New MINI Hatch John Cooper Works – The Most Powerful MINI Ever – First Impressions

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Author: David Miles

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By David Miles (Miles Better News Agency)

Hot MINI UK Sales News

With another record year of sales behind them in 2015, MINI is well placed with the introduction of their third generation range of models to continue their record breaking sales record.

Last year MINI achieved 63,581 UK new car registrations, an 18.5% increase over the previous year and the sixth consecutive year of growth.

During the latter half of 2015 MINI introduced the first of their third generation of models under the ownership of the BMW Group which started in 2001. First of the new generation came the three door Hatch, followed by the first five door Hatch and most recently the new and larger Clubman models arrived. The new MINI Convertible is scheduled to arrive in March, the Clubman All4 in April and the new Countryman in December. Also being added to the range are the high performance JCW (John Cooper Works) versions of the three door Hatch and in April the JCW Convertible arrives. Deleted from the line-up for the new third generation range are the niche selling Roadster and Coupe versions.

The three door Hatch in 2015 continued to be the brand's most popular model with 25,443 UK sales. The new five door Hatch returned 19,117 registrations. So far the larger five door Hatch and the Clubman models have increased sales in the corporate/fleet sector by 44%. Completing a rosy picture for the home UK market JCW previous generation model sales increased last year by 136% to 2,213 units.

Hot MINI First Drive Views

At the recent UK media test drive event MINI provided the new Clubman and the John Cooper Works Hatch. I selected the JCW three door Hatch for this brief test drive opportunity because in the next few weeks I'm scheduled to have a much longer driving spell, getting to grips with the new generation and much larger Clubman model.

The headline for the new John Cooper Works Hatch (known as JCW) is that it is the most powerful MINI and fastest production model ever. With its new generation BMW Group platform and a move to BMW's 2.0 litre TwinPower turbocharged petrol engine, rather than the old 1.6 litre unit, power is up by 10% to 231 hp and torque has been increased by 23% to 320 Nm (236 lb.ft) from only 1,250rpm. Top speed is a mighty 153 mph and zero to 62 mph takes just 6.1 seconds for the Steptronic automatic version, and 6.3 seconds for the manual. When it comes to fuel consumption and emission levels the manual returns 42.2 mpg with CO2 of 155 g/km and the auto is better at 49.6mpg and 133 g/km.

The figures that matter most to most people are the prices. The MINI Hatch JCW manual is £23,050 and the six speed auto version £24,380. But in true BMW owned MINI fashion the prices do not stop there. Options with Packs and extras has been big business for this brand and at the very least any MINI will be perceived to have as the bare minimum the most popular Chili Pack that in this case adds another £2,470 to the on–the-road-price. What do you get for that? 18-inch alloys, velour floor mats, extended storage system, rain sensing wipers and lights, automatic air-con and an orange interior lights pack. The next most popular option is the Media Pack at £1,400 that adds sat-nav, enhanced Bluetooth and MINI Connected. Fully kitted with lots of show-off options my test car with the manual gearbox finished up at £30,600. That is lots and lots more than the Ford Fiesta ST, Vauxhall Corsa VXR and the VW Polo GTi. With the options my test MINI JCW costs as much as the larger and more powerful 300 hp VW Golf R 2.0 TSI three door hatch and BMW's own roomier M135i three door hatchback.

Exterior design wise the JCW version has a hexagonal radiator grille with a honeycomb centre and a red blade plus the John Cooper Works logo. Flanking the grille are LED headlights and LED running lights incorporating the indicators. There are new air ducts in the front apron, bespoke side sills, plus a rear apron and diffuser which contain the wide twin tailpipes of the sports exhaust system, and a rear spoiler completes the styling package.

Inside it is a very plush environment with large bolstered sports bucket seats with

integrated headrests and on my test car black leather upholstery. JCW logoed door sills, leather covered multifunction steering wheel and gear lever, stainless steel pedals and footrest add to the sporty but very plush interior – perhaps too plush for what is a motorsport orientated model.



The controls of the MINI JCW include the MINI Driving Modes switch which allows the driver to vary the accelerator response, engine sound and – depending on the options chosen – the gearshift points of the automatic transmission and the Variable Damper Control mapping. A rotary switch at the base of the gear selector adjusts the settings from the standard MID Mode to either SPORT or GREEN. MINI say it is therefore possible to

drive to a track with the car in its most efficient mode, switch to the most dynamic settings for circuit use then revert to maximum efficiency for the journey home. I'm not sure how many owners will consider this generation MINI Hatch JCW to be a track-day car because it is just too plush and cosseting. But with the performance available it certainly lends itself to such activities – perhaps a lower specification version specifically for motorsport/road use would be more viable to a wider range of customers.

