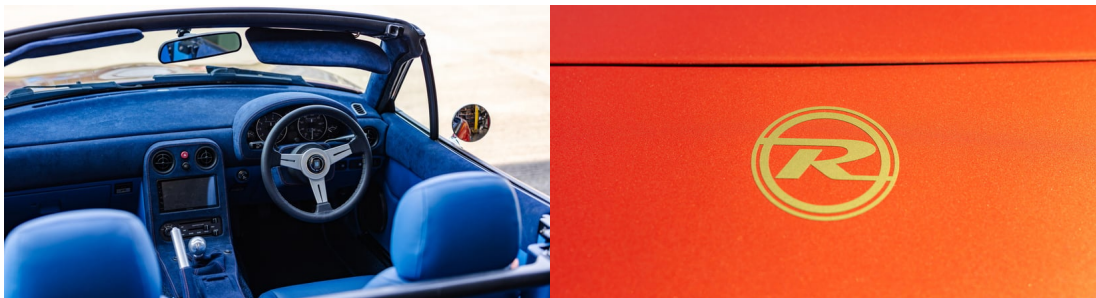


CLASSIC DRIVER

This V6-powered Rocketeer MX-5 restomod ruined sports cars for me

Lead
Reduced to its essence and powered by a V6 crafted by Porsche and Cosworth, Rocketeer's Mazda MX-5 restomod isn't just a stunning sports car – it's the antidote to the bloated, overpowered performance cars that dominate the market. Our Editor-at-Large Mikey Snelgar experienced it first-hand.



It's perfect convertible weather in Britain as I roll up in my trusty Honda S2000 to an unassuming workshop on the edge of the North Wessex Downs. In terms of Japanese car culture, we're in enemy territory, as the place in question is Rocketeer's headquarters, who, [as you'll remember from our story with Neil Clifford's Batmobile](#), are the creators of a mighty V6-powered [Mazda MX-5](#) restomod. After weeks of waiting, today is finally the day I'll get to experience this Anglo-Japanese marvel for myself.



"Get that piece of junk out of here!" Rocketeer founder Bruce Southey greets me with a laugh, unsurprisingly not taking too kindly to the sight of a Honda in his Mazda-only neck of the woods. Bruce has decades of experience in the automotive industry, having worked on the exterior and interior design of the Bristol Fighter, in Ford's innovation department, at Overfinch, and at McLaren. It goes without saying, he's more than qualified for the job.



After apologising for my choice of ride, Bruce kindly shows me around his MX-5 refinery. “If you wrote down everything you wanted from a sports car, you’ll find the MX-5 ticks all the boxes,” Bruce explains. “It’s a fantastic platform, still highly regarded, it just lacks power.” A metallic burnt orange NA-generation MX-5 sits just outside — finished in Lamborghini’s Rame Colorado — coupled with a racing blue interior that works bizarrely well. It’s a prime example of Rocketeer’s limitless personalisation, offering everything from DIY bolt-in kits and turn-key conversions to ground-up rebuilt restomods. Strolling inside the small yet meticulously organised workshop, I discover even greater treasures.

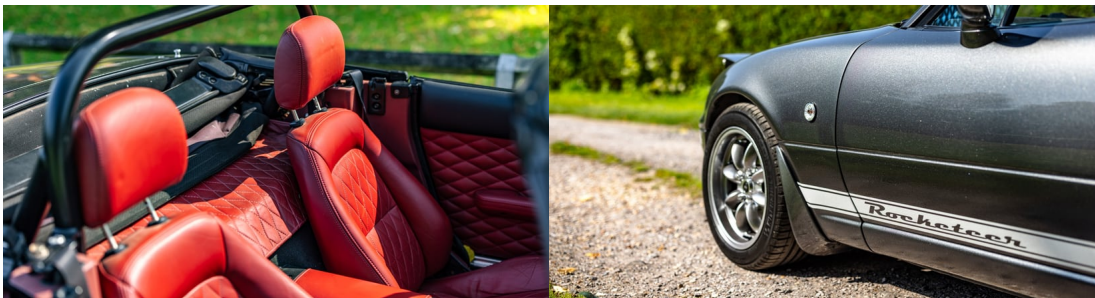


A stripped NA-generation shell boasting a carbon fibre bonnet, front wings, and doors hints at the hardcore end of the spectrum, and Bruce reveals that the car will be fitted with a built V6 pushing out around 400 horsepower and will weigh in less than 850 kg. Both NB and NC-generation cars are receiving the Rocketeer magic elsewhere in the workshop, however, the bulk of Rocketeer’s honed sports cars are of the NA variety, and pack around 280 horses — more than enough in a roadster that weighs roughly 1,000 kg.

Sitting on a lift, and receiving the final tweaks before my test drive, is none other than Rocketeer build number one: Bruce’s personal ride, the company test mule, and the car that started this whole crazy venture. “I built my own car as a pet project, and it got a lot of interest at car shows,” Bruce recounts. “So I said: if I get 25 deposits, I’ll build it, and to my horror, I did.” Now there are Rocketeer builds being enjoyed in as many as 19 different countries.



