

## Minivan Makeover - 2009 Mazda5

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Hi, my name is Jeff, and I'm a sports car snob. I hate to admit it, but it's true. I love a car that's small, fast, lithe, and sexy-looking. Maybe that makes me shallow, but it's a lifelong prejudice that I've held. Many's the time I've scoffed at the terminally uncool, riding around town in frumpy transportation, smug in the knowledge that my car was better, faster, and usually cheaper than their dumpy shoebox on wheels.

So, what am I supposed to make of the Mazda5? Mazda doesn't call it a minivan, but that's what it is. It's smaller than the typical minivan, but it's got dual sliding doors, third row seats, and the sloping front we've come to associate with the soccer-team haulers that have dominated the last 20 years of American motoring.

Yet the Mazda5 is built on the same chassis as the sporty Mazda3 and shares the same 2.3-liter MZR engine used in the Formula Atlantic racing series. The automatic transmission is tight and peppy - and strangely, just as sporty as the 5 speed in the Mazda3 I drove just two weeks ago! When you get in the Mazda5, all the Minivan uncool just falls away and you feel like you're driving a sexy little Mazda3 hatchback or sport compact.

That's significant. Wait - no, it's closer to unbelievable. By taking the size of the Minivan down to just a bit larger than a hatchback, Mazda hasn't given up much utility, but has taken the cliché of the tinny, tippy, underpowered minivan and turned it on its ear. The Mazda5 is none of those bad things, and has everything that's good about a compact.

The 2.3-liter engine offers you 156 horsepower and 150 pound-feet of torque. Fuel economy is 21/27. The Mazda5 comes in at a base sticker price of \$22,675 for the Grand Touring model. That's including leather, HID headlights, CD changer, LED taillights, heated seats, sunroof, hands-free cell phone interface, and all the features you want these days. Of course it's got AC - you really can't find a car that doesn't have air these days.

As I mentioned, the driving experience in the Mazda5 is remarkably similar to the experience in the Mazda3. The suspension is tight and smooth, the engine delivers the goods, and even the automatic transmission is snug and peppy. And if you're worried about the smaller footprint, the Mazda5 gets 5 stars for frontal crash protection, 4 stars for rear seat side impacts, and 4 stars again for rollovers. The car has more air bags than Congress, including side curtain bags for all three rows of seating. It's got the special latches for car seats, and tire pressure monitoring. So the Mazda5 has got its safety chops in order - something that hasn't always been the case with minivans.

The bottom line on the Mazda5 is that the folks at Mazda meant it when they adopted the slogan "Always the soul of a sports car," and that's made a believer out of me.