

CLASSIC DRIVER

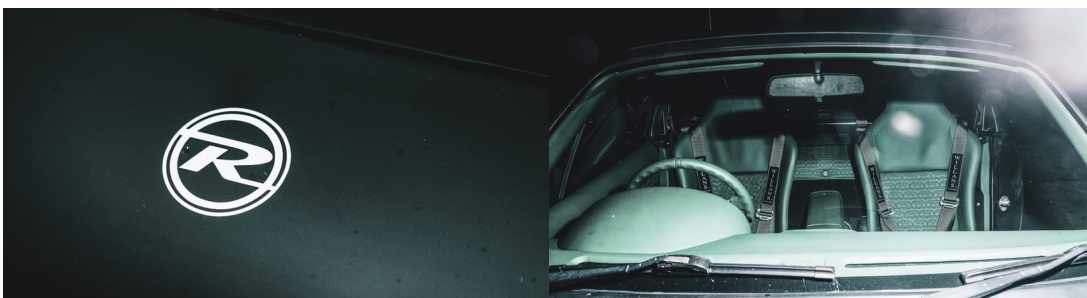
[This restomodded Mazda MX-5 Batmobile is a dark knight's delight](#)

Lead

In celebration of Halloween, we joined car addict-turned-vigilante Neil Clifford, his photographer son Vincent, and his V6-powered Rocketeer MX-5 Batmobile restomod for an after-dark cruise through the mean streets of Gotham, err, London.



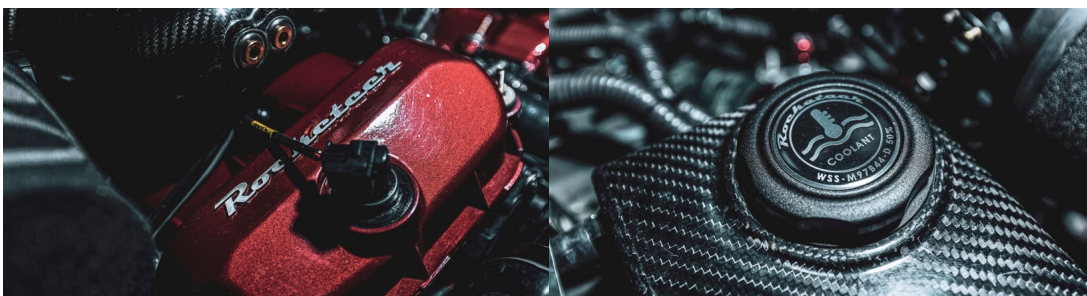
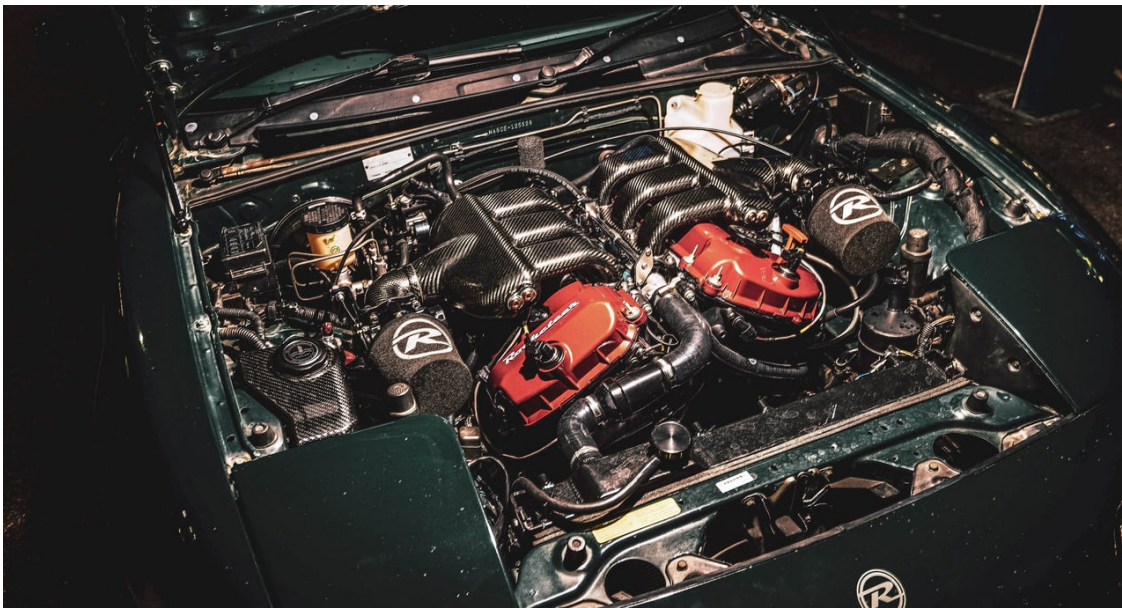
You might have noticed that comic book movies, and the films coming from DC Comics in particular, aren't quite riding the same high they have been in the past couple of decades. We like to think that, with film budgets dwindling, Batman might have to start thinking about downsizing his legendary — and legendarily bespoke — Batmobile. The replacement would have to be fast to hunt down the crooks, small to fit through Gotham's narrow alleyways, and yet still customised to his tastes; he is Batman, after all. Ideally, it would also be something relatively inconspicuous to use as a daily when Bruce Wayne isn't wearing his pointy-eared Batsuit.



