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smart fortwo prime cabrio Road Test

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By Robin Roberts (and Miles Better News Agency).

Horses for courses is a particularly apt phrase to describe the smart fortwo...



There's no denying it was ahead of its time when the original model went on sale in 1998, and now the quirky two-seater rarely gets a second glance. The original car was a product of the cooperation between Swatch and Daimler/Mercedes-Benz.

But in 18 years it has grown up in all areas other than size and now runs to a staggering range of about 50 versions, with choices of electric motor and 71 or 90 hp petrol engines, in six trim levels and with prices from £11,125 to £21,870.

It has been improved and refined without losing its basic concept as a two-seater city car for the 21st century, and it comes from a parent company which started in the late 19th century. That is some pedigree.

There are coupé or convertible models and we tested the latter, which means you get a folding fabric roof and detachable side rails to turn it into a fully open car, and it is fitted with the less powerful three-cylinder engine. Ours also had the sophisticated dual clutch automatic transmission; a conventional auto and a manual gearbox are available in other models.



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The sub-one litre engine is mounted between the rear wheels and under the boot floor with the bonnet covering the usual level check and fill-up points. Boot and luggage capacity is between 260 and 340 litres (9.18 and 12.01 cu.ft), enough for some shopping, a sports hold-all or weekend case.

It is a busy little engine and seems eager to please, freely revving and letting you know how hard it's working with a low level noise in the background and thankfully carried away behind the car for most of the time.

The DSG transmission is definitely a big improvement on the original automatic I experienced in previous fortwo models and today its refinement is very good. Up changes are particularly good unless you are very heavy right-footed, and only some downchanges are felt. If you wish for any reason you can use a manual mode and it is as smooth as the automatic.

Brakes are very good despite their apparent small size and the steering has a tight turning circle and good feel but I found it kicked back on some bad surfaces. Its agility needs getting use to because it turns sharply and you feel it's going to roll but of course it does not. In fact it stays well planted on the road with a tendency towards running wide only on the sharpest corners.

Parking is a doddle with the short body and high driving position putting everything in sight



and just feet away. Lights were reasonable but not long range and the wipers were a bit slow in some weather conditions.

The secondary controls all worked well and were sensibly placed; the basic instruments and info screen were clear and the heating and ventilation was straightforward and effective. Even with the roof open the heating did a good job of warming the legs.

With the roof in place or folded the vision to the back was not good but clear to front and sides. Interior oddments space was good, particularly behind the two seats.

With the DSG ratios, acceleration from standstill was fairly good for town use but it soon ran out of urge after about 40 mph and settled down to a more composed pace. You can easily keep up with most urban and main road traffic but I think a motorway life will be spent in lane 1 in most situations.

Even if you amble along at 60 mph passing lorries, an approaching gradient is a time to anticipate the road speed dropping back and you look for a gap in the left lane.

You can really push on if you wish but the noise level rises and you have to make progress by stirring it along in manual mode.

In urban situations it's really at home, nipping into small parking spaces, negotiating narrow gaps and returning over 50 mpg without a problem.

VERDICT

If the Smart has a character, it's that of a Shetland Pony, small and tough.

For: Easy to park, economical, convertible.

Against: Room, ride, performance, handling.



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Mini Milestones and Wheels-Alive tech. Spec. in Brief:

smart fortwo prime cabrio. Price: £17,539.

Engine/transmission: 999 cc, 71 hp, three cylinder petrol rear engine, six speed DSG auto.



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Performance:

0-62mph: 15.5 seconds.

Top speed: 94 mph.

Running costs: 50.3 mpg, CO2 emissions 99 g/km, VED road tax £0, BIK company car tax 16%.

Insurance Group: 5E.

Warranty: Three years/ unlimited mileage.