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New MINI Countryman Road Test

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Largest production Mini ever. The new Mini Countryman.

By David Miles (Miles Better News Agency).

In the 58-year history of Mini as it was and MINI as it is now under the BMW Group ownership, the all-new second generation Countryman five door Crossover/SUV type is the largest production Mini or MINI ever to go on sale. UK deliveries started in February with prices from £22,465 and running through a 17 model range up to £32,275. These on-the-road prices will marginally increase after the new First Year VED rates come into force from April.



Currently the Countryman range has Cooper, Cooper D, Cooper S and Cooper SD variants with two or ALL4 traction, plus the just announced Cooper S E ALL4 petrol/electric plug-in hybrid, and the top of the range higher performance John Cooper Works ALL4.

Engine choices are the Cooper 1.5 litre, three cylinder 136 hp petrol, Cooper D 2.0 litre four cylinder 150 hp turbodiesel, Cooper S 2.0 litre 192 hp petrol, Cooper SD 2.0 litre 190 hp turbodiesel, Cooper S E ALL4 plug-in hybrid with its 1.5 litre 136 hp petrol and 88 hp electric motor, and the John Cooper Works (JCW), ALL4, 2.0 litre, four cylinder 231 hp petrol unit.

The first MINI Countryman under BMW Group's ownership was launched in 2010 and more than half a million of them have been sold worldwide despite its odd styling and compact interior. The latest all-new incarnation is 200 mm (7.87 in) longer with a total length of 4,299 mm (14.10 ft). It is also a shade wider at 1,822 mm (5.98 ft). It uses the latest BMW small/medium car platform also used for the relatively new Clubman estate and the BMW X1 SUV.



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So it has more interior space and more equipment plus a huge range of must-have extras and personalisation options. It might be new but it still retains its chunky styling. It certainly divides opinions and some say it's 'bloated' or a MINI on steroids, and it is either a design you like or loathe – let's just say it's distinctive and it looks like a MINI albeit a maxi one!

My test version was the likely best-selling Countryman 2.0 litre 150 hp Cooper D but with ALL4 on-demand 4WD and six-speed manual gearbox, priced at £26,025. The automatic transmission version costs £27,620. This is a significant price hike over the previous



generation but the engines are new, the vehicle is roomier and the standard specification is higher.



Talking about specification my test car came loaded with options, taking the on-road price up to £35,740. As standard you get sat-nav, Bluetooth, cruise control, air-con, central locking, electric windows and door mirrors, alloy wheels, collision warning, autonomous city braking and radar rear parking sensors. The popular Chili Pack costs an extra £2,980 and includes 18-inch alloy wheels, heated front sports seats, MINI driving mode selector, auto climate control air-con, LED adaptive headlights and LED front fog lights. The also popular £950 Media Pack includes enhanced Navigation XL, 8.8-inch touchscreen, MINI Connected XL and upgraded Bluetooth with wireless phone charging.

A powered rear tailgate costs an extra £375, a fold-out picnic bench £150, a sliding rear seat bench £300 and Piano Black interior styling inserts £320. My test car also had the £550 British Racing Green bodywork colour with a black roof, black plastic wheelarch protection and lower body cladding. Sounds nice but given the size and bulk of this car it didn't give the kerb appeal which is so important. The brighter bodywork colours seem to suit the Countryman better, I think, softening its raised height and slab-sided boxy styling.



Inside the design is typical latest generation MINI with full width dashboard and its large centrally positioned huge round dial accommodating the sat-nav, infotainment and connectivity functions. This central display is surrounded by multi-colour LED lighting which changes colour according to speed, driving mode and other settings. Below that are the proper easy to use heater controls and the usual toggle switches including the start/stop switch. The speedometer and other conventional instruments are housed ahead of the driver. As with BMW models the centre console houses a rotary controller plus buttons to select various functions such as media and the sat-nav map. The interior, in addition to being roomier, with more elbow room and more rear seat legroom, plus a slightly larger boot, is as classy as ever, premium class in fact with soft-touch trim in most places. The seats are comfortable and the elevated driving position is good to see out of what is now a fairly big and substantial car. The rear seat passengers, ideally no more than two adults and a child, will enjoy the improved leg room provided by the 75 mm (around three inches) longer wheelbase, and the sliding bench seat and reclining seat backs are nice changes. Tall six-footers might still struggle for knee room on longer journeys. The rear seat backs fold down individually in a 40/20/40 split configuration to extend the capacity of the 450 litre (15.89 cu.ft) boot to 1,390 litres (49.09 cu.ft). The luggage compartment has a flat load floor although the folded down seat backs are slightly higher than the boot floor. Access to the boot is through a wide rear tailgate with no higher rear sill to lift items over.





