

MPH+MPG=Maximum GPM

By H. R. Driver

Automobile enthusiasts know that MPH stands for, "Miles Per Hour." They also understand that MPG equals "Miles Per Gallon." Getting either high MPH or high MPG from a car is a good thing. However, getting both from the same vehicle is even better!

So, what's the formula? Add high MPH to high MPG and you get maximum GPMs. "What are GPMs?" you ask. Grins Per Mile! Hey, isn't this what fun motoring is all about?

Unfortunately, in a world of \$3.00-per-gallon gasoline, fuel economy has become a primary consideration when shopping for a new car. Does this mean you must sacrifice performance and buy a boring hybrid sedan? Absolutely not. You have options.

At the recent MPG Track Days (this time MPG stands for Motor Press Guild, not Miles Per Gallon) we drove a group of pocket rockets which delivered volumes of grins or GPMs. These compact machines offered crisp handling, great braking, superb top speed and excellent fuel economy. Yes, you do have options.

Comparing Prices And Fuel Economy

Before testing our pack of small sport sedans on the track, we thought it might be a wise idea to compare the prices and fuel economy of our candidates. Thus, even before the track testing begins you can eliminate any car which exceeds your maximum purchasing parameters. From the least expensive to the most dear, here are our candidates:

Sport Sedan	MSRP as Tested	MPG City	MPG Highway
Sentra SE-R Spec V.....	\$21,000	24 MPG	31 MPG
MINI Cooper S.....	\$23,650	29 MPG	36 MPG
Caliber SRT 4.....	\$23,990	21 MPG	26 MPG
VW GTI 2.0 T.....	\$24,950	23 MPG	32 MPG
Subaru WRX.....	\$29,258	19 MPG	24 MPG
Audi A3 2.0T.....	\$34,650	23 MPG	32 MPG

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Comparing Performance on an Autocross Course

When it comes to performance, isn't the most expensive car always the best? Doesn't the fastest car also get the worst gas mileage? Not necessarily. In fact, the best performing car on our autocross comparison was also the second least expensive car and the most fuel efficient car in our group. Said compact sport sedan was the MINI Cooper S.

1. MINI Cooper S - The secret of the MINI Cooper's superb autocross handling lies in its chassis architecture, light weight and slick engine. The little MINI Cooper S has a short wheelbase-to-track ratio which gets it into and out of corners quickly. With 176 supercharged ponies and minimal body roll, the MINI S takes a set, lays down the power and exits corners with precision. The gearing of the 6-speed is perfect for blasting around tight autocross tracks in second. Sure the tiny MINI Cooper S is not as smooth riding as the Audi A3 on the road, but what do you want for 24 grand?

2. Audi A3 - Admittedly, the A3 we tested was loaded and cost \$34k. However, the A3's base MSRP is \$25,300. So, pass on the expensive NAV and sound system and get a more basic model. With a longer wheelbase than the MINI Cooper S, a 6-speed and a torquey 200 hp 2.0 turbo, the A3 is the perfect intermediate and long track autocross weapon. The A3's impressive 32 highway MPG is only second to the MINI's 36 MPG. The Audi A3 provides max GPM's and has a very smooth ride.

3. VW GTI - Aesthetically, the GTI is nicer looking than the Audi A3. At \$24,900, it is also less expensive. It also has bigger wheels and tires (225/40x19" on the VW vs 225/45x17" on the Audi). The MPG and on-track performance are virtually identical. Is the prestige and luxury of the Audi worth a couple of grand more? It is your call.



4. Dodge Caliber SRT-4 - We won't kid you here. This tall two-box machine is heavier, has more body roll and it did not negotiate our tight autocross track as well as any of the aforementioned vehicles. However, it does have a 285 hp turbo-charged engine, air dam, big brakes and giant tires which make it a very serious autocross and time trials car. The upside is the \$23,990 price. The downside is the relatively poor 26 MPG highway. Both the 6-speed and torque steer are standard, so be prepared to turn left when exiting tight corners. Serious drivers only need apply.

5. Sentra SE-R Spec V - Great torque, but slightly nose-heavy on our tight autocross course. Better suited of longer autocross circuits and full-course tracks. Also, the least expensive car in our test. A decent 31 MPG highway and a very fun machine.

6. Subaru WRX Impreza - At \$34,650, this was the most expensive car in our group. It also was the biggest and most ponderous around our tight Willow Springs autocross course. Why not simply go the extra couple of grand and get a WRX STi? With almost 70 hp more and a killer suspension system, the WRX STi would probably have been the clear winner in our test. However, Subaru was holding back the new WRX STi launch for the LA Auto Show. Far better on a full-course track, the WRX Impreza is also the best riding road car in our test.

Conclusion

The decision is clear if you are looking for the car which gets the best mileage and is the quickest car to run on a tight autocross course: The MINI Cooper S is your machine.

The decision becomes less clear if you factor in performance on longer autocross courses and ride quality. The clear winners are the Audi A3 and the VW GTI.

Let's muddy the waters more with the great power of the Dodge Avenger SRT-4, the excellent long-course handling of the Sentra SE-R Spec V and the Subaru WRX Impreza. These are three excellent alternatives to our top three light weight pocket rockets.

Our choice? For the money, mileage and Grins Per Mile (GPMs) we like the MINI Cooper S...actually the 200 hp John Cooper S model if we were laying down our own hard-earned cash. However, the Audi A3 and VW GTI are more practical daily drivers/weekend autocross cars. You need not wear a kidney belt with these teutonic twins and your wife would be far less likely to divorce you on the grounds of "physical abuse." Not married? Are you a great driver? Want to kick ass at stop lights? Want to embarrass people on track days? Don't care about MPG? Your choice is obvious: The Dodge Avenger SRT-4 with 286 hp, tons of torque, big brakes and fat tires. You decide. ■

