

Show me Your Curves



Volume 12 No. 2
April 2021

The Official
Newsletter of





Editor's Message . . .



“Gear-up”

for the

coming

season!

One year ago, I wrote the Editor's Message while in Portugal, very anxiously awaiting news from the airlines that they would be able to bring us home before all international flights were grounded. Who knew that we would still be in a situation with such severe restrictions a year later? Now that a program of mass immunizations is underway, perhaps there is a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel. Normally, this April newsletter is useful to “gear up” for the coming season and to stimulate members to get actively involved in the operation of the club. This April, we have to be very cautious about long-term planning, not knowing the path that the 2nd, 3rd and maybe 4th wave of COVID-19 may take. Please watch for updates from our Activities Co-ordinator, Bob Macaulay, in the coming weeks and months. We were saddened to hear of the passing of one of our long-time members, Dick Smyth, in early March. We remember, and are grateful for, Dick's active involvement over the years. I want to thank Cal Lander and Michael Topping for their contributions to the content of this edition. They have found some items of interest to car enthusiasts that will certainly appeal to most of you. I encourage others in our club to send me articles or personal accounts that may be added to future editions. I hope to see many of you at the “Spring Fling” on Saturday, May 15th assuming that the COVID-19 restrictions allow us to participate with the necessary precautions in place.



Sponsors:

We are very thankful as a group to be able to have such good friends that are willing to give our organization a helping hand. We strongly urge the membership to give your business to these good folks. They have been a great ongoing support to us throughout the years.



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And don't forget . . . Jack's Auto

Aaron Oliveira, General Manager of Jack's Auto in Huntsville welcomes any Miatas of Muskoka member to his shop offering a 15% discount off all labour as well as offering a "bring your own parts" service. That's right you can source your own Miata parts from specialty vendors and if desired have them installed at Jack's. Jack's Auto Repair was rated one of the three best repair shops in Huntsville.

Please show your support to our most northern Sponsor.

**Jack's Auto Repair
17 Bickley Country Dr,
Huntsville, ON P1H 1Y4**





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Show Me Your Curves

is a quarterly publication by a Miata enthusiasts group known as the *Miatas of Muskoka*... We are a small group that like to explore the twisty back roads and scenic lakes in Canada's premier vacation playground *Muskoka*.

Visit our Website at

URL:<http://www.miatasofmuskoka.com/>

Or

Check us out on Facebook: *miatasofmuskoka*.

As of this printing these members have indicated that they are unable to commit to being MoM members this year. Sorry to see you go, you will be greatly missed. We wish you all the best in your new endeavours.

Pilot	Co-Pilot
Allan Bruce	Marie Josee Hardy
Marie Schlorff	Mike Schlorff
Dick Smyth	Marnie Smyth
Gerry Madill	Peggy Madill
Jane Rice	
Clarence Pardy	Donna Pardy



In Memoriam

Fond Memories of Dick Smyth

by Doug Jackson

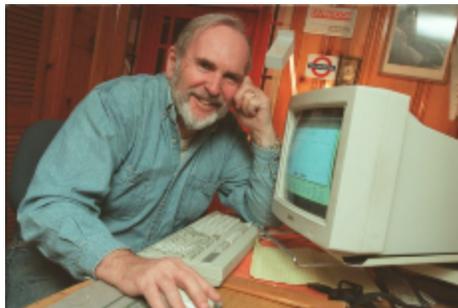
Few of us in this part of the country have been unaware of Dick Smyth. He has been heard by most residents in the province throughout his many years as a broadcaster on several radio stations. Those of us in my generation will remember him on 1050 CHUM radio from downtown Toronto with his deep booming voice targeting some elements of current contemporary affairs. In later years, he continued bringing his brand of opinion radio to listeners in 'cottage country' on "THE MOOSE". In our Miata Club, Dick and Marnie participated in

events in their red 2004 Mazdaspeed, with the distinctive license plate DR DOOM. As health issues for both Marnie and Dick developed, their participation in lengthy trips diminished, but we all have fond memories of Dick in his red roadster, with opera music blaring from the speakers, catching the eyes of passersby on our local trips. We were deeply saddened to receive the message earlier this month announcing the passing of one of our most prominent members, Dick Smyth. It was an honour to have known him.

Most of the newspapers in Ontario carried the article written by David Friend, of the Canadian Press, on March 6th, that is partially reprinted below.

Radio and television personality Dick Smyth, whose booming commentary filled Canadian airwaves for decades with hot takes on the day's topics, has died at 86. His daughter Tracy Smyth said he died Saturday afternoon in Huntsville, Ont. "He was a mentor to many, many people in the business, and I know that he's left a hole in many people's hearts with his passing," she said by phone from Nova Scotia.

The veteran broadcaster was a familiar voice to radio listeners who tuned in for his trademark introduction: "Here's how things look



to Dick Smyth this morning." ...He offered unapologetic and animated opinions on political leaders, the economy and local issues. "He could eviscerate; he could be kind. He could make

you think; he could make you angry," said George Gordon, a friend and CHUM colleague. "If you got into a conversation with him, he wasn't short on opinions, and if you wanted to argue with him, you better have done your homework."

