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New MINI models and MINI Convertible – First Impressions

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A Brace of New MINI Models joins the Range
David Miles (Miles Better News Agency) takes a close look and test-drives the Cooper Convertible...

News Overview

A brace of new MINI models is coming off the UK production lines at Plant Oxford, which this year celebrates its 15th anniversary of MINI production under the ownership of BMW Group.



Last year MINI globally built 340,000 cars, 201,207 of them in the UK – of which 80% of production went to 110 global markets. A record total of 63,500 MINIS were sold in the UK last year.

Arriving in time for summer is the new MINI Convertible, priced from £18,475 to £28,205, with a four car line-up of Cooper, Cooper DS, Cooper S and John Cooper Works models.

Also arriving is the MINI Clubman estate with ALL4; this is the first all-wheel-drive MINI to come off the Plant Oxford production lines. The SUV styled Mini Countryman ALL4 versions to date have been built by Magna Steyr in Austria. The Clubman ALL4 line-up comprises the Cooper S and Cooper SD versions, and prices start from £24,305, rising to £27,410.

MINI Convertible – A Mini Test

This is the third generation of MINI Convertibles under the parentage of BMW Group. The outgoing second generation, on sale from 2011 until 2015, was the UK's best selling convertible, with a total of 29,415 registrations – and this country continues to be the largest global market for the MINI soft-top. UK prices range from £18,475 to £28,205.

The new convertible is based upon the larger and latest generation MINI Hatch with two passenger doors, but in reality it remains a 2+2 four seater. However there is slightly more rear seat space than previous versions – but not much. Better news is the boot volume has been increased by 25%, offering 215 litres (7.59 cu.ft) with the roof up and 160 litres (5.65 cu.ft) with it down. The improved insulated fabric roof can be electrically retracted at speeds up to 18 mph, and there is fully integrated rollover protection.

The new Convertible has an overall length of 3,821 mm (12.54 ft) or 3,874 mm (12.71 ft) for the Cooper S and JCW versions with their larger sports bumpers. All models are 1,727 mm (5.67 ft) wide, 1,415 mm (4.64 ft) high, with a wheelbase of 2,495 mm (8.19 ft). Compared to the outgoing soft-top version there is 98 mm (3.86 in) extra length, 44 mm (1.73 in) extra width and 1 mm (0.04in) extra height. The wheelbase is 28 mm (1.10 in) longer and the track width has grown by 42 mm (1.65 in) at the front and 34 mm (1.39 in) at the rear.



When it comes to the engine choices the Cooper version has a 1.5 litre, 3 cylinder 136 hp turbo petrol engine, the Cooper D a 1.5 litre, 3 cylinder 116 hp turbodiesel, the Cooper S a 2.0 litre, 4 cylinder 192 hp turbo petrol and the JCW – a 231 hp version of the same turbo petrol unit. All engines have the option of manual and automatic transmissions. Best selling units are the 1.5 litre engines with the mainstay retail customers choosing the petrol engine and the small number of company car/fleet users will opt for the diesel for tax reasons.

The new two-door Convertible adopts the styling changes from the already launched MINI three and five door Hatchbacks and the six door Clubman estate. There are the signature new generation larger headlights, a wide grille, rounded front wings and at the rear are recognisable large tail-lights. The fabric roof has been upgraded in terms of better acoustic performance and heat insulation, with smoother electric operation. It's still pram-like in design as it stretches from the upright windscreen right to the tail of the car where it folds into the top section of the boot. Rear and rear quarter visibility has not been improved with the roof up – so thankfully it has rear parking sensors and a rear view camera.



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The larger overall size of this latest generation of MINI allows for improved interior space and better access for the two rear seat passengers, plus more headroom. Standard equipment includes electric windows, air-con, the 6.5 inch screen positioned in the huge circular central display, Bluetooth, MINI Connected, rear parking sensors and a reversing camera. The spec increases as you move up the ladder of variants, and of course there is a wide range of options and option packs, all part of the well known MINI personalisation sales programme.



