



# Toyota MR2



**A**FTER FAR TOO LONG IN EXILE, WHEN IT seemed that tough emissions and safety rules had killed off open-topped sports cars, Mazda showed that affordable sports cars needn't be a thing of the past.

Since the MX5's launch in 1990 – marking the rebirth of the classic open roadster – its success urged other makers to follow suit. Now, cars like the Lotus Elise, BMW Z3, MGF and the left-hand-drive-only Fiat Barchetta (plus a sporty little number yet to come from Vauxhall) are seeking to emulate the MX5's success.

Toyota played little part in this revival, however. Its second-generation MR2 fixed-head coupé sold well enough to begin with, but since then, sales of the company's two-seater have progressively ebbed away.

Now, the MR2 is back with a bang. On sale from early April (in time for some seasonal showers!) the third-generation MR2 abandons its forerunners' fixed-head coupé format to offer genuine top-down motoring. The head-turning midship runabout two-seater (hence the MR2 name) marks a back-to-basics approach for Toyota, with complexity, bulk and weight all shed compared with its predecessor, in pursuit of enhanced pace, agility and, yes ... fun.

With Porsche Boxster overtones, especially from the rear (surely no accident?), the MR2 is unashamedly a strict two-seater. Its "bi-fold" hood (most soft-tops use three folds) clicks neatly and extremely easily into place on to a flat area behind the seats, without turning inside-out. This not only keeps the hood clean and tidy (as its interior always faces downwards), but also averts the

need for a separate tonneau cover. The hood also sports a glass rear window complete with electric demisting, while a small flip-up air deflector behind the seats tames turbulence when driving with the top down. Unusually, the MR2 looks almost as good with its hood up, too.

To help stay snug in the winter, an optional hard top is available, but make sure you decide on one *before* ordering your MR2. It's a factory-fit option only, which Toyota says can't be dealer fitted later, if you "wimp-out" after your first winter of woolly-hat motoring.

Beneath its striking looks, the MR2 sports a long wheelbase, short overhangs and a strong horizontal deck-line, accentuated by upsweeping side intakes that feed the engine bay. Suspended on coil-sprung MacPherson struts all round, and sitting on stylish, 15-inch five-spoke alloy wheels, the midship-mounted engine contributes to a near-ideal 42:58 front-to-rear weight distribution. This arrangement concentrates the mass towards the centre of the car – a prerequisite for a taut, ultra-responsive sports car. The engine drives the rear wheels via a short-throw five-speed manual gearbox (there's no auto option), plus a standard-fit limited-slip differential for the UK.

Inside its cosy cockpit, the MR2's generous inventory offers snug-fitting, sports-style bucket seats, a leather-skinned, three-spoke sports steering wheel and gear knob, plus crisp, communicative controls, presented in a sporty, yet far from spartan manner. A clean, simple facia puts bold, easy-to-read dials prominently in the driver's vision-line, while tilt-adjustable steering and ample seat travel should allow most drivers to get comfortable at the wheel.

Careful weight control hasn't come at the expense of creature comforts or safety, though. The MR2 weighs in at a fairly dainty 975kg, yet everyday conveniences (arguably easier to forgo in a "wind-in-the-hair" machine) are all present and correct. Indeed, with power steering, electric windows and door mirrors, remote control central locking (with double locking), dual airbags and a four-speaker Sony CD/radio/cassette, the MR2 positively pampers its occupants compared with stripped-out, specialist offerings such as the Elise. It even sports an electric aerial, for goodness sake!

Like its stablemates in the new Yaris, Corolla and Celica, the MR2's all-alloy 1.8-litre engine uses VVT-i (Variable Valve Timing – intelligent) to serve-up a lively 140bhp at 6400rpm, together with a broad spread of torque peaking at 4400rpm. Never less than smooth and spinning eagerly to its red line, it needs to be worked hard to deliver its best. But driven in this manner, it rewards with a brisk, sporty-sounding performance, with Toyota claiming under 8sec for the 0-62mph sprint en route to a 130mph maximum speed.