Those characteristics came across in person, Gordon said, and they translated wonderfully to the radio where Smyth became a bridge

between news and fiery editorials — an authoritative voice that rang louder than most others. ...

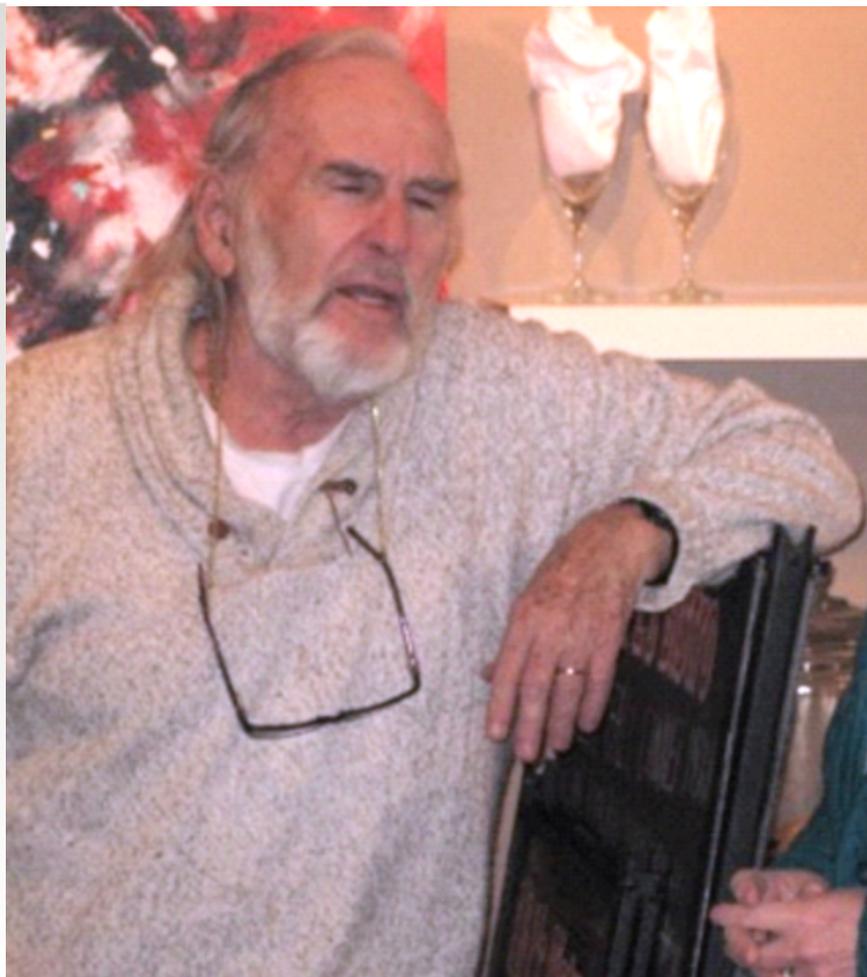
“I was always flattered when somebody would say they would sit in a parking lot because they wanted to hear my

commentary,” he said in a 2012 interview on the RadioViz YouTube channel. “Even if they were late for work, they would sit in a car listening. I think that is a great compliment.”

Reynolds Funeral Home in Huntsville handled the arrangements after Dick’s passing. The very moving background and tribute can be found by clicking on the link to the funeral home website at:

<https://www.reynoldsfuneral.com/obituary/RichardDick-Smyth>

In true Dick Smyth fashion, he wrote his own obituary and it can be found on the same website. It reflects his unique nature and personality and is well worth reading to more fully understand this prominent broadcaster.



*Thanks for the
wonderful memories!*

**Some photos of Dick
from the
Miatas of Muskoka
Club
archives:**





How Observant Are You?

Why Are You Nervous About Responding?

How Good is Your Memory?



Who Wears this T-Shirt?

This question was posed in the January Edition of the newsletter.

Nobody answered – Not even the owner of the shirt!!!! Go on ... hazard a guess!

Sooooo – which one of our club members wore this T-shirt during at least one of our club outings this past summer? Send me your answer.



Several of you knew the answer to a previous Miata Club Member identification quiz (Who wears these socks?) in a previous edition of the newsletter. Those of you who emailed me with the name Gary Helmer were correct!

Here's another one for you.



Again, nobody answered – not even the plate owner who would be guaranteed first prize (if there was a prize!). There are three parts to this quiz. Who is the owner/driver of the car that sports this license plate? What do these letters represent? What is the model/year of the MX5 that proudly carries this plate? Send me your answer.



Contacts . . .

