

SPIRITED

JCW AND COUPE FORMAT ARE A COMPELLING COMBINATION

BY JOE SAGE



We're inclined to think the original MINI Hardtop could stand on its own as master of a niche, well-engineered, well-priced, well-positioned, stylish, economical and fun. And yet, the line-up keeps growing. For one thing, they are a nimble operation: popular response to a couple of their auto show concept cars inspired the company to put them right into production, and that has become something of an anticipated ritual by now. Thus we have the original MINI Hardtop, in Cooper, Cooper S and John Cooper Works (JCW) iterations; Cabriolet versions of those; the slightly extended Clubman; the burly little Countryman; a trimmed-down Roadster droptop; and now, the MINI Coupe. Every one of these, in fact, comes as a Cooper, Cooper S or John Cooper Works, with the exception of the Countryman, whose top spot is occupied by the Cooper S ALL4. And, conversely, John Cooper Works is available applied to any body style except the Countryman. (Perhaps this suggests an impending auto show concept, or perhaps not.)

NOT-TOO-TOUGH CHOICES

How does a buyer choose from among them all? They're all in similar ranges of price and operating economy. They're all sporting drivers, the S and the JCW versions that much moreso. The MINI buying decision is arguably to a high degree an emotional one—driven by good, healthy emotions, of course—and the utility factor on any of them is as likely as not to include some element of tradeoff, just because they are small, by mission and definition.

So it comes down to what floats your boat—style and emotion, with a bit of rational thinking thrown in as far as your purposes for the vehicle. There's a lot of this in any vehicle purchase, but with the MINI lineup, it seems to come to the fore.

The first decision is the easiest, boiling down to budget mostly, fuel economy in the course of things—and that is whether to go with JCW. In the case of the Coupe, a Cooper starts at \$22,150, a Cooper S at \$25,450 and a JCW at \$32,050 (slightly higher today than the sticker on our 2012 test car). That's about 45 percent more than Cooper, to get the JCW, but anybody interested in performance is going to at a minimum compare it to the Cooper S, against which it's only about 26 percent higher. The rationalization process is a wonderful thing.

Engine output follows a different scale, from 121 to

181 to 208 horsepower, respectively, so the biggest bang-for-the-buck upgrade is from Cooper to Cooper S (just 15 percent more dough for 50 percent more go), while going from Cooper S to JCW approaches the opposite (30 percent more dough for 15 percent more go). Can you rationalize any of the decision by fuel economy? Not really. That's linear through the lineup, at 37/29/32 MPG city/highway/combined for the base, 35/27/30 for the Cooper S and 33/25/28 for the JCW.

Tough choice. The MINI Coupe in any form should be the quickest of the body types: smallest and lightest (without the added weight of a convertible with its moving parts and its chassis stiffening efforts). That gives you latitude on your decision.

IF IT GETS A REACTION, IT'S ART

As we posted our first photos of this car on Facebook, one reader commented, "and this is an attractive design why?" Another said there are "much better ways to spend 40k." The price does pile on. Start with the model-to-model ratios we ran, above. Add the options you see on our test car, at right. (And go ahead, just try to start subtracting many of them. Some even seem essential to the JCW level, and we wonder why they're options at all—sport suspension, notably.) Add a bit more for 2013 model pricing, while you're at it.

We weren't paying for ours today, so we hopped in and checked it out. It's very roomy, though it is thoroughly a two-door two-seater, as it's intended to be, based as it is on the Roadster. The trunk is separate from the interior, though it has a ski or long bundle passthrough, but one colleague who was very interested in the car in general had to rule it out because of dog ownership. Too bad, given the actual volume with that big boot. For some, the car could benefit from the open cargo area offered by many small coupes when their limited back seats are folded down.

Back to Facebook. "It's a really odd roof, like a bike helmet—pretty ungainly," read another comment. "The Roadster is much better looking." To each their own.

"I think it would look better in MY driveway," chimed in a more enchanted reader (and current MINI owner).

"Looks like the top was chopped by an underskilled technician," countered yet another.

The roof provides plenty of headroom. At over six feet in personal height, we actually moved the seat a little higher, because it felt like we were sitting on the driveway surface, as delivered. We still had another three inches or so of headroom.

FEATURES AND PERFORMANCE

A joystick behind the shifter rules the center pod of the instrument panel, much like Audi's MMI or BMW's iDrive, but simpler and smaller. Good idea: there's no need for these to be as dominant as they often are.

The armrest conflicts with operation of the handbrake, and it was a \$250 add-on. That we would skip.

Rear visibility is poor. An opera window behind the B-pillar is tiny, and the C-pillar is enormous. To have a car this small be this hard to back up is a paradox.

But when we put it in first gear and go, we love it immediately. Ahh, love versus logic. Then reality kicks in, in the form of one of our least favorite things: front-drive torque steer. Within the first quarter-mile, we have noted it twice, and we note it throughout the week.

The retracting rear decklid spoiler, when finished in contrasting stripes (\$250), puts on a good show through your tiny back window, which also provides you with just a little vignette of the road you're leaving behind.

