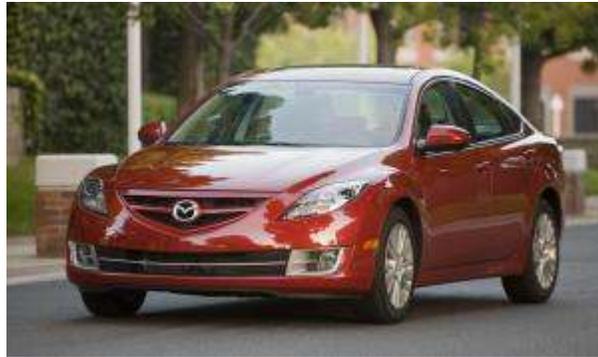


Shifting Gears

Road Running in the Zoom – Zoom 6

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By Roger Witherspoon

The distinctive shape of the Pentagon served as a growing beacon through the windshield of the Mazda 6, seeming to draw more and more motorists to the highway heading towards the nation's capital. Some of them paid more attention to the sights in the distance than to the vehicles around them.

A minivan in a hurry suddenly entered the highway from the right, the driver not bothering to see if any cars were already in the lane he was lumbering into. In an instant, I realized I was about to be rammed and the midday motoring crowd did not leave a lot of room for maneuvering.

I hit the chrome gearshift, taking the transmission out of automatic and putting it into manual mode. Then I downshifted to fourth gear and floored the accelerator. The Mazda's power plant is small: just 2.5 liters cranking out 170 horsepower. The little engine whined, but the sedan shot forward as I changed lanes, with just inches separating me from the side of the minivan and its oblivious driver. After that episode, sightseeing in Washington DC was a treat.

The zoom-zoom guys from Mazda have been running a series of laid back commercials with young motorists tooling around in Mazdas festooned with little blue and white flags, having too much fun behind the wheel to return the car to the show room. And on a long trip, from the bumper-to-bumper streets of New York City, past the Jersey Shore, through the nation's capital to the wide open, meandering roads through the Virginia horse country, the Mazda is a comfortable

car to use to see the countryside.



This is not a sports car, regardless of the zoom-zoom handle. The Mazda 6, the company's mid sized sedan, is designed for affordable touring, and has enough amenities, comfort and room for four large adults. Or, if you have three children, the rear center seat is actually large enough for the trio to ride without constantly fighting for space.

The exterior of the Mazda 6 has the trademark, wide front wheel wells, which get even more pronounced on its sport cars. But on the sedan, serve to distinguish the Mazda from other sedans on the road, such as the Subaru Legacy or Nissan Altima, or Toyota Corolla. Mazda's designers, however, seem to have saved most of their creative efforts for the interior.



The seats are wide, padded, soft, leather with double cable stitching to set it off. The front seats can be heated, if the season calls for it, and are power adjustable. On long trips, these seats are not an enemy, and the leather padding on the arm rests are also appreciated.

On the entertainment side, the Mazda 6 comes with a six-disc CD player as well as an iPod and MP3 connection, and USB port. There is the standard AM/FM radio, and XM satellite radio. Whether one prefers talk, hard rock or soft jazz, the sounds emanate from a 10-speaker Bose system which provides a seamless envelope at speeds under about 45 miles per hour. At faster speeds, the wind noise intrudes – which would probably just blend into heavy metal music, but wrecks havoc with jazz solos from Miles or Chick Corea. The sedan could use more sound shielding – but that would probably push up the \$31,000 price tag, a reasonable figure for a fully loaded, mid-sized sedan.

The interior of the Six is larger than one would think. There is about a yard of air separating the front of the back seat from the back of the front seats – providing comfortable room for a car load of six footers. The ceiling over the back seats even curves up about an inch to ensure head room for tall guys or bouffant hair-dos.

The trunk is large enough for a week's worth of luggage and laptops. But if transporting an

Olympic ski team where extreme length is required, the rear seats fold down in a 60/40 split.

There are also a couple of safety touches in the Six. In addition to fog lights, the car has side radar monitoring the vehicle's left and right blind spots. If there is a car in either location, warning lights in the shape of a car flash on the corresponding side view mirror. The innovation is particularly helpful in traffic or bad weather conditions.

If there is a complaint about this basically well made car, it is in the choice of navigation systems. On the plus side, it has an 8-inch touch screen and is easy to use or program. On the downside, the robot lady who offers directions is, apparently, an immigrant who does not understand the difference between the American directional idioms for "turning" and "bearing". The difference can be critical at highway interchanges where the main exit off the highway divides into several additional exits and "bearing right" means passing up the first right "turn." It takes the robot lady about 100 feet past an exit to realize the difference and up to a mile to figure out just how lost you are. The system also lacks software allowing for traffic updates and rerouting around tie-ups or severe weather.

But that's a minor matter of personal pique. In general, the zoom-zoom boys have produced a competitive, comfortable, affordable, attractive sedan for all occasions.



2010 Mazda 6 GT

MSRP: **\$30,765**

EPA Mileage: **21 MPG City** **30 MPG Highway**

As Tested: **23.3 MPG Highway**

Performance/ Safety:

2.5-Liter, 4-cylinder, DOHC engine producing 170 horsepower and 167 pound/feet of torque; 5-speed automatic transmission; independent front & rear suspension; 4-wheel disc brakes; traction and stability control; fog lights; 17-inch alloy wheels; passing radar warning; dual front air bags; side air bags and air curtains.

Interior / Comfort:

AM/FM/XM satellite radio; 10-speaker Bose sound system; 6-disc CD player; MP3, iPod, and USB music ports; tilt & telescoping leather steering wheel with fingertip audio, cruise command, and Bluetooth controls; touch screen navigation system; power and heated, leather front seats; fold-flat rear seats with a 60/40 split; power sun roof.