Pleasant Contact Via Miatas of Muskoka Website

by Doug Jackson



On a blustery winter day in mid-February, the telephone rang with an “unknown caller” on display. Being a little suspicious that the caller was a telemarketer, I nonchalantly and rather distantly engaged the caller for a few moments until I discovered that the person on the other end of the line, while a stranger to me, was not a stranger to Miatas! He introduced himself as Mike Riemenschneider and explained that he lived in Michigan and has been a Miata enthusiast and a “car nut” for many years. Like many of us, he was spending a lot of time indoors and searching the Inter-

net for items of interest. He came upon our Miatas of Muskoka website and then went back through the archived newsletters to see about our activities and our articles related to the world of Miatas. He came upon the February 2012 edition of the newsletter because of the cover title “Mellow Yellow”. He went to the article that Michael Topping wrote about the history of yellow cars and then exclaimed, “THAT’S MY CAR ON MY DRIVEWAY!”. Apparently, this very rare and distinctive 1992 Sunburst Yellow car was photographed and included in an article that Michael Topping found and included in our MoM newsletter in 2012. I encourage all of you reading this to go to the newsletter archives of our website to read this interesting piece.

We had an enjoyable conversation about the number of Miatas that he has owned throughout the years and then he told me that he would send a link to his personal websites that feature his passion for Miatas. I’ve included them here so that you can peruse them.

<http://myplace.frontier.com/~mwr92/index.html>

<http://myplace.frontier.com/~mwr92/id4.html>

I think that it’s great that he made contact with us and I shall be sending Mike a copy of this article and our recent newsletter. I hope that we are able to keep in touch and perhaps, when the travel restrictions are lifted, meet him in person. Mike Riemenschneider’s alias on the <http://miata.net/> forum is “mrcarnut” which sounds very appropriate! I’m glad that he reached out to us!



Events to be enjoyed . . .

Spring Fling 2021

In the spirit of optimism and “glass-half-full”, you are reminded of the email that Bob Macaulay sent out on March 5, 2021. The section relevant to the Spring Fling is reprinted below:

*As is always the case, our first anticipated cruise would be a "Spring Fling" season opener, which will of course be to and from an appropriate picnic venue somewhere. We have set a date for it of Saturday May 15th (with Sunday the 16th as a rain date), so **please mark your calendars accordingly**. Cruise details, including meeting point, venue and route etc. remain to be determined...plus, as usual, we need a Cruise Director to put all of that together, so please consider taking this one on. I should also note that, if by early May, we find ourselves under an extended lockdown (God forbid!!!), we will likely have to reconsider a Spring Fling cruise.*

Just to get you in the mood, here are a few photos from some previous Spring Flings. Hope to see everyone on the 15th!



From 2017:

The day of torrential rains, driving past flooded lands along the edge of the Severn River, with lunch at Washago.



From 2018: Our second or third trip to the “Swiss Country Restaurant” at Ahmic Lake Resort near Magnetawan where we had the exclusive use of “The Bar” for our lunch!



From 2019: Spectacular day for a spring cruise for 21 cars to the “Crossroads Restaurant” at Rosseau, where our cruise director, Mike Fedorowich, was caught swiping French fries!





Education...

The Tesla 4680 Battery: Six Things to Know



This article is taken from a piece written by Clinton Desveaux, a Halifax based contributor of information about electric vehicles.

Canadians have no idea all of the fancy Tesla battery technology has mostly been developed in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Dalhousie University has partnered with the American Electric Vehicle (EV) manufacturer, and created what is commonly referred to as the Tesla Dalhousie Battery Lab.

The new 4680 Dry-Cell battery is going into Tesla vehicles sometime between February and April 2021. Here are 6 things, in descending order, you need to know for 2021 as civilization begins a serious transformation from fossil fuel road transportation to EV.

6 – Range: 996 km (which equals 619 miles), one can drive from Portland, Maine to Washington DC or Halifax, Nova Scotia to Quebec City on a single charge. Gone are the days people worried an EV wasn't able to drive long distances. The 4680 Dry-Cell has changed the game because

gasoline & diesel cars can't go the same distance on a tank of fossil fuels...When you have driven 996 km, it's time to stretch your legs and have a meal!

5 – Charge Times: Multiple reports have indicated the 4680 charges in 15 minutes on a Level 3 high Speed Charger. When not charging your car at home you will be able to get it done on the highway quickly for those long road trips in Canada and the United States.

4 – Cold Weather: The 4680 Dry-Cell doesn't have a traditional electrolyte, that means no liquid acids or gels. Liquid acids and gels don't like cold, the Dry-Cell eliminates that problem, especially when combined with the heat-pump Tesla developed that will become part of the automotive mainstream.

3 – Life of Battery: The days of questionable battery life from the first generation Nissan Leaf are over – the new Tesla 4680 is good for 3.5 million km's (2 million miles) before it's time to replace the battery. That means it's a game changer in not only the car business, but also the long-haul tractor trailer business.

2 – Cost: The manufacturing time and materials required for the 4680 means production costs will drop by



56%. We are going to see real competition on the raw sticker price in the window at the local car dealer. Currently, 4,416 (Model 2170 lithium ion) cells are placed inside a Tesla Model 3 or Model Y long-range edition battery packs. In contrast, only 960 cells will

be required to fill the same space with the new 4680 Dry-Cell.