Powerful and refined...

At the heart of the JCW version is a new 2.0 litre, four cylinder petrol unit initially used for the latest Cooper S and reconfigured for this model. It features a specially developed turbocharger integrated into the cast-steel manifold, and direct fuel injection with the injectors mounted centrally between the 16 valves.

It uses modified BMW's Valvetronic fully variable valve control and double Vanos variable camshaft control on both the intake and exhaust sides. Large air inlets have been added to the front apron of the car to meet the additional cooling requirements.

The location of the turbocharger allows for short ducting for the exhaust gas flow, which ensures quick and early engine response. All versions have automatic stop/start for fuel and CO2 reduction when stationary at traffic lights.

Power is transmitted to the front wheels through a choice of six-speed sports gearboxes specifically adapted to the engine's performance. The standard manual transmission has automatic rev matching, meaning that when down changing the engine revs are automatically matched to the wheel speed, creating smoother downshifts with an automatic "heel and toe" effect.

The overriding impression this new engine gave me was its refinement. Gone is the coarseness and peaky-ness of previous JCW 1.6 petrol engines. They always sounded stressed although that didn't detract from the outright performance. They just lost out in terms of refinement which this new engine has in spades. It is silky smooth and extremely

responsive with its maximum torque of 320 Nm (236m lb.ft) developed from a very low, for a petrol engine, 1,250 rpm right through a broad powerband delivering ‘punch’ up to 4,800 rpm. With the rev-matching to wheel speed on change-downs this engine and transmission are potentially racing units at heart, all wrapped up in a very expensive, highly specified road car.

Top speed for a small car is an impressive 153 mph and the zero to 62mph acceleration time of 6.3 seconds for the close ratio manual gearbox option is brilliant – but in reality, other than track days, where can you use this performance? Saving over £4k will buy you the 2.0 litre, 192 hp Cooper S three door Hatch which is arguably more suited for everyday use.



Officially the JCW manual model will return 42.2 mpg in the Combined Cycle and on my brief test drive around the busy commuter roads of Farnborough, plus a short spell on rural Hampshire roads and a 'blast' on the M3 motorway, the figure was 38.1 mpg. With CO2 emissions of 155 g/km, the VED road tax is £180. The automatic version is cleaner with 133 g/km so road tax is currently, until April this year, £130. New road tax figures for April 2016 will be announced in the Government's March Budget.

Whichever model is chosen the MINI Hatch JCW retains the car's renowned nimble and agile go-kart handling with a low centre of gravity. With its uprated suspension, which includes an expensive multi-link rear layout with wider front and rear tracks, the ride is firm but the body remains flat during fast cornering. The steering is sharp as a needle and the Torque Steer Compensation system worked well under really hard acceleration, minimising side to side pull from the front wheels.

Personally I didn't find the four piston 330 mm Brembo front brakes to give much 'bite'. I had to push really hard on the brake pedal to get them to perform so a bit more progressive braking power would have been better.

VERDICT

Overall it is a great package if outright performance with a very high interior specification is a requirement. Personally I would have liked the performance but with a bit less interior kit, turning the MINI JCW into a car I could use for motorsport rather than an overpowered car for everyday use. For that purpose the Cooper S is a better option and considerably cheaper.

For: Most powerful production MINI ever, strong and refined ultra-responsive new engine, more sophisticated than previous JCW versions, very fast.

Against: Very expensive; high prices takes it into BMW's M135i three-door and larger VW Golf R territory, interior too highly cosseted and specced for a potential track-day hot hatch, brakes lacked bite.



MILESTONES AND WHEELS-ALIVE TECH. SPEC. IN BRIEF:

New MINI 3 door Hatch, John Cooper Works.

Engine: 2.0 litre, 4 cylinder, 16V, TwinPower turbocharged direct injection petrol.

Power: 231 bhp @ 5,200 to 6,000 rpm.

Torque: 320 Nm (236 lb.ft) from 1,250 to 4,800 rpm.

Transmission: Front wheel drive via a 6 speed close ratio gearbox.

Performance:

0-62mph: 6.3 seconds.

Top speed: 153 mph.

Fuel consumption: Combined Cycle 42.2 mpg (38.1 mpg on test).

Emissions and taxation: CO2 155 g/km, VED road tax £180, BIK company car tax 26% (28% from April).

Insurance Group: 29E.

Warranty: 3 years/100,000 miles.

Dimensions: L 3,874 mm (12.71 ft), W 1,727 mm (5.67 ft), H 1,414 mm (4.64 ft), boot/load space 211 to 731 litres (7.45 to 25.81 cu.ft).

Price: £23,050 (£30,600 as tested).