



Smiles and more

Looking at South Africa's most affordable cool car puts an instant smile on your face, which gets wider when you start beating the bends and doesn't fade even when you approach a petrol pump. Meet the 'other Mini'. By Dieter Losskarn. Photos by Elke Losskarn.

Some cars are more suited to female drivers than others.

I don't want to sound like a male chauvinist, but there is something distinctly feminine about them. If a grown guy is driving one of them, it's like joining your mates for a braai with a vegetable soufflé.

The Mini convertible is such a car. Honestly, how does it look with a heterosexual male driver behind the wheel? There is currently only one car more unsuitable for male drivers. I am talking about the Daihatsu Copen Cabriolet. By the way, Mercedes' SLK is in about the same category.

So I admit I was slightly nervous when I drove the Mini Clubman for the first time. Until I stopped next to a big showroom window and saw the great reflection: no problem there, the car even has a slightly macho look, so it's ideal for 'petrosexual' males. The assumed image problem out of the way, it was time for some serious fun.

Always the best time is in the early morning on a Sunday-driver-free working day. I flew north up the N1 towards the Klappmuts turn-off in the Clubman Cooper S, which has 57 hp



'The car even has a slightly macho look to it, so it's ideal for petrosexual males'

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more than its sibling, the regular Cooper. And it shows. This car has plenty of power in all six gears, so it's worth going for the more powerful (= more fun) version. In the end, it is just an additional R895 a hp.

And if this is still not enough for you, have a look at what John Cooper Works can do for your Mini. The official tuner (with full-factory warranty) is teasing out even more hp: 192 (160kW) in total, to be exact, raising the top speed close to 240 km/h, accelerating the stretched Mini from 0 to 100 km/h in 6,5 seconds, while still not using more than an average of seven litres/100 kilometres, effectively turning the Clubman into an almost green pocket rocket. The Clubman's 1960s predecessors, the Morris Mini Traveller, the Austin Mini Countryman and the Mini Clubman Estate, could only have dreamed about performance like this.

I left the freeway and turned towards Franschoek. It's so much fun accelerating, not only because the Mini responds so well and moves, but it does so by emanating a great roaring sound, especially from 5500rpm upwards. But the road was quite rough and I could feel every bump and pimple in the tarmac. The car's suspension is stiff, sports car-like, and it tends to jump a bit over ruts. You actually have to hold on to the sporty leather steering wheel, which is part of the deal.

The power-assisted steering (EPAS) was originally developed for the BMW Z4. It's lightweight and allows for exact feedback, depending on the road surface. The much written about go-kart feeling is typical Mini. You're close to the road and you want to feel it – maybe not for extended holiday trips, but it's fine for driving around the city or a short weekend jaunt.

Being a baby Beemer, the car offers you a large safety net – just in case you're going a bit too wild. Six airbags protect driver and passengers. After tipping the foot brake, hill start-up assistance gives you two seconds to engage first gear and accelerate, even on a steep slope, without fiddling around with your handbrake. Like BMWs, the Mini is equipped with runflat tyres, allowing the driver to continue even after a complete loss of tyre pressure (a fantastic feature, especially at night and in dodgy areas).

Naturally there is ABS, but also EBD, an electronic brake force distribution system. And for those who don't brake in time just before a tight curve, there is CBC, cornering brake control, which helps to make sure you leave the turn in the same condition as you entered it.

Last, but not least, the much appreciated dynamic stability control, DSC, keeps you firmly on track while beating the bends.

Before testing some of these features on Franschoek Pass, I parked the car in a strategic spot in the village and went for a cappuccino in one of the bistros. The extroverted design was eye-catching. The Mini isn't a mere mode of transport, it's an expression of a lifestyle choice. The Clubman designer wheels top it off nicely.

Its body style has a stretched roofline that's 24 centimetres longer than the hatchback and cabriolet, allowing Clubman rear passengers eight centimetres more legroom. Now there's a fourth body style in the pipeline, expected to hit showrooms in 2010. It's an SUV, the aptly named Crossman.

But back to the Clubman. Main features are a cute split-door design at the back and a rear-passenger 'club' door on the right. Luckily it can be opened only with the front door open. Why, you might ask? Being German, the car was designed for left-hand drive countries where, after stopping at the right-hand side of the road, rear passengers can disembark safely. As the fuel tank is on the left, it obviously would have been too expensive to change the whole design around for just a few South Africans, Brits, Aussies, Kiwis and other odd bods. >



BELOW: Take a chill pill: the Mini's cool interior.
OPPOSITE: Elongated: the Clubman gained 24 centimetres in length and even more attitude.



