

Bigger and smaller By Joe Sage

The MINI lineup continues to proliferate, and that's largely a good thing. Variety is the spice of life, of course. We've noticed this once niche brand is multiplying rapidly on local roads, and variety keeps things fresh, providing novelty anew, where it otherwise could wither.

Through a combination of virtual design tools and a need to meet the instant gratification needs of the general public, along with manufacturing advances, many automakers have been able to bring auto show concept models to market, whether they had originally intended to or not, in record time. Much of MINI's expanding lineup seems to have started out that way—one-of-a-kinds that ended up going into mass production.

The new MINI Hardtop 4-Door could come across in either of two ways: a handy mainstream evolution of the original two-door Hardtop coupe; or a violation of the original simple concept. It's

not hard to envision the thinking that brings us to this point. The original two-door is a solid concept, but surely some potential buyers pined for four. The MINI Countryman has four doors, but it's a different vehicle—burlier, gnarlier, higher off the ground and 4x4 capable, surprisingly so, in fact. The Paceman, one of our favorites, is a Countryman with a lower, sleeker body but the same rough and tough capabilities—and two doors. The Clubman has had three doors (or five including the “barn doors” in the rear): on the passenger side, a rear-hinged “club door” augments the opening of the primary door—leaving the driver's door full size, while giving rear seat passengers some hope of reasonable entry and egress.

Put that all together, and there still was not a simple four-door MINI sedan.

Officially, there still is not. MINI avoids saying coupe or sedan, sticking with Hardtop for both the

original two-door and this new four-door version of the updated original car. (The Coupe name, for a couple of years, has gone to the tin-top variant of the Roadster, anyway.)

We have a lasting impression of the Clubman. The first time we saw it at a major auto show when introduced, an NFL linebacker was checking out those little barn doors. Visualize someone of considerable height and bulk, opening two tiny back doors with just thumbs and index fingers, like playing with a dollhouse. We've had trouble getting a utilitarian vibe from it ever since.

If you've ever read a MINI review, you have almost surely heard it referred to as having go-kart handling. This is intended purely as a compliment, bestowed by those who love a little track time. The car delivers very direct responses to your acceleration and braking inputs, and its suspension hugs the road, flat and solid, as you nav-

igate your daily drill. It's bound to put a smile on your face. The only downsides we noted were in a tendency to oversteer on sweeping fixed-radius curves—just a little, but unusually so—and a ride that can be a little too harsh on speedbumps. We would be buying the manual transmission, but the automatic included in this sample had BMW's usual e-joystick quirks. Our best performance came when we used the manumatic mode.

Size-wise, though smaller than that NFL linebacker, we kept having that same dollhouse experience. Only this time, it was with the doors we used the most—every time, the driver's door, and many times, the left rear door, if just for groceries, camera bag or a load of mail. There's no question a four-door format is very handy, even if you are a party of one. The rear is still a good closet, and a good closet benefits from a door.

But that door is small. So small, we didn't even try to contort ourselves into that space, with its already assured limited legroom. We thought of one sub-five-foot-tall colleague in the Midwest, who for example always tries on a trunk for size. As fate would have it, we were in Wisconsin later that same week for a rally event, and both she and an identical copy of this car, even the same color, were there. For her, it all fits just fine.

So if you have a family of one, and the back is just for gear and packages, who cares? Or if you have a family of three or four, and the back is for the kids, that should work. The downside—for anyone—is that the front door is now considerably smaller, and that one gets used by the owner-driver every time. It's a challenge that gets harder over time, not easier.

Since MINI had earlier solved this with the Clubman's one-on-the-left and two-on-the-right door system, this could be a step backward, reverting to a solution they had vetoed at that point. Or it could be a step toward fleshing out the lineup all the better—creating the one obvious model that had been missing.

Since we'd never been huge fans of the Clubman's styling—long and squeezed out toward the back, and bearing those dollhouse rear doors—we can see the purpose of this Hardtop 4-Door. It bears expanded function, but with a big degree of the original car's style. And the Clubman had been dropped from the lineup. (*But wait! Just as we went to press, MINI announced an all-new Clubman, bigger than ever and with four real doors.*)

As with any MINI, the Hardtop 4-Door is a hoot to drive, delivers economical operation, conquers tight-spot driving and parking convenience in spades and still has about the most personality you can find in a subcompact. Just make sure you try it on for size, before committing to your own personal door count. ■



Pillars and window surrounds above the beltline are blacked out, but when sunlight catches the boundaries of the four windows, they stand out like squares quickly laid out with electrician's tape. • Instruments and controls are revised, with the formerly huge center speedo migrating to the binnacle, while the center circle takes on a wide variety of other functions. Cool and clever details include a toggle switch for keyless ignition. • Polarizing sunglasses make the heads-up display appear blank, but you can't retract it. It then catches your eye as though someone left a top hat on the dash.

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE.....2.0-liter TwinPower Turbo 4-cyl
TRANSMISSION.....6-speed Getrag manual
DRIVETRAIN.....FWD
HORSEPOWER/TORQUE.....189 hp / 207 lb-ft
MPG.....26/33/29 (city/hwy/comb)
TIRES.....Run-flat
INCLUDED: Black stripes, roof, mirror caps; driving modes, stability, dynamic cruise, ABS, EBD, corner brake control, auto dual-zone climate, MINI Connected XL, real time traffic, sport seats, floor mats, hidden dash storage, interior LED mood lighting, interactive LED ring, rain sensor

BASE PRICE	\$25,100
ELECTRIC BLUE METALLIC PAINT:	500
LEATHERETTE CARBON BLACK:.....incl	
COLD WEATHER PACKAGE: Heated front seats, power folding mirrors	600
FULLY LOADED (SPORT+WIRED+PREMIUM)4,500	
• WIRED PACKAGE: Navigation, enhanced Bluetooth/USB.	
• PREMIUM PACKAGE: Keyless entry, panoramic moonroof, harman/kardon premium audio, storage.	
• SPORT PACKAGE: 18" vanity spoke wheels, white turn signals.	
CENTER ARMREST:.....	250
LED LIGHTS: LED foglights	0
LED headlights w cornering lights.....	750
INTERIOR SURFACE FIBER ALLOY:.....	350
SPORT AUTOMATIC TRANSMISSION:	1500
JCW LEATHER STEERING WHEEL:.....	250
ANTHRACITE HEADLINER:	250
REAR PARK DISTANCE CONTROL:.....	500
HEADS-UP DISPLAY:	500
DESTINATION CHARGE:.....	850
TOTAL	\$35,900

Rear sheet metal is revised considerably, with large taillights set against a scalloped panel. But the overall style and spirit of the original car are generally maintained.

