

3 Living with a MINI

– will you get along together?



Good points

If you're looking for a well-built small car with unique looks and heritage, then the MINI could be for you. Just looking at BMW's re-working of the classic Mini shape is sure to put a smile on your face, and considering you're buying one of the best front-wheel drive cars ever, good value too.

The entry-level R50 One is entertaining to drive, with crisp steering and nifty handling – you'll be amazed at how quickly you can go round corners! The Cooper, Cooper S and John Cooper Works (JCW, the factory performance brand for the MINI) badges, link with fast MINIs of the past. The fact that these cars are so tuneable, and can handle big power means that they still have a following amongst hot hatch fans, despite the newer, more powerful rivals that are now on the scene.

It's not just speed where the BMW MINI impresses; for a small car, the standard ride is supple, its clutch, light and the 5- and 6-speed manual gearboxes have a precise change. This makes for easy in-town driving, but get out of the city and generally the MINI is a relaxed cruiser, feeling planted at speed. The Cooper's reputation for its: "sports car performance and handling wrapped in a cute design that's practical and affordable," was recognised in 2003, when this model won the highly respected North American Car of the Year title.

Another plus point is the wide selection of colours, trims and options that were

available. You'll hear of Salt, Pepper and Chili packs – these relate to equipment fitted at the time of purchase, Salt being the most basic.

MINI engines are strong as long as they are looked after. Servicing and parts costs, even at dealers, are reasonable. All MINIs came with a three-year 60,000 mile warranty and six years anti-corrosion. Finally,

There's plenty of space in the front and the driving position is excellent in a MINI.



The entry-level MINI is the One, with a 90bhp version of the 1.6-litre engine. (Courtesy MINI UK)



R53 Cooper S GP 2006

Possibly the ultimate R53 Cooper S, just 2000 GPs were produced by Bertone in Italy just before R56 production began in 2006. The GP is fitted with a unique bodykit, 18in alloy wheels and Thunder blue metallic paint finish. Just a two-seater, the GP's exclusivity is assured with only 455 individually numbered cars sold in the UK.



With the John Cooper works parts and exclusive body styling, the GP is one of the most revered amongst MINI limited editions.

R53 MINI Cooper S MC40 2004

A USA-only special edition, celebrating the 40th anniversary of winning the 1964 Monte Carlo rally. Just 1000 of these Chili red and white MINI Cooper S versions were available, with features including unique graphics, anthracite R90 17in alloy wheels, driving lamps, chromed grille and mirror caps. Inside, there's unique red and black leather trim, a carbon-fibre dashboard, and a numbered plaque on the centre console.



MINI deliberately didn't mess too much with the exterior styling of the second generation R56 MINI, as this 2006 Cooper shows.

Second generation

R56 MINI Cooper

It might look the same, but the R56 second generation car is very different underneath to the R53. Gone is the Chrysler Tritec engine, replaced by a more efficient and sophisticated, 120bhp, 1.6-litre Peugeot/Citroën-supplied engine mated with 6-speed manual transmission. Inside, there's a higher quality interior.

R56 MINI Cooper S

It might still have the bonnet scoop, but like the Cooper, the S is significantly changed underneath. Gone is the charismatic supercharged engine, replaced by a punchy and surprisingly frugal turbocharged, 175bhp version of the 1.6-litre Peugeot/Citroën-supplied engine. Inside is the same high quality interior.



The second generation R56 MINI Cooper S, introduced to all markets, was turbocharged rather than supercharged. (Courtesy MINI UK)

8 Key points

– where to look for problems



Bodywork

Look for signs of accident damage; an orange peel-like finish or poor colour matching are obvious giveaways. The nose and windscreen of the MINI are quite upright by design so check for stonechips. MINIs are well rust-proofed from the factory and even the oldest are just over 10 years old, so there should be no evidence of rust. Expect kerb damage on larger wheels, but this shouldn't be excessive and tyre wear should be even.



The MINI's upright nose is prone to damage from stonechips.



These marks in the paint suggest poor preparation for a previous respray.



Why is this 2002 Cooper fitted with a later front bumper and headlights? Has it been involved in an accident?



Scuffs are common on the side bolsters of the supportive sports seats.

Interior

Expect rattles, especially on early cars but the trim and plastics should all be in good condition. Watch for splitting, sagging front seats and scuffing on the side bolsters of the sports versions. Check for excessive wear on the steering wheel, pedals and gearshift – does it correspond with the mileage? Finally make sure all the electrics work – standard or not.

Right: 17in S-spoke alloy wheels were fitted to R50 Cooper S models with the Chili pack.



Above: Standard 16in five-star alloy wheels on the Cooper, with Dunlop tyres.

Above: Factory alloy wheels were also available in white finish. The Cooper S on the left is fitted with standard 16in X-lite wheels. (Courtesy MINI UK)

Finally, the rear window is glass and heated; make sure it's not damaged and that the heating element is working.

Wheels and tyres

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The MINI One or One D weren't fitted with alloys as standard and instead have 15in steel wheels with trims. These are rare, as alloy wheels were a popular option, so don't be surprised if they're upgraded to the 15in alloys of the Pepper Pack.

The Cooper had 15in alloy wheels as standard, with a choice of different styles, both before and after the 2004 face-lift. There are more alloy wheel options for the Cooper, with the sportier Chili pack adding the popular 16in five-star style. Also available as an option were 17in S-spoke and latterly Bullet style alloys.

Move up to the range-topping Cooper S and 16in X-lite alloy wheels were standard, but many buyers were tempted by the high-value Chili pack which included the sought-after 17in alloys. The rare Cooper S GP limited edition is fitted with unique 18in wheels, the biggest alloys yet fitted to a new MINI.



Above: Bullet-style 17in alloy wheels fitted to face-lifted R50 Cooper and Cooper S models. (Courtesy MINI UK)

Unique, lightweight Cooper S GP 18in four-spoke alloy wheels.



Apart from slight changes to the design, the door cards and handles are the same for the second generation MINI.

Electric windows

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The electric front windows are operated by rocker switches in the centre console. If you're looking at a convertible, the controls for the rear windows are in the roof at the front. The windows are frameless and should drop slightly when the door is open. Look at the condition of the window rubbers, as this could result in more wind noise around the front windows.

Steering wheel

MINI One models were fitted with an unpopular plastic version of the standard-fit single spoke air-bagged steering wheel, and many were specified with optional leather finish. Move up to a Cooper and the same steering wheel was fitted, but this time it was leather-trimmed. A thicker sports steering wheel with thumb grips was fitted as standard to the Cooper S and was included as standard for Pepper and Chili pack versions of the Cooper. A multi-function version of the same steering wheel with buttons for the stereo and cruise control was also available. In 2003, a three-spoke steering wheel was added, with a similar multi-function version fitted to face-lifted Chili Cooper S versions. A suede-trimmed JCW version was an expensive, but attractive accessory.

Base R56 Cooper and Cooper S models were fitted with a re-designed version of the single spoke steering wheel that's mostly black, with silver detailing for the spokes. It's too thin and doesn't look particularly sporty, so no wonder most cars are fitted with the optional three-spoke sports or multi-function steering wheels.

The steering column on both MINI generations is adjustable for rake and reach, with the release lever under the column.



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Later, three-spoke multi-function steering wheel for R50, R52 and R53 MINIs has circular buttons for the stereo and cruise control.



2005 R50 Cooper speedo with the warning lights on. This car has the optional chrome pack.