



The Skinny on the Mini

Fast, nimble, sticky and fun, this British-built, German compact is in a class of its own.

BY WILLIAM ROEBUCK

There's a new car on my 10 Best list – and it's right at the top for now. Before I drove the all-new 2002 Mini Cooper, which is made in England by BMW, I thought it was just another cute retro knock-off. It turns out that I'm not the only one who was surprised by the build quality, superb driving characteristics, practical nature and pure fun that the new Mini offers. To drive a new Mini is to have car style; even to have one on order gives you panache. There's a long waiting list to get one.

Many readers probably had never heard of the original Mini. BMW's research indicated only about 20 per cent of Canadians were familiar with the marque (it was only five per cent in the U.S.). So to many, it's just a brand new car that stands alone on its merits – and for a short, little car, it stands pretty tall.

For the 80 per cent who don't know, here's a quick bit of history. The original Mini was built by Austin in England starting in 1959 and was distributed in North America for about 20 years. It had a reputation as a fast, highly manoeuvrable car and was very popular with rallyists. There are few original models on the road today, though.

The original, which is known as Mr. Bean's car, has been featured in several

popular movies, such as 1969's *The Italian Job*, starring Michael Caine. The cult film, which is to be remade this summer, had one of the best car chase scenes ever filmed. The new Mini also will be featured in the next *Austin Powers* spoof, due out at the end of July.



The 2002 Mini Cooper is fun, practical transportation.

Let's get back to the car. It looks very small, cute and pert. Yet it really is larger than it first appears. The front is dominated by big fish-eye headlamps. The roof can be white or black as an option and most you'll see are painted that way, although a body colour roof is standard. Another distinguishing characteristic is that the wheels are positioned at the extreme

corners of the car. There's barely any body overhang, front or rear. The design allows for more room inside the passenger compartment and adds a good dose of stability to the ride.

Driving the Cooper is a great experience. It's a car with a distinctive personality.

With its low centre of gravity and wide wheelbase, it corners like the tires have been coated by a UHU glue stick. The performance comes from a 1.6-litre, 115-hp engine that's capable of 200 km/h and accelerates from stop to 100 in just over nine seconds. If you want it faster, you can



The turbocharged Cooper S (left) has a hood scoop and dual exhaust pipes.

choose the Cooper S model, with its 163-hp supercharged engine, giving you an extra 18 km/h of top speed and acceleration to 100 that's somewhat quicker at 7.4 seconds. Based on my experiences with both models, unless you're a rally enthusiast, you'll find the base Cooper plenty fast and certainly fun to drive.

Both models provide exceptional fuel economy. City/highway mileage is 8.3/5.9 L/100 km for the Cooper, while the S consumes 9.6/6.5 L/100 km.

While the wheels hug the road, the seats hug you, holding you in place no matter how hard you take a corner. The Cooper S comes with sport seats with extra side bolsters for even better coddling. Front passengers have plenty of headroom and legroom.

Cornering never feels tricky, even on challenging and twisty roads, thanks to an electro-hydraulic, engine speed sensitive, variable-assisted, power steering system. The handling is aided by MacPherson front struts and a multi-linked rear suspension.

The Cooper uses lots of technology to keep it glued to the road, including automatic stability control and traction control systems, and an optional dynamic stability control setup. The ABS braking system includes electronic brake force distribution and cornering brake control to reduce the chance of wheel lockup.

The five-speed gearbox shifts easily and quickly. The Cooper S gets a sixth gear, ideal for long highway trips. An automatic transmission will be available this fall, though few are expected to be ordered by customers.

Safety features include six air bags. There's a tire pressure warning system and an optional rain sensor that will match the speed of the wipers to the intensity of the rainfall. Xenon headlights provide excellent illumination of the roads at night.

The dashboard and interior highlights are finished in a glossy silver colour. An alloy patina trim comes on the Cooper S, providing an industrial, raw metal look that I found excessive. The doors are highlighted by a huge elliptical frame and pipes that look like exposed side-impact beams – the design is like a work of art. Black or coloured leather seating are options.

The interior is quite busy – there are lots of knobs and switches. The speedometer is a massive dial located dead centre on the dashboard. It looks out of place at first, but soon seems natural after a few minutes behind the wheel. The smaller tachometer sits above the steering wheel. The fan and temperature knobs are easy to adjust, as are the radio controls. A series of small toggle switches at the bottom centre of the dash look great, but it's difficult to quickly

distinguish what each switch controls.

Access to the rear is surprisingly easy for a small car like this. The front seats slide and tilt forward. The rear seat legroom is pretty cramped for adults, though. Each of the two rear seats folds flat to extend the luggage area to 670 litres. But the cargo space is a miserly 150 litres with the rear seats raised – just enough for two small overnight bags and two soft-sided briefcases. The rear hatch opens wide and high and the low liftover height makes loading easy.

One of several models I tested featured an impressive power panorama sunroof with two glass sections covering the front and rear passengers, although only the front section slides open.

Key features that distinguish the Cooper

S from the regular model are an air inlet on the hood, dual centre-mounted exhaust pipes, a roof spoiler and chrome-plated side grilles.

The Mini Cooper starts at \$24,950, while the Cooper S is \$29,600. Each includes a decent number of standard features, but putting all options on an S could bring the price up to \$43,965. These are premium sticker prices for a car this size, however it truly is a premium build. A new network of Mini-exclusive dealers – there are five in the Toronto area – is taking orders now for late summer and fall deliveries. 🍁

■ *William Roebuck is a member of the Automobile Journalists Association of Canada. More reviews can be found at www.cartest.ca.*

THE BEER-CAN EXHAUST

One of the teams of designers working on the 2002 Mini was sitting around having a much-deserved beer after a 24-hour period of creating a full-size model out of clay, when chief designer Frank Stephenson spotted a flaw. “We don’t have an exhaust pipe,” he announced.

The model was to compete against those from 14 other teams the next day and every detail would count. Then a quick solution popped into Stephenson’s head: He picked up an empty beer can, cut it in half, stripped off the paint, polished the metal, and glued it to the back of the car. It took just a few minutes.

The team won the competition. That’s why there’s a hint of a beer can on the production model’s exhaust pipe.

