

MACHO MINI

("it's adorable," she said)

Story and photos: Joe Sage



The MINI has near-singlehandedly made small cars not only acceptable but desirable over the past few years. It's relatively affordable, fuel-efficient, has style and is a blast to drive.

A standard 2010 MINI Cooper hardtop has a base price of \$18,800. Its 118-horsepower 1.6-liter four-cylinder engine runs its 2546 unladen pounds from 0-to-60 in 8.5 seconds with a top speed of 126 mph. The MINI Cooper S, with a base price of \$22,300, and about 90 pounds heavier, turbocharges the same 1.6-liter four up to 172hp and knocks out 0-to-60 in 6.7 seconds, with a top speed of 139 mph. The Cooper S also adds a sport suspension, though this can be added to the base model. (A 6-speed automatic adds about 90 pounds to the Cooper or 55 to the Cooper S.) You can add thousands more to the price of either, in options. EPA fuel mileage estimates below are with a 6-speed manual; the automatic drops these by about 2-4 mpg.

The Cooper or Cooper S convertible gains almost 200 pounds, reducing 0-to-60 time by about 0.3-0.5 seconds but dropping its fuel ratings by nothing or almost nothing.

| | ENGINE | HP | EPA | \$ BASE |
|---------------|---------|-----|-------|----------|
| Cooper | 1.6L I4 | 118 | 28/37 | \$18,800 |
| Cooper S | turbo | 172 | 26/34 | \$22,300 |
| Cooper Conv | 1.6L I4 | 118 | 28/36 | \$24,250 |
| Cooper S Conv | turbo | 172 | 26/34 | \$27,150 |

Cool as the MINI is, and as great a performer as the Cooper S is, to some it could use just a bit more testosterone. Enter the MINI John Cooper Works. The JCW comes with a number of upgrades, at its core taking the same 1.6-liter four-cylinder and adding a twin-scroll turbocharger and direct fuel injection. An incredibly wide power curve delivers 208 horses from 1,850-5,600 rpm, with peak torque of 192 lb-ft increasing briefly in the Overboost mode to 207 lb-ft. This is based on the engine raced for the first time in the 2008 MINI John Cooper Works CHALLENGE.

| | ENGINE | HP | EPA | \$ BASE |
|----------|----------|-----|-------|----------|
| JCW | TST DOHC | 208 | 26/34 | \$28,800 |
| JCW Conv | TST DOHC | 208 | 26/34 | \$34,000 |

Other elements of the JCW are also derived directly from motorsport, including extra-light alloy wheels, extremely powerful brakes, a new exhaust system and a modified six-speed manual gearbox. The JCW has an aluminum cylinder block and bearing case, 16 valves and double overhead cams, roller-type drag arms optimized for minimum friction and hydraulic valve play compensation elements. Sodium-filled exhaust valves meet the greater cooling requirements of a turbo. All intake and exhaust components have been streamlined, which not only optimize flow conditions, but give the engine its special sound. The JCW hardtop weighs in at

2701 pounds (manual only), just 33 pounds more than the Cooper S hardtop. With a whopping (for its size) 208 hp, the John Cooper Works' 0-to-60 time is knocked down to 6.2 seconds, and its top speed is 147 mph.

The JCW Convertible is still quick, at 6.5 seconds 0-to-60, and it still achieves the same estimated 26/34/29 mpg as a Cooper S hardtop. Base price for a JCW hardtop is \$28,800, and for the convertible \$34,000.

The comparables and variables overall are quite close, although it wasn't hard to watch the base Cooper's price almost double by the time we get to the JCW Convertible, or more than double in our tricked-out test car. But if you're going for the gusto, and perhaps for its beefier style points, you'll likely head to the John Cooper Works straight away. Drive it, price it, and if need be, back off from there.

The JCW still has front-wheel drive, which we don't favor for a performance-oriented car (it shifts weight *away* from the drive wheels during acceleration), but the MINI's light weight negates this. Front-drive also introduces torque steer, which needs extra engineering to mitigate. (For all-wheel drive, there is a MINI John Cooper Works Clubman.)

