Mini Cooper has major appeal

by Mark_Maynard

The modern Mini Cooper "is the instigator of optimism," says Mini USA Vice President Jim McDowell. And who couldn't use a little optimism these days?

Sporty and powerful, the 2009 Mini Cooper should popular in any circle. Photo courtesy of MINI USA.

SPECS

2009 Mini Cooper S Convertible

Body style: compact, front-wheel drive, four-seat, power soft-top convertible

Engine: 172-horsepower, 1.6-liter four cylinder with 115 foot-pounds of torque at 4,250 rpm

Transmission: six-speed manual

Acceleration, 0-60 mph: 7 seconds (7.2 automatic)

EPA fuel economy estimates: 26 mpg city, 34 highway; 91 octane recommended

Wheelbase/length: 97.1/145.6 to 146.2 inches (base to Sport models)

Curb weight: 2,700 to 2,888 pounds

Base price: $27,450, including $650 freight charge; price as tested, about $32,000 The Mini has been a phenomenon of marketing and a pretty good little car, finding rave popularity in the past year for its 36 mpg on the highway. It appeals to all ages and both sexes, making a personal statement for a variety of "ists" - stylists, environmentalists and enthusiasts. Also those who think small is better, such as the driver of that red Mini seen in Southern California with the personalized license plate "DWN SZE."

The second-generation coupe was launched in the past year and now the convertible receives this slightly larger platform, with a little more power, a little plumper appearance and more technology options and, of course, more accessories.

Pricing ranges from $24,550 for the base model to $27,450 for the turbocharged Cooper S. Available in April will be the 208-horsepower, John Cooper Works model at $34,950. Warranty coverage includes no-cost maintenance for three years.

Both models use a 1.6-liter four-cylinder engine. The S is pumped up by a twin-scroll turbocharger and direct gasoline injection. Even with a few more pounds, I did not notice any turbo lag. At 2,888 pounds, the S convertible is still light enough to scoot from the traffic light and not stumble over its run-flat tires when pushed hard. Peak horsepower is high at 6,000 rpm, but peak torque kicks in at 4,250 rpm, where it is readily felt and enjoyed.

Transmission choices are a six-speed manual (and a sportier one for the S model) or optional, $1,250 six-speed automatic (Yay! No more continuously variable automatic, which translated to continuously boring.)

Among the most notable exterior changes are concealed trunk hinges and 16-inch wheels (up from 15). The new model has a foot-wider turning circle, now 35.1 feet, which is still U-turn nimble on most side streets.

Inside, there appears to be much improvement to the quality of plastics and how the trim pieces are assembled and installed. The toggle switches for various cabin functions and options are still in place.

But some of the interior design pushes the limit of cuteness, such as the enormous speedometer in the center of the dashboard. This lunch-plate-size disc integrates audio readout, Bluetooth controls and a circular fuel gauge that clicks off amounts used almost like plucking the petals of a daisy.

Beneath the car's huggable, happy-go-lucky demeanor is a planted, capable sporty car. The new model has much less understeer (when the front tires push through aggressive cornering instead of gripping) than the previous generation, and the turbocharged Cooper S is a gutsy shredder on twisty back roads. The six-speed manual helps keep the engine in its sweet spot of power, 177 foot-pounds of torque from 1,600 to 5,000 rpm.

The S models I tested were equipped with the Sport Package, $1,500, which includes Dynamic Traction Control with Electronic Differential Lock Control for traction under acceleration.

Braking, steering response, acceleration and gear-box precision felt sharper than in the previous model and the whole experience was just lots of let's-see-what-it-can-do fun. And all this from front-wheel drive.

Should the driver push though the margin of common sense, there are saving graces of anti-lock brakes, Cornering Brake Control with brake assist and Dynamic Stability Control with start-off assist. On manual-transmission cars, start-off assist gives three seconds of brake hold for a clean start on a hill.

The simple joy of the Mini convertible is in the driving. Up to 80 mph and maybe faster, air turbulence is minor and conversations can be enjoyed without shouting. The black and gray leather-trimmed seats aren't the best colors for bare thighs on a summer day, and beige leather is a $1,500 upgrade.

The power top goes up or down in 15 seconds, so there is no excuse for not driving the car topless. I drove the car with the top up only about 25 minutes and did notice that visibility over the shoulder is cramped by the wide wrap of cloth at the corners.

All the better reason to leave the top down. The Mini convertible for North America features a standard Openometer (optional in Europe), which logs hours driven with the top down. And it knows the real time driven, not just time with the top down and the engine running, for those who might cheat.

And for those competitive types, there is an online site where owners can upload their "open" times and include pictures and other notes and anecdotes of their car, its colors, its name and other personality traits. Mini owners are not like owners of other cars.

A Mini convertible with the top up on a sunny day is like a sad pup at the pound. It wants to be out running, unleashed and loved. And the Mini convertible makes it easy to feel loved and free.

MINI COOPER ACCESSORIES

The starting price of the Mini Cooper is merely a canvas for a palette of accessories that allows owners to build a car that expresses their individuality. Most owners add about $4,000 in extras, said Mini USA Vice President Jim McDowell.

For example, there are 10 paint colors, but only the nonmetallic choices of Pepper White, Chili Red and Interchange Yellow are free. The other colors, metallics, are $500 options.

There are at last nine wheel choices, adding $500 to $1,250 with standard or run-flat tires.

A wind deflector is $500, but I didn't find one necessary.

For those who want Bluetooth phone connectivity, the Convenience package adds $1,250, but includes such features as a USB port and iPod connector, bike-rack prep, universal garage opener and keyless locking and push-button starting. Sirius satellite radio is $599.

Heated seats are always a good idea for a convertible, but these are part of the Cold Weather package, $500, which includes heated, power-fold mirrors and heated washer nozzles.

Driving enthusiasts could add $2,500 more in John Cooper Works performance accessories.

And the Premium package, $1,250, adds chrome trim inside and out, automatic air conditioning with pollen filter and anti-theft alarm - and who doesn't want an alarm for a car that now costs $32,000?

Then there are accessories for bonnet scoops, bonnet stripes, mirror caps in the Union Jack flag and more, mud flaps, floor mats, car covers and stone guards and license-plate frames.

Somebody stop me. I'd want them all.

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