The torque steer generates a love-hate relationship, wherein we note that sometimes when you feel it, you can turn that torque steer into sport. If we felt things starting to get a little squirrely, we could dig in hard and enjoy it. If you're a front-drive fan, you just might love

KEEP RIGHT >>



SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|---|---------------------------|
| ENGINE | 1.6L 4-cylinder 16v turbo |
| HP/Torque..... | 208 hp / 192-207 lb-ft |
| 0-to-60 mph | 6.1 sec manual (6.3 auto) |
| TRANSMISSION | 6-speed manual |
| DRIVETRAIN | Front-engine, front-drive |
| FUEL MILEAGE | 25 MPG city, 33 highway |
| STANDARD FEATURES: 17" alloys, run-flat tires, manual 6-way seats, Brembo discs with red front calipers, ABS, CBC, EBD, DTC, EDLC, four airbags, personal lock/lighting settings, keyless entry, CD-AM-FM-HD six-speaker audio, cargo area pass-through, piano black interior surfaces, active rear spoiler. | |
| BASE PRICE | \$31,200 |
| OPTIONS: Blue metallic paint | 500 |
| Carbon black/beige punch leather | 1500 |
| MINI Connected with Nav | 1750 |
| Sport suspension | 500 |
| Chrome line interior | 250 |
| Silver stripes | 250 |
| Door mirror chrome caps | 100 |
| Center armrest | 250 |
| Xenon headlights | 500 |
| Harman-Kardon audio | 750 |
| White turn signal lights | 100 |
| DESTINATION CHARGE | 700 |
| TOTAL PRICE | \$38,350 |



this. If not, you can join us in our effort to look at it from the bright side.

Torque steer is one thing, but engine torque is another, and on this the JCW excels: its 208-hp turbo brags 192 lb-ft at peak, but also has an override feature that goes, well, beyond peak—to 207 lb-ft. We find ourselves on the freeway, up into fifth gear at highway speeds, normally a borderline lugging situation, yet can punch it and accelerate another 10 mph immediately.

The engine has a great raspy note when you accelerate—not the roar of a V8 and not a pocket rocket sewing machine—just powerful and wound up tight.

As our week wears on, we declare that this MINI is red hot and solid. We hit highway speeds immediately without even trying, tracking straight and true. People had been very polarized about the style. If you are, then take it as a motivation to drive a MINI John Cooper Works Coupe. Then if you don't like the Coupe style, take it as a motivation to try the standard-issue JCW Hardtop or one of the others. It's a great package (and we stopped doing the math on the cost of the JCW upgrade, long since). The Coupe part is just one flavor.

Caught in traffic with a combination of a red MINI Countryman and our MINI Coupe, plus three-of-the-same from another brand, we realize MINI is on to something with their push for variety. The car makes a whole different kind of impression in its different forms. As regular MINIs proliferate, it's really good to have options that distinguish themselves from the herd.

We came to this MINI straight from the tiny Scion iQ, which could do a boulevard U-turn between two adjacent (but for the divider) lanes. The MINI takes another lane, and torque steer hits in the middle of it, then again as we shift up on the opposing straightaway. We find more gripes with the torque steer on surface streets. On

the freeway, it holds straight and strong. Yet, freeway driving is not the main reason we'd buy this car. We already mentioned that you can shake off some of that torque steer by giving the car a lot more power, but it seems you can also get rid of it, to a degree, by giving it less power. But that's less fun.

The suspension is impressive. We drove over a succession of bolted steel plates in a construction zone, and basically wanted to do it again, it felt so good.

Toward the end, we were even making friends with the torque steer effect. You gun it, hammer it, power it, bear down, forge ahead, grab that torque and handle it, and it can become part of the fun and challenging sports car feel—fairly elusive in the market overall. (We'd still rather have the tail hanging out, than the front fighting back, but maybe that's just us.)

We had a beef with the audio system, which uses two buttons—one a half foot above the shifter and one a half foot behind it, with the shifter in between—to go between volume and tuning. We also inadvertently changed our airflow settings a few times, while reaching for the radio volume.

The shifter is precise and tight during forward driving, but we would love a gate or detent for reverse, as it takes special care to avoid it when sliding back into first at a stop.

Our logbook reveals that, despite a few demerits on specifics, "overall, all the things we're commenting on, especially the torquiness, are things that likely wouldn't bother an owner at all. It is plenty peppy and remains a hoot to drive, on the open road or even a freeway ramp. As we change lanes in rush hour traffic, it is every bit as quick as you want it or need it to be. We're having our way with everyone on the freeway: Mustang, Challenger, BMW, big pickups. This car is a hoot."

FAMILIARITY BREEDS FAMILIARITY

Getting used to this car's look and feel took no time at all. A MINI Cabriolet at the light, with the top up, looked startlingly tall now. That in turn made the Roadster seem cool, and the idea of a Coupe based on the Roadster makes sense. (We did keep getting the urge to put the top down on the Coupe.) We think the stylists could have done something much more integrated with the roofline, bringing the body into play more, but working from the beltline up (within likely constraints of engineering and budget), this is what we get. Not bad. Distinctive.

Overall, if you want a small car with more than decent fuel mileage, it's hard to beat any MINI. The cars offer fine fit and finish, performance, and that elusive panache and authority that a lot of small cars don't. You can show up at the country club in any MINI, and the more attention-getting—like this Coupe—the more so.

Once you get accustomed to its defining shape, the other MINIs can start to look odd by comparison. It has its own flavor and a personality that grows on you. (We experienced this with the Countryman, to a degree, too, though the Hardtop remained our benchmark.)

You could say the MINI Coupe is for anybody who likes the Roadster but doesn't like convertibles. But there's something about this combination. If the JCW came only as a Coupe, or if the Coupe came only as a JCW, it would be a perfect mix. And it's a blast to drive.

We've driven many MINIs and have never had one we wouldn't have been glad to keep indefinitely. It was the same with this. If we were shopping on any kind of budget, though, we'd take a good look at the Cooper S.

This odd little Coupe starts to feel like your own little secret. It looks so small, but inside it's not. Some people think it's a little awkward, but it's not when you drive it. It's just a little different, and everyone agrees on that. ■

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