



Remember that early Miata advertisement with the Porsche Speedster in the background? It was the one designed to evoke misty-eyed nostalgia for the glorious sports cars of the Fifties.

It was, as they say in the ad biz, a nice concept. After all, the Miata was conceived as the spiritual successor to those long-deceased cars, especially to the British roadsters, that many of us once knew and still love.

So why a Porsche? Okay, James Dean, that Fifties icon, drove one. And sure, they were innovative cars for their time. And certainly Porsches carry considerable cachet.

But a Speedster definitely isn't British. Moreover, Speedsters are ugly; they call them upside-down bathtubs for good reason.

And most important of all, Porsches, even funky 356s, are intimidating. Their makers' attitude

THEN AND NOW

Austin-Healey "Bugeye"
Sprite
vs. 1993 Mazda Miata

Oh What A Happy Face!

seems to be, "You are lucky to have zis fine German machinery, and you VIL treat it vith great respect."

Now if the ad folk had really been on the ball, they would have photographed an Austin-Healey "Bugeye" Sprite to co-star with the Miata. For if there's one thing the Sprite—or the Miata—is not, it's intimidating. Besides being both British and Fifties, the tiny Sprite with the bulging headlamps and smiling grille is one of the most charming sports cars every built.

Of course, it was all wonderful happenstance, in that wacky, Monty-Python, British sort of way. Donald Healey and his son Geoffrey had a mandate from the

British Motor Corporation to come up with an inexpensive sports car that would fall a step below the new MGA and a couple of steps below the Healey's own Austin-Healey 100-6. ▶

B Y P E T E R B O H R

Photography by Sam Mitani

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And so off they went, chock full of inspiring ideas for their new car. They envisioned a fiberglass body that would use the same panels front and rear. And weirder still, they wanted retractable headlights that would disappear into the hood during daylight hours. But alas, their mandate for an inexpensive car meant two inescapable facts: that the car had to be a no-frills, basic machine, and that it had to be made up of bits and pieces from some existing BMC model. Out went the fiberglass panels in favor of conventional steel, and out went the complicated pop-up headlights in favor of... well, what looked like pop-up headlights that remained permanently fixed in the "up" position.

It was a good thing too. For had it been otherwise, the world would have been deprived of that special Bugeye—or Frogeye, as the Brits call it—happy face.

Those oddly exposed headlights account for much of the car's appeal. But the baby Healey has other endearing features as well, thanks in large part to its incredibly diminutive dimensions. The Bugeye Sprite is perhaps the only sports car on American roads that makes the Miata seem large.

Take a peek at the stats: an 80-inch wheelbase for the Bugeye versus 89 inches for the Miata; a 137-inch overall length for the Bugeye versus 155 inches for the Miata. And when it comes to curb weight—1,460 pounds versus 2,205 pounds—the Miata is a real porker by comparison.

Small size meant the need for fewer raw materials, which in turn meant a small price tag. At a time when Alfa Giuliettas, big Healeys, MGAs and Porsche 356s were duking it out in the \$2,500-\$4,000 market, the little Bugeye at \$1,795 slipped right into its very own market niche—much like the Miata did some three decades later.

Small size also contributed to torsional stiffness. Moreover, the short wheelbase and low curb weight endowed the car with agile handling and, well, "Spritely" performance.

There was one innovative feature that didn't fall victim to cost cutting. The Bugeye had a monocoque chassis with a steel floor pan.

the body's rigidity. But there is a cargo hold, just behind the rear seats, not much smaller than the Miata's compartment.

The car also has a one-piece "bonnet," complete with grille and headlights, that's hinged forward and opens to expose the entire engine and front suspension.

When it came time to put it all together, the Healeys turned primarily to a frumpy Austin sedan called the A35 for many of the requisite bits and pieces. The Bugeye's 948-cc pushrod 4-cylinder—slightly tuned with twin SU carburetors, special valve springs, improved exhaust valves and modified crankshaft bearings—was taken from the A35. So too was the front suspension—complete with its lower A-arms and very British lever shock absorbers—the non-synchro-first-gear transmission, and the rear end.

The Morris Minor, however, contributed its excellent rack-and-pinion steering system. The smallish, hydraulically operated drum brakes, the hydraulic clutch system, the rigid rear axle—located by quarter-elliptic springs and again, lever shocks—came from various sources, though mostly from BMC parts bins.

The Sprite was built cheek-by-jowl with its big brother, the 100-6 at the MG works in Abingdon. During its production run between Spring, 1958 and Spring, 1961, just under 50,000 Bugeyes rolled off the line, many of which came to our side of the

Atlantic. Its replacement, the Mark II Sprite, was a modern sports car with its headlights where they were supposed to be—in the fenders. And of course, with that, the "Bugeye" was no longer, and the Sprite lost much of its unique character. *Continued*

