

ARIZONA DRIVER

THE ENTHUSIAST'S GUIDE TO LIFE BEHIND THE WHEEL

VOLUME 10 NUMBER 5
SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2011

VEHICLE LAUNCHES, DRIVES AND NEWS

MERCEDES-BENZ M-CLASS LAUNCH
TOYOTA PRIUS V LAUNCH
MINI COUNTRYMAN ALL4
FIAT 500 SPORT
LAND ROVER LR4
RANGE ROVER SPORT HSE
CHRYSLER 300
GALPIN 700-HP MUSTANG FOR BARRETT-JACKSON

SPECIAL EVENTS

MONTEREY - PEBBLE BEACH
BULLRUN ROAD RALLY - VIVID RACING
BARRETT-JACKSON LAS VEGAS INFO
ARIZONA INTERNATIONAL AUTO SHOW INFO

ARIZONA RIDER: MOTORCYCLE NEWS

ROCKFORD FOSGATE RIDE LIKE A PRO

EQUIPMENT AND TECH

SOLAR POWER FOR FORD FOCUS
GOODYEAR HQ, AKRON
IPHONE GASKET CASE



MINI COOPER S COUNTRYMAN ALL4

MINI CON COJONES

With four doors, all-wheel drive, turbo performance and beefier bodywork, the new MINI Cooper S Countryman ALL4 fully rates the all-caps name treatment the company prefers

Let's have a spelling quiz of sorts, right up front: the manufacturer spells its vehicles' name MINI, all caps. Not everybody plays along, but we're game. The idea is to revert to "Mini" when referring to the tiny classic from decades earlier—when the brand was owned by the Brits, not BMW. But MINI for the new. Fair enough.

Among these, a MINI is a MINI is a MINI, right? No; that would be selling the brand very short. For starters, a visit to the build-your-own website makes it clear you're about to face some 10-million-plus choices—a mixed blessing, perhaps, but it makes a point. But, beyond that, the MINI brand has evolved into a whole lineup, and it's slated to expand further.

MODERN MINI EVOLUTION

It all starts, of course, with the familiar MINI hard-top/hatch, on the road for a decade now, yet still looking fresh—maybe fresher than ever, as there is clearly a small car boom going on. Add a convertible, multiply both of those by Cooper, Cooper S and John Cooper Works (JCW) versions, and the game has long been underway.

MINI has put together one cool and compelling concept car after another at the big shows, some wildly different, others mild variants. Some come to market. The new two-seat MINI Coupe concept was revealed this year, and the production car is starting to hit the streets right now.

The MINI Clubman arrived in 2008, a small station wagon version, almost ten inches longer than the hatch, for cargo and rear legroom, with a small third side door on the passenger side and with little double doors at the rear. The Clubman in original Mini parlance was a restyled Australian hatchback, a sheet metal variant, while wagons had been called either Traveller or Countryman. But BMW hadn't initially acquired those names.

Now they have, and the Countryman is the all-new vehicle we're holding in our hands.

We've wished for an all-wheel-drive MINI since the first new model hit the road ten years ago. The basic hatchback is actually a great front-driver: its suspension engineering and wide stance mitigate the challenge of typical front-drive torque-steer characteristics almost completely, and its light weight and front-rear distribution reduce the effects of any unavoidable transfer of weight away from the drive wheels upon acceleration. Though

actual go-karts are rear-engine, rear-drive, the MINI has been consistently praised for its solid and responsive go-kart feel. Still, it would be great to plant that little car on all four wheels and fire 'em up. The Cooper S Countryman ALL4 does just that.

The Countryman is the first MINI to be offered with permanent all-wheel drive, in top-end ALL4 guise (which is also a turbocharged Cooper S). The ALL4 system uses a "smart" electro-hydraulic differential, mounted alongside the transmission, which switches power distribution from front to rear, depending on which wheels have the best traction. Under normal conditions, up to 50 percent of power goes to the rear wheels. Under extreme conditions, full power can be directed to the front or rear wheels as needed.

