

More power, open top, two seats... more sport

By Joe Sage

MINI's lineup just grows and grows. BMW brought the brand itself back to life in 2001 as a sort of fanciful revisiting of Britain's quirky automotive heyday. Since then, MINI has shown one even quirkier concept after another at the major shows—as most companies do—but they keep doing one thing differently from most: they bring these concepts to life, to actual production. Thus this small company with the small car now has at least seven different models—including the original MINI hardtop; its direct offshoot convertible; the slightly longer Clubman, with its swinging double rear doors; the gnarly all-wheel-drive Countryman; the sleek and slope-roofed Paceman; the funny little two-seat Coupe with its funny little helmet roof... and now the Roadster, which is that little two-seater with its funny little roof replaced by a ragtop. There are even more versions if you use all-wheel drive as a multiplier where available, and more still when you multiply by the more potent John Cooper Works versions. What we have here today is their latest model, the Roadster, in a John Cooper Works edition.

The MINI Roadster lineup

Among the Roadster itself, there are three: the basic MINI Cooper Roadster, the MINI Cooper S Roadster and the MINI John Cooper Works Roadster, which is the one we are driving here.

They all have 1.6-liter four-cylinder engines, but those vary. The base Roadster uses it normally aspirated and with BMW Group's Valvetronic technology. That engine is rated at 121 hp and 114 lb-ft of torque, can hit 0-to-60 in 8.7 seconds and has a top speed of 124 mph. The Cooper S Roadster adds twin-scroll turbocharging, which ups the power to 181 hp with 177 lb-ft, drops acceleration time to 6.7 seconds and boosts top speed to 141 mph. Go all the way, with the JCW version, and your twin-scroll turbocharged four-banger is modified with a range of tech details derived from motorsports, now hitting 208 hp, 192 lb-ft of torque, a 0-to-60 time of 6.3 seconds and a top speed of 147 mph. The biggest gain in specs is from base to Cooper S, while prices climb at a different ratio—at \$25,550, \$28,550 and \$35,700 respectively for the base, Cooper S and JCW Roadsters. This means going from base to S gives you a 49.6 percent horsepower increase for just an 11.7 percent rise in price. Moving from S to JCW involves another 25 percent price hike, but deliv-

ers only a 14.9 percent power gain. It's enough to suggest looking carefully at the Cooper S Roadster before moving to the John Cooper Works.

But we *are* here today to move to the John Cooper Works—specifically the round-number-\$40,000 JCW Roadster shown on these pages. The first thing that helped the price climb was the last thing we would have added: an automatic transmission for \$1250. Slightly more expensive was what the Monroney confusingly lists as two packages but prices as one \$1500 item (see sidebar). Checking against manufacturer specs or the consumer build site, this doesn't agree in name, content or price variables, but expect to throw \$1500-2000 at various electronic gotta-haves.

Features and controls

MINI has a near-keyless approach: stick the key in a hole next to the pushbutton start and then push the button, a two-step start that's less convenient than just using a key. Small side mirrors and a back mirror with a perfect view of the windshield between the seat backs add up to limited rear visibility. (And the windshield is an open mesh, so it may block the mirror, but not much wind.)

The MINI's trademark huge center-of-dash speedo surrounds a variety of readout options—range, distance to destination, arrival time, fuel consumption and more useful digital speed. The fuel gauge with its distinctive string of dots is stylish and useful, though ironically prominent in a car that doesn't require obsessing about fuel.

Every switch for everything looks the same, a cool look until you're using them, although tiny icons help. Switches on the upper windshield frame for the convertible top and rear spoiler also could benefit from better differentiation.

Sounds good...

We had said we wouldn't spend money to eliminate our usual preference, the manual transmission, but our logbook notes that "it shifts so well, we almost don't miss the manual we otherwise wish we had. The car makes nice aggressive shifts, though being an automatic it sometimes makes them regardless of what you're asking for, and some are borderline unwanted, although it does have a manumatic feature." As our time with the car continued, we liked this transmission quite well. It anticipates downshifts much better than most automatics, which would just lug as you slow down, and its sound effects are great.

Engine sound effects are equally great. Power bursts are strong, though we noted a lag at times when really punching it. As with any MINI, we



don't suffer any front-drive torque steer, though at times on both freeway and surface streets, it could dart to one side more than average. On the valley's competitive freeways, the car always had the power and maneuverability we summoned.

Suspension is very firm. We love a good road feel, but you can practically count every seam in the pavement. Its low profile tires contribute.

Logbook notes about convertible top operation were extensive, or at least heavily recurrent. There are some oddities in the controls, though if you own the car, you'll master them and never think about them again. But the odd angle and forceful push it takes to first split the top from the windshield frame will likely be forever.

Being a two-seater, the small soft top does have the benefit of not gobbling up any trunk space, and being a two-seater, it has a sizable trunk—enough to pack well for a good road trip. This single trunk approaches the utility of the two trunks in a Boxster, one of our benchmarks.

The JCW's sound effects gave us motoring joy repeatedly, to the point we'd keep the top down on the hottest of summer days (at least for a little while), just to catch its note. And on a very rainy day, it remained nice and snug.

We noted a paradox with our Roadster—as the logbook eloquently stated—"in which the car feels sportier than it might be, only because it's not as sporty as it might be; in other words, it feels a little clunky to sit in, compared with the sports car atmosphere of e.g. a Boxster, because that's pure sports car, while this could be any number of other models inside." Ultimately, the MINI JCW Roadster won't set the world on fire for performance, but it's a lot of fun, even with the automatic, if that's your preference. And it includes that distinctive MINI style and flavor. ■



MINI JCW ROADSTER

ENGINE1.6-liter 16-valve 4-cylinder
TRANSMISSION*...(standard): 6-spd manual*
POWERTRAINfront-wheel drive
POWER/TORQUE208 hp / 192 lb-ft (207 OB)
0-TO-60 MPH6.3 sec
BRAKES (FR/R)12.4" vent.disc/11.0" disc
MPG26/35/29 city/hwy/comb

WHEELBASE97.1 in
LENGTH146.8 in
HEIGHT54.5 in

BASE\$35,700

STANDARD: ABS, Corner Brake Control, Dynamic Traction Control, Electronic Differential Lock Control, four airbags incl side thoracic, personal lock/light settings, microfilter and recirc A/C, six-speaker AM-FM-CD-HD audio, Bluetooth-USB-iPod, one-touch windows, cargo area pass-through, active rear spoiler.

OPTIONS: Spice Orange Metallic\$500
*Steptronic automatic trans\$1250
17" alloy wheels, cross spk, blk\$100
MINI Connected with Nav Pack,
MINI Wired Package\$1500

DESTINATION\$795

TOTAL AS TESTED\$39,845