As it turns out, certified Classic Driver and friend of the magazine, Neil Clifford, has just taken delivery of the perfect Batmobile, complete with Bat-Signal stitching throughout the interior. With Halloween upon us, we couldn't resist a nighttime ride through London in [Rocketeer's](#) latest restomodded [Mazda MX-5](#). And while Neil shares his distaste for reporter cameras with the caped vigilante, we managed to jot down some quotes into our notebooks.



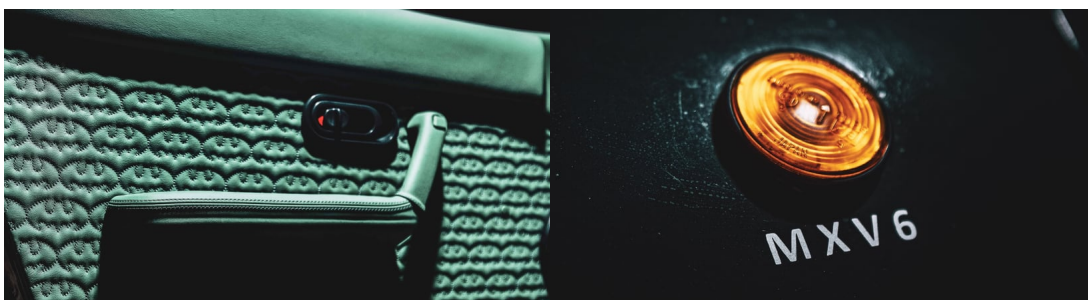
Founded by Bruce Southey (yes, he's also called Bruce) — the automotive designer behind the ultra-cool Bristol Fighter — Rocketeer is a small British outfit that specialises in giving [Mazda's](#) MX-5 the restomod treatment. "Really I tripped over Rocketeer," says Neil. "I've never had a Mazda, and for someone like Bruce who was going to double espresso an MX-5, I thought, gosh I've got to have this!" Unexpectedly, it was the numberplate — BMZ 787 — that sparked the idea, which according to Neil is both a reference to Batman, and the legendary Mazda 787B, a car he witnessed win the 1991 24 Hours of Le Mans in-person.



