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2006 Pontiac Solstice

By Mark Gillies

Photography: Ian Dawson

The Pontiac Solstice engineering prototype might look rough at this stage, but it tells us that GM should have a winner when the car goes on sale sometime next year-especially if the price is kept below the promised \$20,000 and the interior and exterior designs don't stray from the car shown at this year's Detroit show.



On the basis of our initial drive through the southern English countryside and at the Goodwood racetrack, the Pontiac is a terrific little sports car that can easily handle a lot more power than the base 2.4-liter Ecotec in-line four-cylinder engine provides. This is the first product to use GM's global Kappa architecture, and on this evidence, it works really well.

The engineering vehicles you see here have a production-style underbody, but the matte-black panels are soft-tooled and stitch-welded, rather than being sheet-hydroformed. Even though details such as the lights are pretty much an afterthought, the Solstice looks good on the road, with compact proportions and styling that is unique yet has hints of other roadsters such as the BMW Z8. Under the skin, these vehicles have the same engines, Aisin five-speed manual transmissions, and control-arm suspensions as the production car. Bilstein dampers are used all around, and the eighteen-inch wheels are shod with P245/45R-18 Goodyear Eagle RS-A tires.

Inside, these are obviously hack vehicles, although the architecture and control positions are close to production. The driving position is nicely sorted, with a fully adjustable steering wheel, and the pedals are just so, making heel-and-toe shifting natural. Compared with a Mazda Miata, which is cramped for bigger people and which you tend to sit on rather than in, the Solstice envelops the driver and has lots of room. In that respect, it feels more like a baby Corvette than a bigger Miata. The top on this development car was so basic that we decided to fold it away, even on a bracing late-winter day. Wind flow around the cabin, even with the windows down, is brilliantly managed, with hardly any backdraft making it into the cabin.

The 170-horsepower engine has lots of midrange pull, decent top-end power, and a sporty rasp under hard throttle that's easily the best exhaust note we've heard from an Ecotec. Our only criticism is that the engine is rough at around the 6000-rpm mark, lacking the sweetness of the best Japanese fours. The five-speed gearbox is slick, with short throws and a narrow gate. The ratios are nicely spaced, although fifth gear is very much a cruising overdrive.

The chassis is a peach. It rides well over bumpy British secondary roads and feels composed and faithful. At Goodwood, it was really impressive, turning into corners with minimal understeer and roll, staying flat and neutral all the way through. The Solstice's attitude is nicely adjustable with power, because you can lift off the gas in the middle of the turn and get the tail to move, much as in a really good front-wheel-drive car. If anything, the car is over-tired, so dry-pavement power oversteer is unlikely, but the tail will swing out faithfully in the wet. The steering is accurate and direct but is too light and lacks the kind of communicative feel you need to make the sports-car experience special, even at low speeds. The non-ABS brakes work well, with excellent pedal feel.




So, the early indications are very promising. The Solstice looks great, goes nicely, and has a

superb chassis. The base car should give Mazda a lot to think about, while the 250-horsepower-plus turbo version coming later should be a humdinger. Just fix the steering, please.

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