1 – Future: You are going to see serious discussions and planning in the tractor-trailer long-haul business because of the 4680 Dry-Cell. The development and ingenuity of ever more efficient batteries developed by Tesla will create mass disruption in the marketplace





What if...

DIY Kit Turns the Miata Into a Prewar Alfa Romeo Race Replica



Conner Golden
Author
Dec 25, 2020

The Tipo 184 is arguably the next best thing to owning Fangio's Alfa.

It's nice to know that even if you don't have the financial health often associated with selling a unicorn startup to Google, you can probably at least (someday) afford the

replica of your favorite historically significant car. Beyond the myriad Shelby Cobra, GT40, and Porsche 550 Spyder clones that clog your local Cars and Coffee, there's more esoteric stuff to be copied. From the Ferrari 250 GT (GTO Engineering) to the Lola T70 (BroadleyAutomotive) to the Lotus 11 (Westfield), there's a replica of just about anything available at a relatively reasonable cost—including a new Miata-based DIY kit for a 1950s Alfa Romeo Grand Prix car.

Yes, you too can turn your old leaky, greasy, wheezy Mazda roadster into a rather excellent approximation of the Alfa 158/159 that domineered Formula 1 between 1938 and 1951. Other than the obvious excitement that goes along with driving an open-wheeled car, this is a fascinating build, as creating a reasonably priced and



well-proportioned racing replica is a tricky endeavor. Most replicars are built on a stripped-down chassis of an existing car, or designed with their own standard chassis with semi-mass production in mind, such as the Shelby Cobra or the GT40. The market for prewar racing replicas is significantly smaller, so building a bespoke "monoposto" frame/kit



is a tough sell. The majority of the monoposto replicas you do see charging around at track days or sitting pretty as garage art are usually enormously expensive one-offs or ultra-low production specials such as the Argentina-based Pur Sang Type 35.

This is where the new Tipo 184 comes in. Inspired by Wheeler Dealers and Master Mechanic presenter Ant Anstead's very own homebrew Alfa 158 replica, the new Miata-based kit is one of the most interesting methods of Miata upcycling we've seen thus far. Anstead appears to be the creative and technical force behind this project and the

first ten buyers of the kit will get a chance to build their Tipo 184 in a workshop with Anstead overseeing; he is reportedly working on a full Haynes manual of the Tipo 184 for buyers who would rather perform the conversion in the comfort of their own garage.

Again, details are still scarce at this point. From the photos available on the barebones website, though, it appears only some of the Miata componentry makes it through the transformation. Looking over a portion of the kit, some of the suspension, brakes, and most of the Mazda's powertrain components

bolt onto the supplied spaceframe. Once all the mechanical gubbins are sorted, body panels presumably shaped from fiberglass fit flush on the long tubular shape, along with the single leather seat, wood-rimmed steering wheel, and full metal dash plate





for the interior. Even with the modern Miata guts under the cylindrical body, the Tipo 184 does its best impression of

a mid-century race rocket: the supplied wheels are excellent analogs of the multi-spoke Borrani wire wheels, there's an exposed elongated exhaust header that runs down the side of the car (complete with four semi-cheesy fake exhaust ports), and the brake discs appear to be shrouded with a metal cover aping the finned drums from the original Alfa.

If you already have a tired Miata sitting around your garden shed, the first ten conversion kits on offer are a relative

bargain at £7,499, or \$10,100 at the time of this writing. More kits will be made available at a later date, with revised pricing and without the opportunity to build your car alongside Anstead. Of course, if you don't already have a donor car, you'll need to source your own, but Tipo 184 says it can assist in the process. Which generations of the MX-5 qualify is unclear, but based on the name—184 alludes to the 1.8-liter displacement and the four-cylinders—and a photo of a junked NB on the landing page, we suspect only the NA and NB generation Miatas are eligible.

If this seems like the perfect opportunity to live out your dreams as Juan Manuel Fangio, register interest on the official Tipo 184 website and keep an eye out for future updates. And if you want to keep an eye on whatever other projects Anstead is working on, then be sure to sign up for the MotorTrend App

NEWSROOM INSIDE MAZDA MAZDA MOTORSPORTS UPDATE February 12, 2021

After five years of participating in IMSA's DPi series, Mazda is opting to end its program at the close of the 2021 season with the Motul Petit Le Mans race in October. This was determined after an internal assessment of the current DPi series and the future LMDh series, and concludes Mazda's participation in prototype racing. Starting in 2022, Mazda will focus its motorsports efforts on MX-5 Cup and grassroots racing. The MX-5 Cup, a signature single make series, remains the cornerstone of Mazda's racing efforts. This series, combined with ongoing support of grassroots racing, ensures Mazda's celebrated heritage in motorsports continues.