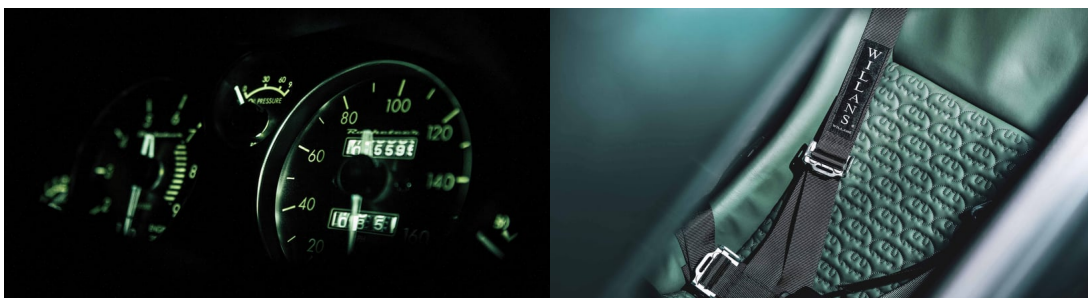
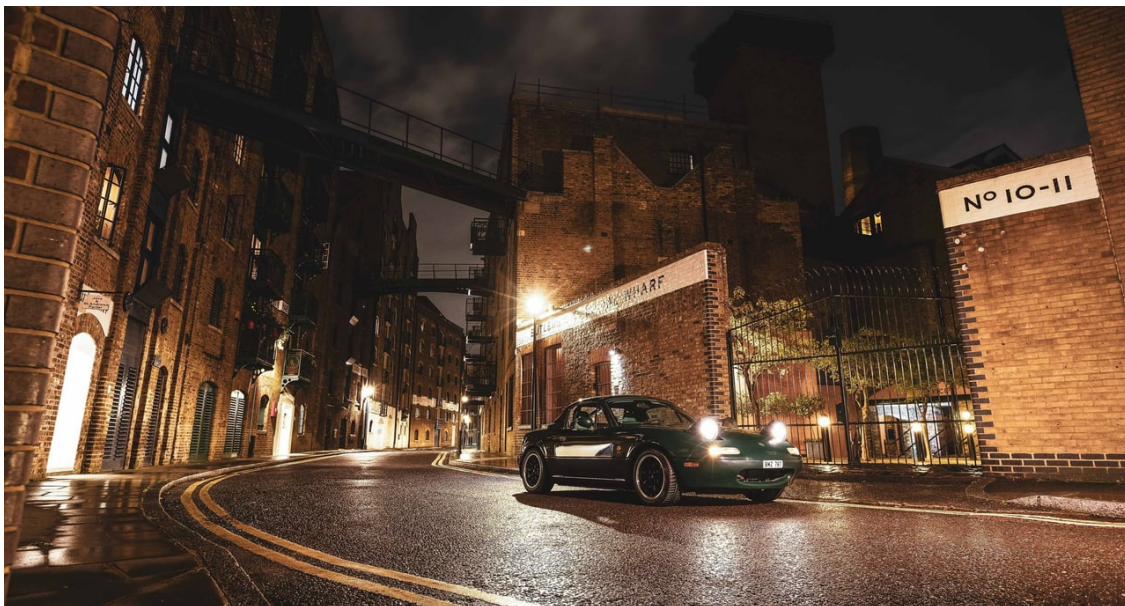
Visually, Rocketeer's modifications certainly fall on the discreet side of the spectrum, but don't let this MX-5's demure exterior fool you. Under the bonnet, you'll find Jaguar's AJ30 V6. This might seem like a strange choice, but as Bruce revealed, it's an engine with a fascinating history: "It was designed by Porsche, finished by Cosworth, and used in all sorts of boring saloons, but it's actually an incredibly well-designed sports car engine." Another interesting factoid for you: it's actually half the V12 from the DB9! Bruce didn't just perform an engine swap and call it a day, though, and Neil's car has a forged crankshaft, rods, and pistons, resulting in a 320-horsepower firecracker. Couple that with the fact that it's no heavier than the MX-5's original four-banger and you have a recipe that guarantees endless smiles.

In pursuit of creating the ultimate daily sports car, Rocketeer thoroughly re-worked the mechanicals from front to back. The suspension was upgraded with springs and

dampers supplied by MeisterR, new brake pads were fitted along with Rota RB alloys, a rollover bar, and chassis rails to enhance stiffness, and lastly, the seats were swapped for Corbeau units originally designed for Lotus.



Then came the finishing touches, which in this case meant a fresh coat of Mazda Racing Green paint and a totally re-trimmed interior to match; an area where Neil admits he went slightly mad. "Bizarrely, Bruce sent me the sample from the trimmer, and there was a swatch of leather stitched with the batman logo. Then we got carried away. I loved the idea of a convertible but with a hard top, it takes you back to those racing Jaguars and Alpine Tigers from the Targa Florio. It's just a lovely look. Bruce sourced the hard top for me, we painted it to match, and then we lined it in green Batman leather."



On paper, it sound ridiculous, but we think you'll agree that in practice it's absolutely ace. Then there's the driving experience, something which left Neil more than satisfied on his first outing: "I jumped in it on a Sunday morning and did an hour in it in the Chiltern Hills. I love the size of it, you can bomb around, go down every little road. I'm not a great driver, but I get more pleasure from a smaller car; you've got more space and you're not anxious. Whether it be an MX-5 or a 182 Clio Trophy, you can drive it faster than any big supercar. It gives you confidence in spades and it's a car that works in both the countryside and city."



Neil plans to get as much use as possible out of the Batmobile: "I'm going to daily it. That's why we undersealed it; it's fully protected for the winter. It's going to be my London sports car, just zooming around the city. It will be totally impossible to sell, so I hope I can keep my job, but for less than a fifth of the price of a Singer you can get this amazing little car that will never give the wrong perceptions and will never let you down. I adore my Singer, it's a brilliantly thought-through, perfect 911, but I get just as much pleasure from my Rocketeer!"

As our evening with Neil and his Batmobile draws to a close, I find myself with a stronger urge than ever to find an MX-5 of my own. Keep an eye out for our full driving impressions of the Rocketeer MX-5 later this year, but until then, happy Halloween!

Photos by Alex Lawrence for Classic Driver © 2024

Gallery