The 2.0 litre, four cylinder 150 hp turbodiesel engine has 330 Nm (243 lb.ft) of torque from 1,750 rpm, which will be sufficient for most higher mileage users but those using the vehicle for the school run or driving limited distances might well opt for the 1.5 litre three cylinder 136 hp turbo petrol unit, but it being a weighty vehicle, the diesel engine will provide a more 'rounded' performance. The 2.0 litre turbodiesel unit has an official Combined Cycle fuel consumption figure of 58.9 mpg with those all important CO2 emissions of 127 g/km. Under the new VED rules this MINI Countryman bought after the 1 April this year will have a First Year rate cost of £160 and then £140 for each year after that. Prior to April the VED costs were £0 and then £110. Company car drivers will now pay 27% Benefit-in-Kind tax - an increase of 2% over the pre-April rate. Insurance rates are yet to be confirmed but expect them to be roughly the same as the outgoing models, in the case of the 2.0 Cooper D ALL4 Group 14E.

During my week long test driving the Countryman 2.0 Cooper D ALL4 manual returned a real-life fuel consumption figure of 44.2 mpg and most of that was done in the Green (ECO) mode setting. Given the high volume of traffic, selecting Green mode seems the most sensible; we don't get anywhere in a hurry these days and given the torquey response for the diesel unit, Green mode driving was no hardship in town or in the country. Top speed is 127 mph and the zero to 62 mph acceleration time was a spritely 8.8 seconds. In no way is this engine a frugal on fuel tardy diesel engine, it likes to be revved but it's still responsive from lower revs right through the mid-range and it's remarkably quiet once warmed-up.



Generally the ride comfort was good although poorer road surfaces unsettled the handling, but despite its raised ride height the latest Countryman provided a stable platform. It feels a weighty and solid car but it retains its sharp handling; perhaps not as nimble as the latest MINI Hatchbacks, but agile enough with its quick steering response and wider track, and the ALL4 grip at each wheel provides good cornering stability. The on-demand ALL4 traction provides enough traction for light off-road travel away from tarmac surfaces and is well able to cope with tracks and grassy fields, and of course provides added on-road driving security during Winter conditions. It seemed to shrug off impacts from our ever worsening potholed roads as well.

VERDICT

There is no doubt the latest Countryman is a better car overall than before. It's more expensive and its design is an acquired taste so some potential customers will be tempted to go for what I would call proper compact SUVs. These include the high selling Renault Captur, Nissan Juke, Skoda Yeti, Fiat 500X, Vauxhall Mokka and the really good Peugeot 2008. But none of these offers the premium brand ownership desirability the 'well-heeled' buyer gets from the MINI Countryman in whatever specification level the discerning customer requires.

For: More interior space than before, new engines, higher specification, excellent high quality interior design, wide range of personalisation options, high residual values.

Against: Expensive, with a significant price increase over the outgoing versions, chunky muscular styling divides opinions, firm ride at times, less money will buy you a roomier and more conventional compact/mid-sized SUV, real-life test driving fuel economy even in Green mode fell too far below the official figures.



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Milestones and Wheels-Alive Tech. Spec. in Brief:

MINI Countryman 2.0 Cooper D ALL4 manual Crossover.

Price: £26,025 (£35,740 as tested).

Engine/transmission: 2.0 litre, four cylinder 150 hp turbodiesel with 330 Nm (243 lb.ft) of torque from 1,750 rpm, six speed manual with ALL4 traction.



Performance: 127 mph, 0-62 mph 8.8seconds.

Fuel consumption: Combined Cycle 58.9 mpg (44.2 mpg on test).

Emissions and taxation: CO2 127 g/km, new VED road tax £160 First Year rate and £140 thereafter, new BIK company car tax rate 27%.

Insurance Group: 14E (tbc).

Warranty: Three years/unlimited mileage.

Dimensions/capacities: L 4,299 mm (14.10 ft), W 1,822 mm (5.98 ft), H 1,557 mm (5.11 ft), boot/load space 450 to 1,390 litres (15.89 to 49.09 litres), five doors/four to five seats.