

Consistent Favorite: 2008 MINI Cooper

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It's almost impossible to buy a used MINI Cooper in America today. They just aren't available, and those that are for sale are fetching almost-new prices. The reason is obvious - with gas pushing \$4.50/gallon in most of the country, a car that gives you 37 MPG (28 city) without even trying is in high demand. Especially when that car is as useful and as much fun to drive as a MINI Cooper.

Journalistic ethics demand that I admit up front that I'm a MINI fan. I drive a 2005 Cooper S, and my wife drives a 2004 Cooper. In 1.5 years, when our daughter turns 16, the plan is to buy Mom a new Clubman S and let the kid drive the Cooper. We're a MINI family. We drank the kool-aid.

But look at that again. As an automotive journalist, I drive a lot of different cars. I've been in the Subaru Impreza WRX and STI. I've driven the Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution, VW R32, Volvo C30, MAZDASPEED3, and so on, right down the line. And at the end of the day, I've never found a car that I like as well as my MINI for the money. Even some cars that cost several times the MINI's modest purchase price don't really measure up. So both sides of our garage are still MINI-occupied territory. (Of all those above, only the Mazda and the Mitsubishi came close to swaying my loyalties.)

And there's a host of good reasons why the MINI is still my ride of choice for a trip to the grocery store or a trek across country. First and foremost, it's fun to drive. Whether it's the low-power, momentum-carrying Cooper or the amazingly quick Cooper S, the MINI driving experience is fantastic. It's a tight, well-designed machine that will hug the curves beyond all reason, respond to throttle, and give you all it's got. OK, the basic Cooper needs a lot of revs to make it up a hill, but did I mention 37 MPG?

Inside, the MINI is as comfortable and well-appointed as its more expensive BMW brethren. One thing though - you must buy the Sport seats. The normal seats aren't so great, but the MINI sport seats are as good as anything on the market. And get the cold weather package - those heated seats are a must in the 95% of North America that sees weather below 50 degrees on occasion.

I recently had the chance to compare the 2008 MINI Cooper against our household stable, and found that there have been some marked improvements. Mainly, the new Cooper comes with a 6-speed transmission instead of 5. This offers some space for gearing improvements that make the car a bit zippier without sacrificing fuel economy. There's also a "sport mode" button that unleashes a few extra ponies. I ran the test car hard, in sport mode, up a lot of hills for two days straight and still averaged 33 MPG.

The extra inch or two of trunk space put in for the 2007 model year also helps, especially with the now-standard trunk nets that hold stuff in place. I hauled several bottles of wine over hundreds of miles of mountain roads with no trouble at all.

Like most early MINI owners, I didn't care for the 2007-2008 dash board changes. The big classic center speedometer got even bigger, the water temperature gauge went away, and the stereo controls got all strange and unwieldy. They changed the classic metal toggle switches to bigger plastic switches, and went to a rather fragile-feeling set of climate controls shaped to look like a MINI logo - cute, but I didn't like it. I still don't, but I'm getting used to them, so they don't bug me as much as they did at first. The dash layout may not be my cup of tea, but it's no reason to deny yourself a MINI.

Most importantly, the fundamentals of the MINI are the same from 2002 to the present. The willing, rev-happy 1600cc DOHC engine, wheels out at the corners of the vehicle, sporty suspension (some optional packages are sportier than others - none are bad), comfortable roomy interior, and generally sassy looks have all stayed constant throughout the

car's development.

The car I tested still starts at \$18,050, and with a \$1500 sport package, \$250 multi-function steering wheel, \$250 rear spoiler, \$500 for heated seats, and \$250 for fog lights, it still comes in at an honest \$21,450. And part of the beauty of the MINI experience is that you'll really actually pay that amount at the dealer. If I were buying this car, I might leave off the spoiler, but...no, for \$250 it looked very sexy on the car. I'll keep it.

Now, assuming that the marketing folks from MINI are going to read this, here's my plea: bring us the MINI Cooper D that I saw all over Italy this summer. For those who don't know, the Cooper D is a 1600cc diesel MINI, and its specs are nothing short of miraculous. It does 0-60 in 9.9 seconds, gets well over 50 MPG, and drives just like its gasoline-powered brethren. It sells for the same price (more or less) as a Cooper in Europe. If MINI brings it to America, I'll be first in line to lay down a deposit. And at 50 MPG, that'll be a long long line.

The bottom line is that the MINI today is just as great as it has always been. There's a good reason you can't find them on the used market. It's because like me, almost every MINI owner out there plans to keep his or her Cooper forever and pass it down to the kids.