm (its all metric in an import, psi in a UK car); entirely normal for those not used to oil pressure gauges in cars (after 1995, the pressure gauge became a dummy item). The temperature gauge should warm to just left of centre. When you switch on the ignition, in an import, a "Heat" symbol should light up, then extinguish with the firing up of the engine. This indicates a sensor in the catalytic converter, and its quite normal. If it remains lit, or doesn't come on at all, questions need to be asked.

12. Check the headlight operation; the lights should pop up smoothly and without clonks. If one looks like it comes up a little slower than the other, a linkage is worn. On a fresh import, the radio FM will not work properly; there are FM tuning devices that can correct this (though the display will remain incorrect). The radio can of course be replaced easily.

13. Check the electric window operation; pre-92 cars will have a push-push button design (retained on all UK cars). Later Roadsters have a push-pull button design, with an auto-function on the drivers side. The windows should open and close reasonably fast. If they struggle, they need looking at. Some Roadsters were available with normal wind-up windows.

14. And to the roof. The main reason you're buying a MX5/Roadster is almost inevitably tied to the drop-top idea. A poor condition roof is fairly obvious; check for splits in the vinyl, or a cloudy window (or worse). Evidence of leaks can be seen fairly obviously on cloth seats as a tide mark. Cars with a hardtop will have a better preserved softtop (though the lining can be often faded). New soft-tops

are relatively inexpensive these days, so often a dealer will fit a new top before sale. Not all cars will have a hood cover (to cover the hood in the folded position); these were optional on Roadsters. Check the hood catches lock securely; the catches can wear, causing them to open at inopportune moments. If the hardtop is fitted, check all the correct catches are present, including side catches.

15. Odds and Sods. Check there is a jack and wheel brace present. With luck, there might be the full toolkit present, in a vinyl roll, consisting of a screwdriver, cheap pliers, and a sparkplug remover. If the car has aftermarket wheels fitted, check the wheel brace actually fits the wheel nuts. Some aftermarket wheels require an adaptor. Check the condition of the sparewheel; often overlooked. Check the battery; ideally it will be a Mazda-fit Panasonic battery, with all vent tubes connected. If not, check if there is any venting; it really should be to prevent corrosion in the boot. Check the battery is secure, and on a proper battery tray. Lift the boot carpet, and check for dampness, which might indicate a problem with the roof, leaking rear light gaskets, or possible rear body damage. Check all the locks; Roadsters came with 2 keys; one that opened all the locks, and one, a "valet's key", which operated only the doors, ignition and boot. Check the driver's lock; the little spring-loaded flap protecting the barrel often breaks, and the lock become stiff. Foglight; check one is actually fitted. Its been known for some importers to somehow get a car through a MOT without one being fitted, which calls into question if it has a valid MOT. I prefer one fitted to the rear tow hook, as no cutting of bodywork is needed, and it can be tucked up out of sight when not needed. Others have a reverse light or the boot brake light converted.