Unable to wait any longer, I suggest we hit the road so I can finally experience Rocketeer’s gunmetal grey masterpiece. After a quick refuel, it’s my turn in the hot seat, and first impressions spell a bad omen for my wallet. The NA MX-5 is a simple car; the jewel-like chrome door handle releases with a satisfying mechanical click and shuts with a reassuring thunk. The re-trimmed seats are supremely comfortable, even for a hulking oaf like myself, while the custom Rocketeer instrument cluster pairs beautifully with the wooden Nardi wheel and alloy shift knob. Being a car from the 1990s, there’s a pleasing lack of buttons (apart from a CarPlay-enabled touch screen), and it feels even smaller than my S2000 — almost as if I could touch the ground should I reach over the window sill. Simply put, climbing into the Rocketeer MX-5 is akin to putting on a tailored driving glove — it just fits.



After turning the ignition and hearing that naturally-aspirated V6 wake with a growl, pulling away reveals zero creaks, bumps, rattles or any other audible irritations to distract from the joy of driving. And what a joy it is. This is very much a car built for road use; the ride offered by the custom-tuned MeisterR suspension is planted, yet not overly stiff on Britain’s variable tarmac quality. The wooden steering wheel is alive with sensation, the shift strikes a balance between mechanical tactility and ease of action, and the clutch is a dream at low speeds. Speaking of which, the Rocketeer MX-5 is shockingly smooth and laid-back in traffic, unlike my S2000, and Bruce is quick to highlight how important daily usability was when developing this restomod.



As we roll out of a small village and reach faster roads, I'm finally able to put my foot down and savour the building howl as the V6 gets into its stride. Not only does Rocketeer's custom intake manifold look magnificent, at 3.0-litres the engine offers enough low-end torque that third gear is perfectly usable at low speeds, while the output of 280 horsepower in this particular car seems to be the Goldilocks zone. Appropriately for a roadster that feels like a love letter to the British sports cars of the 1960s, its Jaguar AJ30 V6 boasts genuine motorsport credentials, being initially developed by Porsche and finished by Cosworth. "It's over-square, has a forged crank shaft, and loves to rev; definitely a sports car engine," Bruce remarks as I savour the engine note. It's the perfect fit for the MX-5, and it strikes me as the engine Mazda's engineers would have dreamed about during the development of their game-changing sports car.



The way the Rocketeer dances along the road is simply astonishing. The closest thing I can liken it to is the lovely, delicate feeling of a 911's front-end, but translated to all four wheels. Rocketeer's added chassis rails and rollover bar also do wonders to enhance the chassis stiffness. Here, the genius of retaining the MX-5's original weight distribution can really be appreciated, as the steering and acceleration are almost telepathic around the twisting B-roads of Hampshire.

Stock NA MX-5s are often described as 'momentum cars', requiring the driver to work with the engine and gearbox to carry speed around corners, and it seems that trait remains present in the Rocketeer, only you're carrying a lot more speed. "Is the speedometer in km/h?" I ask Bruce after a glance down at a surprisingly high number, to which he replies with a negative. Better let off the gas.



However, the Rocketeer is really a car that encourages you to keep your foot planted all the way to its 7,750 rpm rev limiter, and the evolving howl of that V6 further up in the range truly is intoxicating. I found myself changing gears for the sheer pleasure of it, even at the risk of undermining my driving abilities in front of the company founder. If I was forced to pick a weak link in the whole equation, it would be the brakes, but that's unsurprising considering they're the stock units with upgraded pads. However, this is only a slight criticism — they do a perfectly adequate job considering the Rocketeer's equal-to-stock curb weight, while offering a more civilised experience around town than carbon ceramics would, for example. Naturally, should you wish for more stopping power, Rocketeer will happily oblige.



Pausing to admire the scenery, and the wicked little JDM sports car that transported us here, it hits me just how unassuming Rocketeer's MX-5 is. In a world filled with exposed carbon Singers and menacing Lancia restomods, the Rocketeer could easily pass as a mostly-stock, tastefully lowered and well-maintained NA MX-5. Even the Rota wheels would look remarkably OEM to the uninitiated, which makes Rocketeer's offering the perfect solution for those who simply want to enjoy a world-class driving experience without shouting about how much money they spent to achieve it.



Which brings us to the most magical aspect of this entire scenario: the price. If you want to source the engine and do the work yourself, Rocketeer will sell you the kit for a mere 6,000 pounds sterling. If you want Rocketeer to perform a turn-key conversion, expect to pay 20,000 pounds and join a long waiting list, while a fully-customised restomod like Bruce's car would be in the region of 65,000 pounds. It goes without saying that increased customisation will result in a bigger bill, but all in, you could quite easily drive a V6-powered MX-5 for less than the cost of a new ND-generation car, they'll even source a donor car for you should you desire. "The sky is the limit, and it's bespoke — we'll do whatever you want, but we try to be cerebral about it. You can put in a V12, but we would ask why." Truthfully, it almost feels like you're robbing Bruce when you consider there isn't a restomod out there for less than six figures, with most being closer to seven.



I had suspected this experience would be the start of an unhealthy obsession, and after spending a day in V6-induced bliss, it may come as no surprise that once I made it home I immediately hopped on the Classic Driver Market in search of an MX-5 for a Rocketeer build of my own. Should you think about doing the same? Without a doubt.

Photos by Mikey Snelgar

Gallery