SPECIFICATIONS AND PERFORMANCE

Specs	'59 Sprite	'92 Miata
Country	Great Britain	Japan
Layout	Front engine/rear drive	Front engine/rear drive
Body type	Roadster	Roadster
Engine type	Inline-4	Inline-4
Bore x Stroke, mm	62.9 x 76.2	78.0 x 83.6
Displacement, cc	948	1597
Valvetrain	Pushrod	DOHC
Fuel delivery	Twin SU carburetors	Nippondenso electronic fuel injection
Compression ratio	8.3:1	9.4:1
Horsepower, bhp	48 @ 5000 rpm	116 @ 6500 rpm
Torque, lb.-ft.	52 @ 3300 rpm	100 @ 5500 rpm
Transmission	4-speed manual	5-speed manual
Final drive ratio	4.22:1	4.30:1
Gear ratios 1st	3.63:1	3.14:1
2nd	2.37:1	1.89:1
3rd	1.41:1	1.33:1
4th	1.00:1	1.00:1
5th	0.79:1	0.81:1
Front suspension	Independent coil springs and wishbones lever shocks	Independent A-arms, coil springs tube shocks, anti-roll bar
Rear suspension	Live axle 1/4 elliptic leaf springs radius arms lever shocks	Independent lower A-arms coil springs tube shocks anti-roll bar
Steering	rack & pinion	rack & pinion
Brakes, front/rear	drum/drum	disc/disc
Wheels, in.	5.5 X 13 steel	5.5 x 14 steel or alloy
Tires	Dunlop bias-ply 5.20 x 13	Bridgestone radial P185/60-14
Wheelbase, in.	80.0	89.2
Track, front/rear, in.	45.8/44.8	55.5/56.2
Length, in.	137.3	155.4
Width, in.	53.0	65.9
Height, in.	49.8	48.2
Weight, lbs.	1460	2205
Acceleration, 0-60 mph	20.8	9.5
1/4-mile, sec.	21.8	17.0
Top speed, mph	NA	117
Avg fuel consumption, mpg	34.0	25.5
List price	\$1,795	\$14,800

(approx. \$8100 in 1992 dollars)

Keep in mind, that body-on-frame was de rigueur among the British sports cars of the time, and that even the recently designed MGA had wooden floors.

The Bugeye lacks an opening trunk lid because the Healeys feared it might compromise



Blood. What Every American Should Know.

1. Each year four million Americans depend on blood transfusions.
2. The safeguards on the blood supply include conducting seven separate laboratory tests to screen out AIDS, hepatitis and other infectious agents, educating donors on transmissible diseases and encouraging at-risk donors to disqualify themselves from giving blood.
3. Blood banking is one of the most highly regulated areas in health care, governed by multiple federal and state rules, laws, policies and regulations.
4. As an alternative to blood transfusions, today a growing number of people benefit from autologous (self) transfusions.
5. There is no risk of AIDS or other infectious diseases when blood is donated, as sterilized needles are never reused.



AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF BLOOD BANKS

For years, there were plenty of clapped-out Bugeyes running around serving as cheap and cheerful transportation for the young and the young of heart. Many others sat languishing under backyard shade trees, waiting for a little attention. Buyers with a few hundred dollars in their chinos could usually find themselves a nice example.

But no longer. Today a pristine Bugeye fetches about the same price as an early used Miata, \$10,000 to \$12,000. Project cars are considerably cheaper. But even though a Bugeye is about the most basic car imaginable, the costs of restoration can easily boost the total to the price tag of an already-restored car, or more.

Just ask Steve and Michele Dulson of Costa Mesa, CA, owners of the beautiful Iris-blue '59 Bugeye pictured here. After buying the tired, but fundamentally sound and complete car for \$2,500, and then having professional mechanics and body men go through it from bumper to bumper, they figure they might break even at 10 grand. Cheerful, yes, but cheap no more.

Ah, but when I reached inside (there is no outside handle), opened the door and lowered myself into the driver's seat, I began to understand why people might pay such big money for a Bugeye. The utter simplicity of the car is delightfully refreshing. There's no glove box, no ashtray, no radio. Why heck, the heater and even the front bumper were optional extras! In short, there's nothing to divert your attention from just driving the Bugeye.

Instead, the driver sits in front of a proper set of traditional white-on-black Smith's instruments, unobscured by the rather large bakelite wheel. Attached to the far side of the dash, in front of the passenger, is a grab handle, a legacy from the days of ride-along mechanics and two-seat race cars. As for the seats, they're marvels of simplicity; they're true buckets with a little padding in the right places, and yet are comfortable, even affording good lateral support.

While Steve marveled at all the room in the cockpit of the yellow Miata I brought along for comparison, I found the Bugeye's interior surprisingly comfy, at least for my lanky five-foot-ten frame. But taller drivers would find their head "projects into the air flow," as Steve phrased it, meaning they'd sit higher than the windshield. When I twisted the key

in the ignition switch—a quaint affair that doubles as a headlight switch—the Dulson Bugeye's little four-banger instantly came to life. With its new, but stock, exhaust system, it let out a pleasantly quiet, raspy exhaust note.

Except for the marginal synchros, the gearbox's snick-snick, close-throw action made it nearly as nice to use as the Miata's box. The drum brakes felt adequate, though the disc brakes that came in subsequent Sprites were a worthy improvement. So too, was the larger 1275-cc engine that came later. Still, because of the car's bantam weight, the standard 948-cc Bugeye powerplant seemed quite spunky, thank you.

It was obvious though, that the Bugeye isn't any sort of a grand tourer. "Once you get it there, it can cruise at 65 mph," said Steve. "But

For years, there were plenty of clapped-out Bugeyes running around serving as cheap and cheerful transportation for the young and the young of heart. Many others sat languishing under backyard shade trees, waiting for a little attention.

after 100 miles, you really want to take a break." And heaven help you if you run into rain on the way; the Bugeye's erector-set-top-and-side-curtains is a miserable affair to raise, in direct contrast to the Miata's lovely "hood."

Instead, the true joy of the Bugeye comes from its handling, or more precisely, its steering. Quick—quicker than the Miata's—light, instantly responsive, the Bugeye's steering feels as if it has the world's best power-assist. Combined with an absence of body roll, taut springing and that stubby little wheelbase, the Bugeye is the virtual paradigm of the "tossable" car.

Yes, the Speedster is indeed an admirable sports car. But the Bugeye is downright friendly and fun. A sunny day, a picnic hamper in the boot and a favorite person beside you, and the little Bugeye is sure to put a grin on your face as wide as that smile on its grille. A legacy the Miata is glad to carry on today. □