

Maximum MINI Amusement John Cooper Works—Tuning Creates a Thrifty Screamer

by By Brian Douglas, Auto Editor



Gas prices have dropped from their \$4-\$5 level, but after a slump, they're back to three-buck levels. Add to that the recession, and there's not much incentive to buy that muscular performance car. Sales of perennial heartthrobs like BMW's M3 and Audi's RS4 are slipping, Mercedes-Benz is advertising its C63 AMG and the new Lexus ISF has not met sales expectations.

Even if the above crop of thirsty tuners went away, all

is not lost for the driving enthusiast. A small, light car with a big heart can provide the true gearhead all the entertainment value he or she desires. MINI has made a pretty good living doing just that.

MINI Cooper's standard three-door hatch feels like a gokart under most city driving scenarios and you can pack three adults along for the fun. If more zip is required, the Cooper S adds a turbocharger to push the power up from 114 to 177 then adds better tires, brakes and suspension tuning to handle the thrust.



If 177-horsepower feels good in a 2,600-pound MINI, what happens when a twin-scroll turbocharger ups the power to 208 with torque to match at full throttle? I call it fun, especially when you can slay a pompous performance pilot in a sprint to highway speeds while using far less precious petrol. I know this after showing my MINI's twin pipes to a BMW 745 whose driver was really trying to place first in our impromptu contest.

Although 0-to-60 contests can be amusing, the John Cooper Works modifications include an array of enhancements to make the MINI nearly racetrack ready. New alloy wheels hold 205/45R-17 performance tires, suspension is dialed up to full sport and red Brembo brake calipers clamp on 12.4-inch front/11-inch rear discs.

Since the MINI is front-wheel-drive, the company has provided a number of electronic aids to keep the Cooper where it's pointed. The dynamic stability control contains traction to allow a bit of slip on the front wheels and an electronic differential lock is activated when the stability is turned off for true sporting maneuvers through the woods.

Since one doesn't live by speed alone, our MINI was equipped with a nice audio system, iPod integration, Bluetooth phone connectivity and a pleasing level of equipment that is optional on standard MINIs. While the result doesn't qualify for a luxury label, it's far better in every way than entrance-level economy cars.



It's nice to know there are choices available that offer frugality and fun. By that measurement, MINI's John Cooper Works with class leading economy, puppy-cute looks and free three-year scheduled maintenance is a hard combination to top.