Front MacPherson spring struts with forged lower control arm and a rear multi-link suspension work with Servotronic electric power steering to provide the Countryman with a slightly different flavor of trademark MINI go-kart-like handling.

MINI COOPER S COUNTRYMAN ALL4

String together the full name of our test vehicle, including the S, Countryman and ALL4, and you confirm it has pretty much everything (millions of option combinations aside). The S means it has more horsepower; the Countryman body brings four doors, adds ground clearance, ups rear storage and more; and ALL4 announces four-wheel traction. Ours includes an automatic transmission (\$1250), the one thing we might order differently. Manual and automatic transmission options are both economical 6-speeds. In MINI's case, unlike many (who control fuel use partly through the automatic's computer mapping), the manual has the

better fuel mileage of the two: 31 mpg highway, 25 city (compared with 30/23 for the automatic). The base Countryman (no S, no ALL4) gets 35 mpg highway. But it also has just a 121-hp base engine.

The same basic 1.6-liter DOHC 4-cylinder engine is at the heart of every MINI, though S models have a turbocharged, intercooled version that boosts horsepower by a whopping 50 percent, from 121 to 181 hp (and JCW models are tweaked a bit more). The Countryman ALL4 is also a Cooper S, so it has the high-horsepower turbo. Torque in the ALL4 (or the 2-wheel-drive S version) is 177 lb-ft.

Decisions, decisions. You can gain MPG with the manual transmission. Are you blowing it by getting all-wheel drive? The Countryman S without ALL4 all-wheel drive does get 1 mpg better rating from the EPA (or with the automatic, the front-driver gets 2 mpg better). Not enough to take us away from AWD. The ALL4 also has a base price just \$1700 higher than the 2-wheel-drive version: \$27,650 for the 4-wheeler and a huge feature for the price. To us, spending more and losing a little MPG adds up to a win-win: AWD is worth it. And we'd still likely opt to save \$1250 and gain one or two MPG by going with the manual.

These are the fundamental decisions before you ever get to colors, trim and add-ons.

The four-door MINI is available in three trim levels: the front-wheel-drive base MINI Cooper Countryman, turbocharged front-drive Cooper S Countryman, and the all-wheel-drive MINI Cooper S Countryman ALL4. (Prices start at \$23,050 for the naturally-aspirated front-driver.) Put an "X" in enough option boxes and you get a very distinctive Countryman, though the price can easily climb to some \$40,000.

DELIVERING THE GOODS

The MINI has never been all cars to all people, nor has it tried to be. It's a small car without any small car stigma. (This is becoming more common, but was a major distinction five or ten or even about two years ago.) It has operating economy, but its purchase economy is less so, being a well-built BMW at its core. And people were less likely to buy one if its primary purpose was to carry around a family of four, and/or all their stuff, and/or a whole lot of one person's stuff, at least inside.

But the Countryman is different at least on the last score: it significantly increases the ease of carrying four people, with full four-door access and more legroom and headroom; and it provides decent cargo space, all the moreso if you don't have those other two backseaters. The Countryman has 12.1 cubic feet of cargo space with the rear seat backs in place, or it can be expanded to 41.0 cubic feet when the seats are folded. Two mountain bikes, with front wheels removed, can fit

KEEP RIGHT >>



By Joe Sage



Where the roads are dry and the cars are slick.



to report back after a thousand-mile highway drive. Headroom was adequate, even with the sunroof. Sunroofs notoriously take away an inch or two of height, depending on mechanisms, and of course a glass roof isn't much better than a black roof, in an Arizona summer. Tough call whether to buy that.

Speaking of Arizona summer, we set the a/c at 72 degrees, auto, and it ran full tilt. No surprise there, but it was noted as very loud, and it stayed very loud. We turned the fan down for relief from that, but of course cooling is reduced—and you're no longer on auto. So we turned it up to 82, auto, but still had noise. A few days later, we noted we liked it after all and noise wasn't a problem. Next day, it was noted as a complaint again. Ultimately, we found happiness, set at 84. We still noted a very loud engine cooling fan, running after shutdown.

