

## Join the Club, Man! - 2008 MINI Cooper Clubman

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I have to admit right at the start that I'm a MINI fan. We bought my wife a MINI Cooper back in 2004 and it's been an automotive love affair ever since. After a year of competing for the driver's seat, I bought my own MINI Cooper S in 2005. We're a MINI family and I've never had a car I loved as much.

So it's no surprise that the whole family was jumping for joy when we got to spend a week driving the new MINI Cooper Clubman - the extended wheelbase "micro-wagon" version of BMW's diminutive hatchback. With its "funkier than thou" looks and extra legroom in the back, we wanted to see if the Clubman has the same mojo we love about our daily drivers.

The short answer is, yes it does. The Clubman is a great choice for those who found the basic MINI a bit on the small side. You get more legroom in the back seat and more trunk space as well. When we bought our first MINI, our daughter was 10 years old. Today she's 14 and the back seat is a bit more cozy for her than it used to be.

The driving experience on the Clubman is very good, yet different from its standard-length siblings. A standard-size MINI is a very lively car; with its wide stance and short wheelbase, it loves to turn but it has a tendency to get pulled along in the studded-tire troughs on the freeway. The Clubman feels more solid on the road, but sacrifices some of the lively handling in the turns. Yet this is only in comparison to a regular MINI - compared to just about any other car on the road, the Clubman is an absolute giggle to drive.

As with all normally-aspirated MINI Coopers, there's not a lot of power under 4,000 RPM on the basic Clubman. I think the turbocharged Cooper S engine will be much more popular in the Clubman body because of its better low-range torque and generally higher power throughout its range. The Clubman is several hundred pounds heavier than the smaller MINIs, and you can feel it. The basic Clubman offers 118 horsepower and 118 pound-feet of torque. The car runs this power to the ground through a 6-speed manual transmission, with an optional 6-speed automatic if you want it. You will do a lot of shifting, especially if you need to pass someone on the freeway, but the 6-speed is becoming standard to achieve better fuel economy.

And one big reason to look into the Clubman this year is its excellent gas mileage. At 28/37, a Clubman will make a great replacement for a larger crossover SUV or other bigger car that guzzles the gas without providing a whole lot more utility. In real world combination driving, I saw a solid 35 MPG - better than a lot of hybrids. To those who wonder about safety, the MINI gets 5 stars in European crash tests and comes stock with side curtain airbags front and back as well as front seat and dash-mounted airbags.

Speaking of hybrids, one of the features they crow about is the ability to regenerate energy for the batteries when you use the brakes. Well, some of the MINI's fuel economy is managed the same way. In most cars, when the engine is running, some of its power is given over to running the alternator to provide electricity for various functions. For the 2008 model year, MINI has introduced a new system in which the car drives the alternator only when coasting or braking. This helps save gas by delivering all the engine's power to the wheels when you need it, and using otherwise wasted engine cycles to generate electricity as you're slowing down.

So, let's take a walk around the Clubman. The car I tested came in an interesting "Hot Chocolate" brown color, with a Hershey-bar brown leather interior trimmed with cream highlights. Now, ordinarily brown is not a color I'd ever choose on a car, but this shade grew on me as the week went on, and I came to appreciate the color scheme. The Clubman is an odd-looking car in some way - design cues that come down from the very utilitarian original Mini Clubman cars of the 60s.

One such design cue is the "barn door" style for the rear access. Instead of the standard MINI's hatchback, the Clubman doors open out from the center. This puts a vertical bar through your rear-window visibility, and honestly doesn't add much utility to the rear end. I'd have been happier with a standard hatch or a clamshell style where you can pop the hatch and then open a lower tailgate if necessary.

The other big access win on the Clubman is the "suicide" third door, located on the passenger side to facilitate getting in and out of the back seat. This is nicely done and really makes the car more accessible for kids, especially those who still need to be buckled into their car seats.

Base price on the 2008 MINI Cooper Clubman is \$19,950. The test car sticker is about \$9,000 more than that, so let's look at what you can order on your car. MINI gets \$500 for Hot Chocolate as one of the "premium" paint colors. There's \$2,000 for leather seats, color-matched to the car, and that also includes seat heat, folding side mirrors, and heat on the mirrors and washer jets. Those are all useful, so if you like leather, it's probably worth the money.

\$1500 of the price pays for the Convenience Package, which includes a leather multi-function steering wheel, universal garage door opener, keyless entry, auto-dimming rear view mirror and automatic wipers and headlights. And the iPod attachment. I'd probably leave this package on the shelf and just pay the \$250 or so to have the iPod attachment put in at the dealer.

Another \$1500 is for the premium package, which really just buys the nice glass sunroof, but also includes a better stereo and automatic climate control. I wouldn't buy that stuff either - we bought that on my wife's car and when I ordered my Cooper S, I left them off. They're just not worth the money.

But the \$1500 for the Sport Package is worth every penny. Yes, you get nicer wheels and sport suspension, but the big deal in the Sport Package is a set of MINI's ultra-comfortable sport seats. Get these in leather with heaters and you'll always be comfortable. You also get fog lights with this package, and that's nice too.

\$500 of this car's price was for "chrome line" exterior and interior. Which the MINI Clubman really doesn't need. I'd save the money. The last \$600 buys Xenon headlights and white side marker lights. This is a luxury, but I like it, so I'd pay for that.

All in all, I'd save about \$4,000 over the sticker price on this Clubman, bringing the car in for under \$25,000 fully-featured with leather, sport package, heat, and Xenon HID lights. Which is a great price on a great car.

Yeah, I'm still in love with MINI.