MINI Convertible On the Road

I had a brief test drive of the new Mini Convertible from Plant Oxford where it is built. The model was the best selling Cooper 1.5, petrol 136 hp turbo three cylinder petrol manual, priced at £18,475 but of course the must-have option packs add to that price. My test car with options costs £25,055, of which £3,200 is the must-have Chili Pack. This brings with it lots of extras including auto air-con, LED headlights and fog lights, multi-function controls for the steering wheel, MINI Connected, front sports seats, MINI Driving Modes and 17-inch alloys.

A convertible is more about SHOW than GO, it is all about style and ownership desirability for those who like wind in the hair motoring. Most buyers, given our congested roads and ever-increasing speed restricted areas, will find the Cooper 1.5 petrol engine ideal for their



use. Although it is a three-cylinder unit it is really responsive to drive, thanks to the turbocharger which provides 220 Nm (162 lb.ft) of torque from just 1,250 rpm, so it pulls strongly from just over tickover speed with its linear power delivery up to around 4,000 rpm. Mated with a six-speed manual gearbox, or the £1,270 extra cost option of the six-speed auto, this unit is smooth at low speeds with only the characteristic roar of a 'triple' under brisk acceleration. It is sharp when needed and unfussy at boring commuter speeds. The manual gearchange on my test car was unusually notchy for a Mini.

Top speed is 129 mph, zero to 62 mph takes 8.8 seconds and officially it will return 55.4 mpg according to the Combined Cycle figure. On my test drive around Oxford and surrounding busy roads the figure was 36.4 mpg. The CO2 emissions of 114 g/km means VED road tax is £0 First Year rate and then only £30 for Year Two onwards, so other than the purchase price, petrol-powered topless motoring doesn't get more cost effective than that. And for the small number of users who will have one as a company car then 19% is the low figure for Benefit-in-Kind tax. Insurance cost is relatively low as well for a soft-top, with a low group 19E rating for my test model, 10 groups lower than the Cooper S version.

When manufacturers start taking the roof off small to mid-sized production saloon or hatchback models, some integrity in terms of handling refinement and performance is almost always lost, no matter what brand the convertible comes from. The best handling soft-tops tend to be the ones designed from the outset to be that way.

Removing a metal roof usually for a soft-top variant means introducing handling wobbles, shudders and shakes mainly during cornering or on rougher road surfaces. It is a fact of life no matter how much strengthening is built into the vehicle, which of course adds weight - in this case 100 kg (220 lb) and that dulled the agility found with MINI Hatchbacks. Normal driving with the Convertible was generally refined enough with sharp steering plus responsive power on-tap, and the softer suspension settings improved ride comfort but reduced the car's ability to change direction swiftly.



VERDICT

If you are a 'convertible convert' the new MINI soft-top is an improvement over the old best-selling one with more room, a bigger boot, a better folding roof, sharp looks and reasonable running costs, but with some compromises such as the purchase price.

For: Built in Britain, improved in all areas over the outgoing versions - apart from purchase price and the high cost of options, responsive engine, low running costs and taxes, distinctive MINI good looks, immaculate premium high quality interior.

Against: Not as agile or as composed as the MINI Hatch, some body wobbles during cornering, only pricier versions on sale now, restricted rear/rear quarter visibility hood up or down, notchy gearchange

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

MINI Cooper Convertible manual.

Engine: 1.5 litre, 3cylinder, turbo petrol.

Transmission: 6 speed manual, front wheel drive.

Power: 136 hp.

Torque: 220 Nm (162 lb.ft) from 1,250 rpm.

Performance:

0-62 mph: 8.8 seconds.

Top speed: 129 mph.



Fuel consumption: Combined Cycle 55.4 mpg.

Emissions and taxation: CO2 114 g/km, VED road tax £0/£30, BIK tax 19%.

Insurance Group: 19E.

Warranty: 3 years/unlimited mileage.

Dimensions/capacities: L 3,821 mm (12.54 ft), W 1,727 mm (5.67 ft), H 1,414 mm (4.64 ft), boot 215, hood up, to 160 litres, hood down (7.59 to 5.65 cu.ft), 2-doors, 2+2 seating.

Price: £18,475 (likely best selling model).