In our driving, the car is definitely peppy and didn't leave us lacking in tight multi-lane traffic. Zip-zip. The suspension does well on drainage troughs or speed bumps, with front-wheel-drive issues well addressed. But in cornering, it was still apparent. A micro-slalom through a small traffic circle revealed torque steer in both twists, and in accelerating turns, it delivered a dart to the left every time in first gear, as it also did when shifting down from 4th to 3rd in an aggressive right turn. Not a lot, but you'll want to hang onto the wheel. It feels somewhat like driving a 60-year-old Mini at Monaco, so there's a thrill.

RPMs stay economically low through quite a range: at 62 mph, we took it up to 6th gear and were at just 2500 RPM. Shifting down to 5th gear raised it to 3000 and 4th gear just 3600 or so. As noted, it maintains its power band over a wide RPM range, so you will have plenty of power in reserve.

Our test car, though delivered in 2010, was a 2009 model, yet it had a base of \$34,300. After adding a cold weather package (\$500), a Premium Package (\$1250 for multi-function steering wheel, alarm, some chrome bits and vital-for-Arizona automatic a/c), various trim, xenon headlamps, white turn-signal lights, Bluetooth™/iPod upgrades, plus \$650 destination, it stickered at \$38,050. You can, of course, build your own at the latest prices by visiting www.miniusa.com.

Aside from wishing for less torque steer, we found the car a lot of fun. It corners, it's peppy, the top goes down, and we'd find the power and features of the JCW version just about impossible to resist, budget willing. ■



MINI JCW LOGBOOK

- Of course the car is small. It arrived with the seat far forward, but we slid it back, and for a 6-plus-footer it was plenty adequate.
- For two pairs of glasses and a wallet, you run out of space fast. There are three cup-holders, the phone plug-in is in with two of those, but the shifter conflicts at times.
- Putting the top down is a two-stage operation, going halfway back first in about 5 seconds, leaving a solid rail from the A-pillar to the B. When you put the top all the way down, that unclips and retracts, about 11.5 seconds to top-down but 14.5 by the time the windows are back up, which is when the job is done. It takes about 14 seconds to raise the top, which doesn't stop at midpoint. In the up cycle, there is a disturbing whining ratchet from the back.
- The 4-window switch is not a one-touch: we hold it, get the back windows up, then it stops. Let go and hold it again for the fronts.
- With top up and driver's window open, there is considerable wind buffeting noise.
- The windshield-frame-mounted antenna brings you a smile from the car's personality, seen from inside when the top is down.
- The throaty exhaust note is less rice-rocket, more like half a V8 in volume and depth. Driving in a neighborhood, we figured we sounded like a 17-year-old with a modified Subaru. But most of the time, the exhaust noise was great as background.
- The top, when down, is higher than the hoops behind the seats, restricting rear vision, though largely unavoidably.
- The steering wheel blocks the tach from 2200-5800 RPM or so. If you raise the wheel, it all moves together, so it's always blocked.
- It looks keyless but it's not... you stick the "UFO" in the hole, and then hit a way-smaller-than-average stop/start button. You have to get the key angled just right (we used our hand), and then a stalk is in the way.
- From the key, to levers that look like buttons, to audio controls, we are reminded that style is a theme of this car, but function can suffer. We try checking the manual for help with the audio, and find nine manuals.
- Boopity-boop sound during start-up shows a fine line between quirky and goofy.
- 82 degrees, the roof is not hot, but it is stuffy inside. We set the HVAC at 66° on auto, and it's not cooling, so we put the fan up to a noisy maximum to start cooling off.
- Cockpit temp goes up 2 degrees at a time, which makes a lot of sense, though you may set things oddly till you realize it.
- We like the simple center mechanical handbrake lever, very traditional.
- One of our favorite details was the fuel gauge, a dial of lighted clock points that runs down to light up a pump at the end.