

Putting the Zoom Zoom

In the Family Sedan

By Roger Witherspoon

It had been raining fiercely, and after the storm passed the temperature dropped faster than the winter daylight and I-95 coming out of the nation's capitol was coated with water slowly changing to ice.

We were just south of the Delaware line when a gust of wind ripped through the hills and broadsided the tractor trailer running in the center lane, and the rear set of axels rapidly crossed into the passing lane and those large wheels closed the distance between us. There was only time to floor the accelerator and slide slightly to the left, leaving those wheels on gravel while the right wheels rolled on wet pavement.

But Mazda's tend to be build for performance under pressure. They test the effectiveness of the traction and electronic stability control programs on their vehicles by putting explosive charges in a wheel, and then blowing it during a run on their test track. In this case, the Mazda 6, with one set of wheels on gravel and the other on water, concrete, and ice jumped to 90 miles an hour in seconds and left the careening trucks in the heated rear view mirrors. I made a mental note to thank the guys who put the Zoom Zoom into a family sedan.

There are two reasons for paying attention to the Mazda fleet: Their designers take pains to put a comfortable car into an affordable package; and their engineers take pains to pack enough performance to make a moderate priced car as much fun to drive as the higher priced wheels. In this case, Ford's Japanese affiliate has produced a family sedan which can comfortably cruise across country, or – if weather, roads and police permit – zoom into the triple digits.

The Mazda 6 has a V-6 engine pumping out 212 horsepower, which is enough to push the sedan to about 120 miles per hour, a speed that is unsafe enough for most motorists and most roads. The spoiler on the back of this Zoom Zoom special is, actually, functional. The sedan's six-speed automatic transmission smoothly slides between gears, avoiding the whine and jolt one might expect from under the hood of a \$30,000 vehicle.

After the sliding truck was in the background, the only sound in the Mazda was the soft sound of flutes from the Harold Johnson Sextet emanating from the seven speakers in the Bose surround sound system. There was no roar from the passing wind to mar the mood in the tight, comfortable cabin.

It is a comfortable ride. The seats are wide, padded and leather, though only the driver's seat is powered, and the manually operated passenger seat seems out of place in this price range. But the seats are also heated, which was appreciated.

The rear section of the four-door sedan contains more than enough leg and head room for a pair of NFL-sized adults, or three kids. And the trunk – which is designed to hold about a month's worth of luggage – can be enlarged if the rear seats are folded flat.

On the other hand, the Mazda 6 does come with a navigation system, something that is often optional at this price. The navigation system's controls are designed for a generation of motorists raised on computer games and joy sticks. There is a small, hand-held device which can rest in its slot on the console for driver, or be picked up and used by a passenger. For us older folks, the joy stick takes a bit of getting used to and it takes a

bit of practice to learn to hit the command you aim for. But for the most part, the system is intuitive and easy to use.

The Mazda 6 is not a car in which your body complains and the aches accumulate as the miles roll by. It is powerful and maneuverable enough to keep one's racing edge active, and comfortable enough to double as a living room on wheels. All you need to do, is pack your favorite music, pick a distant place in this wide country, and roll.

2008 Mazda 6

MSRP:		\$30,025
EPA Mileage:	18 MPG City	25 MPG Highway
As Tested Mileage:		18.8 MPG Highway

Performance/ Safety:

Top Speed:	118 MPH
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3.0-Liter DOHC V-6 engine producing 212 horsepower and 197 pound-feet of torque; 6-speed automatic transmission; independent front & rear suspension; 4-wheel disc brakes; traction control; dual front airbags; side air bags & side air curtains; 18-inch alloy wheels; high density headlights; fog lamps; heated outside mirrors.

Interior/ Comfort:

AM/ FM/ Sirius satellite radio/ in-dash, 6-disc CD changer; navigation system; 200-watt Bose audio system with 7 speakers; power moonroof; power driver's seat; leather seats and steering wheel; tilt & telescoping steering wheel with fingertip audio and cruise controls.