"Mazda has a long history in racing and recently added several DPi victories and podium finishes during the 2020 season. This is a tribute to our 'never stop challenging' spirit," chairman and CEO of Mazda North American Operations Masahiro Moro said. "We're especially proud of our victory at the 12 Hours of Sebring, podium finishes at Daytona's Rolex 24 in both 2020 and 2021, and record-setting laps at Daytona in 2019 and 2020. These are significant accomplishments in the history of Mazda Motorsports. We thank our drivers, team, partners, and our fans for their years of support, and look forward to a strong 2021 season." Additionally, Mazda Motorsports Director, Nelson Cosgrove, will be leaving Mazda at the end of February. Mazda is grateful to Nelson for his contribution to Mazda's motorsports efforts and wishes him well in his future endeavors. Mo Murray, senior vice president of Garage Team Mazda, will oversee Mazda's DPi program starting in March.



Interesting . . .

New Spanish Sports Car Is A Mazda MX-5 Miata With A Retro Makeover

JAN 22, 2021 BY MARTIN BIGG

Only 30 will be made.

If you're unfamiliar with Hurtan, the Spanish coachbuilder has been building bespoke sports cars predominately inspired by classic cars from the 1930s and 1940s since 1992. Some of its most recent creations were based on the Fiat Ducato and Chrysler PT Cruiser back in 2017.

Just last week, we were given a first look at its latest coach-building project testing in public, and now just a few days later the covers have come off: say hello to the Grand Albaycin, which marries retro styling and modern technology. Created in collaboration with VeryVip Cars, the luxury two-seater sports car is inspired by Hurtan's T2-Reedition concept car.

While the retro styling seemingly mimics British sports cars from the 1960s, the project is based on a Mazda MX-5 Miata. Available in cabrio or targa bodystyles, the Grand Albaycin is powered by Mazda's 1.5-liter or 2.0-liter engines generating 132 hp and 184 hp respectively. Like the MX-5 Miata, the 1.5-liter unit is paired with a six-speed manual, while the larger 2.0-liter unit is also available with a six-speed automatic. The smaller engine enables the Grand Albaycin to achieve a top speed of 126 mph, while the 2.0-liter version will top out at 136 mph.

Two variants will be available: the classic Heritage and the sportier Bespoke.

On the outside, the styling shares nothing in common with the MX-5 Miata it's based on, sporting retro-style round headlights and taillights, prominent wheel arches, and a quad exhaust system.

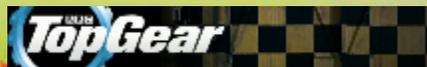
The interior is also significantly more lavish, appointed with high-quality wood trim and cream leather seats. Production of the Grand Albaycin will be limited to just 30 units in 2021, with each model featuring a unique serial plate displaying its production number.

No pricing details have been announced, but it's safe to say the Grand Albaycin will cost significantly more than the standard Mazda MX-5 Miata, which starts at \$26,580. Order books for the Grand Albaycin will start on January 23.





Road trip: to Alaska's Arctic limits in a Mazda MX-5



Tom Ford
6 Nov 2015



Tom Ford takes on the endless Arctic tundra in a most inappropriate vehicle

Photography: John Wycherley
This feature was originally published in the November 2015 issue of Top Gear magazine

It's roughly quarter to six in the morning when I nearly run over a bear.

Or run *into* a bear, since the fuzzy hillock staring at me from 20 feet away probably weighs about the same as the MX-5 I'm driving. We gawp at each other for a while, the ursine and the human, as confused as each other. The bear wondering why a small, off-white roadster should have suddenly appeared in its remote territory north of the Arctic Circle, when the usual occasional traffic consists of easily avoided big-rigs, and me on the grey edge of hypoxia because I've forgotten to breathe. I have the roof down. To a hungry bear, I probably look like semi-tinned dinner.

Very slowly, I reach for reverse, begin to crawl backwards out of pouncing range and promptly nearly hit the camera car. Luckily, reinforcement seems to provoke a

reaction, and the Grizzly whuffs mightily from somewhere in her sternum and ambles off into the trees. At the opposite end of the respiratory spectrum, I gulp air like a drowning man.

Ten minutes later, I nearly run over several things that look like steroidal chipmunks, an adult beaver and a lynx – a cat the size of a labrador, with huge furry feet the size of my spread hands – and decide that the Alaskan wilderness really is dangerously full of wild. And that it was a faintly ridiculous idea to try to drive the entirety of the Dalton Highway – and back – in a small roadster with the roof down.

It sounded like a jolly notion in the UK, but the chances of being messily attacked by the local fauna are somewhat less intense in rural England. You don't tend to get badgers as big as your car where I live.

There is method, of a sort, to the madness. The MX-5, like it or not, is considered to be a little bit sports car-lite. Something the hardcore wouldn't consider, because it's amiable and practical and doesn't try to vault you spitefully through the nearest



hedge every time you make a minor mistake.

And yet, here we are. At the top end of Alaska, attempting to verify the little Mazda's intrepid credentials by doing something ridiculously rugged. Of course, it's largely pointless, because you either get the idea of the MX-5 or you don't, but I happen to believe that brilliance isn't necessarily allied to scariness, that you don't need to buy cars exclusively using the currency of testosterone, and that the friendly little Mazda is more than capable of delivering proper sports-car fun no matter what the environment.