The keyless entry, typically enough, requires touching a little button on the door handle. It's pretty quick for entering, but to lock it, you have to keep your finger pressed on it for a couple of seconds, which—in the words of a colleague—feels like two months when it's 115 degrees out. We also wonder how long the little rubber button will last, with fingernails emphatically pressed into it.

Being a four-door, access and egress are naturally tighter than in a two-door. Being a small four-door, they are notably tighter. And the B-pillar is pretty much right at our shoulder, impacting over-the-shoulder visibility. It's all part of the tradeoff for four doors, overall a worthwhile tradeoff.

Simplicity is an appropriate standard for the MINI, and the owner's manual is blessedly thin (172 pages rather than multiple multi-hundred-page books, as with so many). Unfortunately, we noted this because we needed the book more often than average: trying to get the exterior mirrors into our range of vision and not folding up unexpectedly, trying to abandon intuition and learn the rules for radio presets, and so on. As always, these are annoyances for the one-week driver, but sure to get sorted out during ownership.

COUNTRYMAN ALL4 ON THE ROAD

We wanted to repark the Countryman immediately upon delivery, which required a quick U-turn. Whoa. This didn't seem like a particularly tight turning circle for a small car, even a four-wheel-drive small car. And yet, a few days later, we noted delight with its turning circle when deciding to do a quick turnaround on a remote two-lane highway. It apparently isn't speed-sensitive steering, so it may be a matter of expectations in both instances (which

KEEP RIGHT >>

in the cargo area (though there's still a rear bike rack option if you want everything else inside).

INSIDE THE COUNTRYMAN ALL4

Our test MINI stickered at \$35,900 or so. We say "or so" because the sticker provided with the test car said it was blue and didn't have the automatic. That paint cost extra, but we'll guess that this pearlescent white may, also; and we've added the \$1250 for automatic. The sticker we had included that special color, leather interior, cold weather package (seats, mirrors, washers), premium package (dual-pane panoramic sunroof, automatic climate, Harman-Kardon sound), sport package (18-inch wheels, turbo fan, stripes, xenon headlights), keyless entry, cargo net, center armrest and rear parking distance alert.

We'd go for most of it just like that. The larger wheels give it that MINI stance. Stripes? Mixed on that, though it's almost not a MINI without them (ditto the contrasting roof). If you want certain options or packages, but maybe don't want stripes or a color-keyed roof, the build-option process fights back online, but it can be achieved. Certainly a dealer can get it right. As for a black roof in Arizona, that speaks for itself, but we became so used to this color combo that nothing else looks quite right. This one's a beauty. Leather interior is definitely a winner, even if you're headed to some mud and dust. And we'd always get the cold weather package, as this car is just begging to head somewhere nasty and give it a try.

We appreciated keyless entry. In fact, that's so common by now, we'd want it in pretty much anything. We wished it had a backup camera, for the same reason, but that's available.

As soon as we got in, we noted the handbrake in the center, a cool offset design with a full-hand grip whose lever is off to one side. Grab, pull up. Slick. Unfortunately, it hits the \$250 optional center armrest. We'd probably still get the armrest. You get used to things like this. But it's still flawed design.

Ergonomics were mixed from the get-go. Any MINI's distinctive big center gauge is in a famously odd location, but the cluster in front of you balances overall information well. Of seven spots for buttons in the center stack, only four were taken, and those by a mixed group of foglights, window lockout, traction control and a sport driving mode. It's an odd grouping.

At over six feet tall, we put the driver's seat all the way back and noted that if it went back further, we'd use that. It was fine for our week; we'd have



Arizona Driver Magazine
www.arizonadrivermagazine.com
 Advertising: sales@arizonadrivermagazine.com
 480-948-0200



means you'll forget about it most of the time). We did find a number of posts in online forums, wondering about its larger-than-expected turning circle. By the numbers, a regular MINI hatchback has a turning circle of 35.1 feet. A Fiat 500 is 30.6 feet. The Countryman ALL4, with its five-inch-longer wheelbase and all-wheel drive, turns in 38.06 feet. Compare this with a Jeep Grand Cherokee at 37.1 feet. At least we weren't imagining things.