Although not quite as cossetting as the MGF, the MR2 soaks up bumps surprisingly smoothly, feeling taut and well controlled over most surfaces, with only a hint of softness over tricky undulations. Likewise, the electro-hydraulically assisted steering offers sufficient feedback to encourage spirited driving and is quick without feeling too nervous, providing goes-where-you-point-it precision.

Mid-engined roadsters can prove tricky at the limit, with the tail stepping out of line in response to cutting the throttle mid-bend. While proving no exception to this rule *in extremis*, when driven with a modicum of restraint,

the MR2 merely delivers a prompt and well-telegraphed tightening of its line in response to a mid-turn power cut, while ample grip keeps the rear end from becoming unruly when too much power is applied.

Unlike the similarly laid-out Elise and MGF, Toyota has elected to forgo the provision of a rear luggage compartment on the MR2. Instead, soft luggage must be shoehorned in to a pair of (surprisingly spacious) lidded cubbies behind the seats, or into remaining space in the front "boot" which houses a space-saver spare wheel. Oddments stowage comprises a pair of small door bins, a lockable glovebox and a useful lidded cubby in the centre of the fascia top. Even with all these brought into play, however, the MR2 is roundly eclipsed by the MGF and MX5 in this respect, and luggage space for a touring twosome remains at a premium.

## VERDICT

**Lighter, smaller and less powerful than its fixed-head predecessor, the third-generation MR2 nevertheless provides significantly boosted appeal from behind the wheel. As well as being fast, frugal and fun, it's also well built, generously equipped and reasonably cheap to insure. And, being built by Toyota, reliability is all but guaranteed, too.**

**It strikes a happy balance between the stripped-out spartan appeal epitomised by the Elise, and a slightly more subdued, yet more luggage-friendly approach of, say, the MGF and MX5. Ultimately, picking the MR2 over one of its equally desirable rivals is a difficult task as, come rain or shine, they all promise to put a perpetual smile on your face.**

## FACTS AND FIGURES

<b>BODY</b>	two seater mid-engined convertible roadster
<b>length x width (cm) - excl mirrors</b>	389 x 170
<b>ENGINE</b>	
<b>type</b>	mid-mounted, transverse, all-alloy 4 cylinder in line
<b>valves/fuel</b>	DOHC 16-valve (VVT-i – variable valve timing)/electronic multi-point petrol injection; 48-litre fuel tank
<b>capacity (cc)</b>	1794
<b>power (bhp/rpm)</b>	140 at 6400
<b>torque (lb ft/rpm)</b>	125 at 4400
<b>TRANSMISSION</b>	5-speed manual, rear-wheel drive, with standard limited-slip differential (no auto option)
<b>CHASSIS</b>	
<b>suspension – front</b>	independent MacPherson damper/struts with coil springs, lower arms and anti-roll bar
<b>– rear</b>	independent MacPherson damper/struts with coil springs, dual links and anti-roll bar
<b>steering</b>	rack and pinion, with electro-hydraulic power assistance (2.7 turns lock-to-lock)
<b>wheels</b>	5-spoke 15-inch alloy, with 185/55 R 15 tyres (front) 205/50 R15 tyres (rear); space-saver spare
<b>brakes</b>	ventilated discs front and rear, with standard ABS
<b>PERFORMANCE (all manufacturer's figures)</b>	
<b>0-62mph (sec)</b>	7.9
<b>maximum speed (mph)</b>	130
<b>official fuel consumption</b>	27.9 (urban); 47.9 (extra urban); 38.2 (combined)
<b>CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (g/km)</b>	n/a
<b>luggage space (overall capacity not specified)</b>	twin lockable compartments behind seats; additional space in front "boot", plus lockable glovebox
<b>ABI insurance group</b>	13E