Which is why we're driving the new MX-5 up the James W Dalton Highway north of Fairbanks, Alaska, to the Prudhoe Bay oilfields on the edge of the Arctic Ocean, to prove that affable doesn't have to mean a lack of capability. What it will mean is a proper adventure for this little car, because most people even bothering to attempt this road do so in, at the very least, an SUV, if not something with more than





Road trip: to Alaska's Arctic limits in a Mazda MX-5

four wheels and its own water-purification system. The road was built as a supply route for the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System back in '74, is one of the most isolated roads in the United States, and one of the few I've ever driven where the tourism advice is *to bring survival gear*. That's 666km of dirt and gravel road to the top, 666km back, plus a few hundred clicks of tarmac from Fairbanks. For extra macho points, I would also carry all my own spares and fuel, and attempt the journey without closing the roof. Because it's summer, and that's what roadsters are for.



Unfortunately, what I hadn't bargained on was that an Alaskan summer has an irritating tendency to rain. A lot. And when you drive a non-tarmac road that is pretty much exclusively used by heavy trucks supplying industrial sites – the Dalton is featured on the popular TV show *Ice Road Truckers* – you find that you also subject yourself to quite a lot of mud. And ruts. And potholes. Absolutely none of which are inherently kind to small, two-seat roadsters which some pillock has left defiantly open to the elements.

At this point, I wish to point out that this MX-5 is completely standard. As in *completely*. We're on 17in alloys and summer tyres, with a stock 2.0-litre, 158bhp, 148lb ft naturally aspirated engine. The only things I'm carrying are a pair of spare wheels plus tyres, a couple of jerrycans of

unleaded and a kilo of trail mix. Although it would have been handy if I'd also remembered to pack a jack.

Still, as my nose and eyes clog with mud and the car starts to shake like a badly balanced washing machine, I look forward to the next 1,000-odd miles with the same excitement I would normally reserve for a four-day bout of gastroenteritis or vicious street robbery. At least I've got heated seats.



Honestly, it feels like being on one of those vibrating Victorian weight-loss contraptions. Constantly jiggled and shuddered until my insides feel like foam. The USB ports that charge my phone oscillate themselves from their slots every 20 or so miles – not that it matters, because there is precisely no phone signal anyway.

After some 50-odd miles, I feel a bit sick. It's not as if the view is particularly stunning, either. Yes, the enormous twin barrels of the pipeline that shadow the road are fascinating for the first few miles, but weirdly, after a bit you start to get used to the scything black lines that scar the view, whose pump stations can move 754,000 barrels of oil a day. The countryside is pleasant enough, though not an awful lot different to what we've enjoyed on the

Elliott Highway out of Fairbanks – long, sweeping ridges furred with black spruce, aspen and birch.

If you like trees, there's plenty to get excited about. As in millions of acres of excitement. I can't get excited, because my eyes have gone numb with the jiggling.



First stop is the Yukon River Camp, and a chance to fill up with fuel and food, seeing there are only a couple of places on the Dalton that actually sell either. The weather has turned grey, mist-filled and close, causing a particular

kind of all-over wetness that slides into collars and pokes dead, damp fingers into unprotected seams. There is no view as such, and Yukon River Camp can best be described as practical. Because this area is protected, technically there can be no 'permanent' structures, so everything is constructed of a shambling Lego of trailers and Portakabins. The petrol station is literally a tank of fuel with a hose attached, and the prevailing custom appears to be various species of grizzled trucker and a couple of hardy enduro bikers. Bikers who – tellingly – turn around and peel off back towards civilisation after wondering why the hell I'm driving around in the rain with the roof open, and laughing at my mud-spattered face. The truckers just grunt and look at me as if I have some sort of mild madness.



Road trip: to Alaska's Arctic limits in a Mazda MX-5

A couple of hours later, and I'm wondering the same thing. The weather has turned even more disagreeable, and things are less than pleasant in the MX-5's cockpit. Not through any fault of the car – those heated seats really do work – but I've got a spare wheel and tyre in the passenger seat, a passenger footwell full of petrol cans, and freezing fog simultaneously obscuring the view and trying to burn my ears off. There's also the torturous nature of the Dalton. Because it lies. Basically, at certain points, the Dalton Highway has stretches of perfect asphalt. A blessed relief after being generally beaten to a pulp by the ridges and ruts left by the heavy-duty traffic. But they never last long enough, and serve to remind you how bad things are on the dirt in a low-slung sports car when you inevitably drop back onto the ungraded bits.

And then there's the trucks themselves: giant chrome-laden titans, often dragging enormous loads, that Do Not Stop. When one bears down from the distance, you'd better get the hell out of the way – especially if you're in a vehicle that might escape notice. Beware, mind, because the margins of the highway are gravel, and when you drop your right-hand wheels into deep kitty litter at 50mph, you'd better be holding on. After the first few breathless games of slippery chicken, I slow down to pass.