In the first few blocks of driving, we made a note that we had just reaffirmed our preference for a manual transmission, beyond just general principal. We noted that first was very short, and second was very long and loud. For errands, or around the 'hood or office park, this seemed the wrong range. But then we gave that sport button a try. This mitigated what we had noted in first and second, though we noted it now shifted into higher gears sooner—which means lower revs, which to us would be counter to the goals of a sport setting.

All that analysis aside, the MINI Countryman is peppy and fun to drive, no less so than its hatchback brother. Its smart differentials weren't sensing any trouble on local streets, which had us clearly in front-wheel bias. Despite the MINI hatch

having done a great job of engineering away any torque steer, the ALL4 seems to reintroduce a bit. We don't have an engineering study to back up this casual observation, but the logbook had several notations of an overly lively front end.

We noted the brakes didn't feel as strong as expected; upsized discs to go along with the upsized wheels might be a great option. US specifications don't list this, but UK figures show a 60-to-0 stopping distance well over 200 feet.

The suspension is nice and firm, clearance is more than adequate, and we had no problem navigating around the various troughs and speed-bumps in the office park.

On local streets and highways, with the automatic transmission, we continued to favor the sport setting; however it's a feature you can't set and forget. We had to reactivate it repeatedly. What's more, unless that becomes second nature at startup, the control is in an awkward spot, at least with the automatic, tucked in front of the shifter and forcing a distraction while driving.

Within two days, we were loving this car and willing to overlook any flaws it may have.

On the weekend, we took it out into mild canyon

country and ran it on a very rough stretch of barely-road. It did extremely well, right out of the box. If you'd like to push the envelope, check out Countryman Connection of southern California, makers of everything from lift kits to light bars to a solid hitch and teardrop trailer: www.countrymanconnection.com. Stock or modified, the MINI Cooper S Countryman ALL4 says, "bring it on."

All in all, we enjoyed the Countryman plenty. It has a decently commanding presence over the road, far beyond what its size might suggest. In fact, it wasn't long before we noted that "it performs so well and is so easy to drive, we'd almost be willing to consider the unthinkable and get the automatic." Ten million option decisions if we bought our own? Maybe not. This one is a keeper, as is.

The Countryman is right-sized. In traffic, you have the inescapable feeling that this is better than other small cars, and you have the equally inescapable feeling that it's better than other big SUVs. We start thinking that MINI may not even be the right name for this one: if it were an iPod, it might be the do-everything Classic. Inside, we compare it to other small cars we've driven: plenty of room for your legs, even knees side-to-side, even if you're six-foot-two. There is a spacious feel and more than adequate room for more people in the back seats. We find ourselves wondering why BMW bothers making a 1 Series, since they have the small car niche so well nailed with the MINI: a car that's stylish enough, has quality build, is economical enough to purchase and operate, powerful enough and always ready to rock.

MAKE IT A DOUBLE

A foot longer and six inches wider than the MINI hardtop, with its four doors and higher ground clearance, the Countryman has a more rugged persona than the MINI hardtop. It offers the beef you might expect from an SUV or truck, more than the keep-me-on-the-pavement styling of crossovers.

Depending on options, you can spend as much on a MINI Countryman ALL4 as you would on any number of larger SUVs or crossovers. You could buy a three-year-old Escalade for less. But you wouldn't have the fuel economy, parking convenience or general fun of the MINI.

The MINI Cooper S Countryman ALL4 is on the short list of vehicles we'd like to own, ourselves. The more time we spent in it, the more we wanted to take one home. You'd be hard-pressed to find all the Countryman offers, rolled into any other one vehicle. MINI has proven its lineup is broadening and maturing. The proof, to us? The more we wanted to take home a Countryman, the more we wanted to take home a MINI hardtop, too. ■