It's tiring, hard work, this. A grind. We're headed to a place called Coldfoot, at milepost 175, but some 60 miles before we get there, we cross the Arctic Circle at precisely N 66° 33' W 150° 48'. There should be some sort of change in the environment to jolly me along, but there isn't, just a sign and a load of tourists in an all-wheel-drive tour bus who take pictures of the crazy person in the

mud-brown MX-5. It's still raining. I feel no sense of accomplishment whatsoever. Several hours later, we arrive in Coldfoot, realise that our 'hotel' looks like the kind of place featured in the title sequences of a movie where everyone dies, and get a bit sad. I knew it was getting bad when I failed to smile as we passed Gobblers Knob.



Next day, and after a fitful night's sleep, we meet the bear and the lynx, and it buoys us. We track through the 'pingo' field below Sukakpak Mountain – a weirdly Arctic phenomenon where meltwater gets into the permafrost and splits the soil, making it look like the surface has lightly exploded, head up into the Brooks Mountain Range, pass the last tree on the Dalton Highway (it gets its own sign) and head up the Atigun Pass.

The Atigun is significant. Mainly since it's snowing, I'm on summer tyres, and this is the highest pass in Alaska, at 4,739ft. I also still have the roof down, and the temperature has dropped to -15°C. It's also important because this is where we cross the Continental Divide: rivers to the north empty into the Arctic Ocean, while rivers to the south empty into the Bering Sea. We're heading into the tundra proper.



Again, I'd like to say at this point that I'm filled with the awe of adventure and manage some Bear Grylls-ish wonder at the magnificent outdoors. But I'm not. I'm filled with the need to survive until the night-time, and the need not to crash or break down in a place where rescue and medical services are several

hours away.

The MX-5 has taken an absolute beating and, apart from having several kilograms of mud throwing the wheel balance into fits, it's simply doing what it needs to do. Which, in several instances, involves drifting around snowy bends on the side of cliffs. Believe me, I wouldn't be happy doing *that* in anything else. So 160-ish horsepower isn't that much, but with the standard-fit LSD working hard and rear-wheel drive, the MX-5 provides the kind of fun that doesn't leave you upside down in a ravine at the end of it. It's utterly, utterly brilliant.





Road trip: to Alaska's Arctic limits in a Mazda MX-5

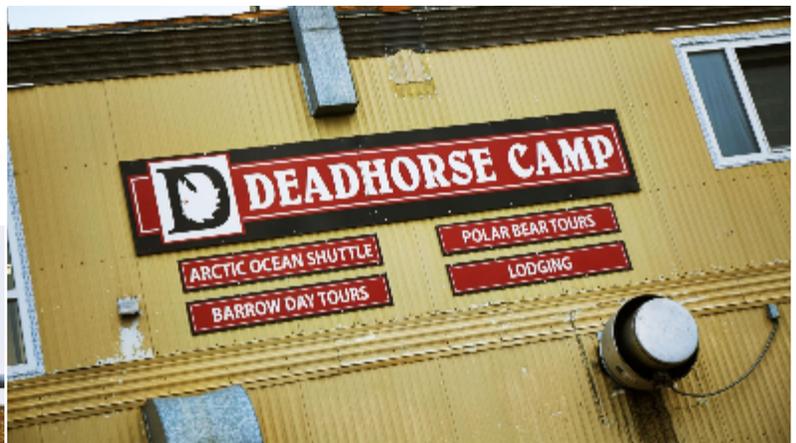
Unfortunately, only a few miles later we're also some 350 miles into the journey on the other side of the pass and driving across completely flat Arctic tundra with all the distinguishing features of a large brown carpet. It's heavy with fog, alternately snowing or raining, and desperately miserable. We pass a place called Happy Valley – basically a collection of huts – and I can't think of a less appropriately named area in the entire world. There's nothing here, just a fog-laden hint of a horizon, various shades of brown and a neon-speckled man on a unicycle. *Hang on a minute.* My brain slows to a crawl. I just drove past a man on a unicycle down a mud road across the Arctic tundra several hours from civilisation. Handbrake, one-eighty, let's see if I'm hallucinating. Five minutes later, and my own sanity is confirmed by the reality of Sid, who really is riding a unicycle down the Dalton. He flew into Prudhoe Bay, some 80 miles north, and is *unicycling* down the Dalton on his way to *Montana*. That's 3,000 miles away. This is momentous news. Mainly because I realise I've just driven over the Atigun Pass and thought it was hard and Sid can't even freewheel down the good bits.



We chat for a bit, and it turns out that our monocyclist is doing this for adventure's sake. Because he enjoys it. And it's enough to make

you feel better that the human race still contains the kind of people who do crazy things just because they can. Sid also mentions that he thinks I'm insane for driving a car like the MX-5 up here, never mind with the roof down. We find solidarity in our stupidity, and I leave him to continue.

Arrival at Deadhorse at the bottom of Prudhoe Bay is achieved late in the evening. Again, the accommodation and dining facilities are loosely based on the idea of an oil rig, and that's basically what they are – Deadhorse only exists to support the pipeline and oilfield operations in the bay. It has a permanent population of just four, with a part-time complement of between three and 6,000 people. There are a lot of bearded, muscular men with forearms like scaffolding poles. Most of whom laugh at the MX-5. Alcohol is banned. You can guess why.



We attempt to get to the coast, but as it turns out, the final section of the road is actually owned by the oil companies, and we are forcefully thrown out by a BP security guard, who – in a fit of

bored pique – calls all the other local security guards to tell them to watch out for us and bar passage. We're pretty easy to spot, and there's not much to do in Deadhorse at night, so we retire early and prepare for the monotony of the return journey the next day.

I could mention the toilets that have nothing but a short shower curtain separating you from other occupants of the shared bathroom here, but I'm still too traumatised to recall it.

Morning dawns, and I trudge to the car weary and beaten; the return trip promises the reflection of the outward, and I'm not looking forward to it. But the sun is finally out, and it's like God's own magic trick. The veil has been pulled back on Alaska. The sky is brochure blue and film wide; so incredible it seems almost artificial. Suddenly, the monotonous brown velour of the tundra becomes some sort of Zen canvas on which to paint your

imagination, full of subtle colour and hidden life. The Franklin Bluffs on the side of the Sagavanirktok River are basically Martian shades of yellow and ochre – due to the iron-rich soil – and the landscape is sluiced with hundreds of small rivers and



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lakes that slide over the flat vista like mercury.



It's also hot. Like 22°C hot, and the sun is shining. And the MX-5 feels... triumphant. It's the most appropriate, best car for this journey at this point, and I couldn't be happier. All that pain and discomfort, just for a few minutes of this, would have been worth it.

But we don't get just a few minutes. We get hours of intense beauty. The day is a blur – literally as well as metaphorically, unfortunately, because the bumps haven't evaporated – but still something best described in the style of a gratuitously overwrought Victorian novel. We catch up with Sid – he's done another 35 miles – and give him biscuits.



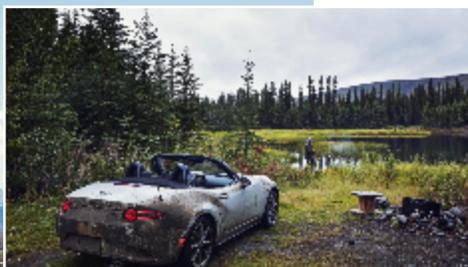
The tundra, even given its simple nature, is radiant. The Atigun

Pass is splendid. All of it lounging in sun, and a breeding ground for superlatives that don't seem quite big or spectacular enough to encompass the punch in the guts some of these views contain.

One piece of road that swoops regally down a valley and then up into the Atigun is eternally shadowed by the slithering pipeline, and beautiful enough to make you have to take a moment. And the view is a thief. It steals a piece of your heart and never gives it back. We sail through the day, running on compressed awe and cheap coffee, constantly shaken and beaten, but elated.

The air tastes fresh and clean, wild and green, and there's no better way to experience it than in a little roadster exposed to every scent and sight, an endless joy of impossible things. We get to Coldfoot, and the Portakabin hotel feels like a palace. The food tastes like manna. We have seen the

Arctic at its best, and it is dazzling.



The next day isn't quite as spectacular, but it's still fresh and sunny, and in between doing a

little light fishing in forested lakes where swarms of pigeon-sized mosquitoes try to bite your face off, we drive, and refuel the Mazda at the side of the road. I spill petrol on my feet and spend the day smelling like an accident waiting to happen, but nothing can dent the mood, and the forest becomes something from a fairy tale, a full Pantone chart of greens broken by vibrant reds and golds and rich, earthy browns.

There are eagles and ducks and geese and funny-looking squirrels that come barrelling out of the undergrowth like suicidal doormats. We rewind the journey, but the song isn't the same the second time around. It's joyous and full, and completely satisfying. Back to Yukon River Camp, back to the Elliott Highway and back to a proper road where somehow the spell is broken and it feels like we're back in civilisation. Phones happily chirp their connections, emails torrent into inboxes in a fanfare of modernity, and we're done.



Once we're back in Fairbanks, it takes hours to clean the Mazda up into some semblance of order. There's mud concreted into the wheels, and the only vaguely presentable part of the interior is the seat covered by my body.

But, as we drive back to return the car, the little MX-5 is as fresh as when we picked it up. It's been on a journey that most balk at



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making it a full-house off-roader, and it never missed a beat. Delivered fun in a way that made me feel safe, skipped where other cars would have tripped, and became

a companion rather than a vehicle.

Not a hardcore sports car? Not from where I've been sitting. And when the Arctic decided to

bring its full majesty to bear on that couple of sunny days in October 2015, I swear, on my life, there wasn't a better seat in the house.



Never a dull moment