Longer front doors and a traditional tailgate would have done the job on the Clubman and even allowed you to see the traffic behind you in your rear-view mirror, but how boring would that have been? As a Mini, the only thing you don't want to be is normal. Function has to follow style, not the other way around. And the style is up close and personal.

There is currently no other car with a higher level of individualisation options available, both inside and out. More than 40 different colour combinations make sure that each customer can create his own Mini-me.

My favourites are the different roof designs. You can have a Union Jack, a checkered or even the South African flag on top of your car. But that's not all – have a look at the Mini website (www.mini.de/de/de/roof_designer/index.jsp) for its on-line roof-designer option, where you can choose your own style, which will be printed on high-quality water resistant adhesive decals.

Expect to pay around R1 500 for this add-on. By the way, they are easy to remove, without damaging your paintwork, just in case your taste changes, or you sell your Mini to another individualist.

But enough about the looks, let's hit the road. Franschoek Pass is pure bliss for car-nuts. The new blacktop is so smooth and provides such a perfect grip that you want to hug the roads department officials responsible for it. It is wonderfully empty and, after arriving at the bottom, I quickly took the Mini up again.

After passing the Theewaterskloof Dam, I made my way via Grabouw and Botrivier to Clarence Drive along False Bay. It's another fantastic piece



of road, ideal for the Clubman. Just before Gordon's Bay, there's a turn-off to the right, which leads to an accessible private road that climbs all the way to the Steenbras Dam gate. This winding piece of tarmac, with False Bay as a backdrop, is pure Southern France and the Mini was in its element once again.

Coming down the road, I remembered Jeremy Clarkson's remarks about the Clubman: 'One of the worst cars in the world. About as desirable as a packet of dung or a can of worms. Truthfully? I'd rather have a goat.' I really enjoy his *Top Gear* show, it's enormously entertaining. But the fact that German engineers are constantly perfecting former British icons, such as the Bentley or the Mini, is clearly galling to the paunchy presenter, provoking hate-speech whenever he encounters one of those vehicles.

I had one more great drive to look forward to on my way home, one that usually completes any of my test drives perfectly: good old Chappies, between

Clubman designer wheels: a cute split-door for rear passengers on the right gives it loads of extra style.

Noordhoek and Hout Bay, is worth every cent of the R24 entrance fee.

The Mini is a great car for cool, young couples or trendy singles, or an ideal second car for anyone who wants to make a statement. Was there anything I didn't like? Well, being a bit of a macho itself, the Mini doesn't like long trousers. While getting out, your left leg tends to get caught on the protruding seat height adjustment lever. Could that mean the Clubman prefers (mini-) skirted woman drivers? ■

Next month: We take the new Nissan X-Trail into the Little Karoo and along the Garden Route.

The low-down

Mini Clubman Cooper S

Price: R260 500 (entry level model: Mini Clubman Cooper R209 500)

Engine: 1,6 | 4 cyl, 128 kW/175 hp (88 kW/118 hp)

0–100 km/h: 7,6 secs (9,8 secs.)

Top speed: 224 km/h (201 km/h)

Consumption/100 km: 6,9 litres (5,8 litres)

Fuel tank: 50 litres

Weight: 1 205 kg (1 280 kg)

Ground clearance: 135 mm

For more information: www.mini.co.za or www.theothermini.co.za, or browse the American (www.miniusa.com), British (www.mini.co.uk) and German (www.mini.de) sites.

For the same amount of money (R260 500), you could buy:

Mazda MX5 2,0 | Soft Top R261 800

Mini Cooper S R194 000 (R245 000)

Mini Cooper Convertible S R232 500 (R281 000)

BMW 116 3-door R218 000

BMW 120i 3-door R246 500

Nissan Qashqai 2,0 Acenta R229 990

VW Tiguan 1,4 | TSI 4Motion Trend & Fun R265 500

VW New Beetle 2,0 Highline R224 000

The Clubman Cooper S has 57 hp more than its sibling, the regular Cooper. And it shows



Boys' toys

American Chopper

The Teutuls from Orange County Choppers (www.orangecountychoppers.com) in New York State weren't too happy. It used to be their job to chop Harleys into unique street machines. To celebrate its 105th birthday in 2008, Harley-Davidson decided to develop (and subsequently sell) its own choppers. The result is impressive. The first new model is the sleek Rocker C (R232 000) with an elongated front fork, loads of chrome, a fat 240mm-18 rear tyre and a single driver's seat. But it's the next chopper that has become my favourite Harley model and I'm obviously not the only one who's impressed. The dark, custom, chrome-free 1940s Bopper-style Cross Bones (see photo right; R204 000) is a bestseller in Europe and the States. With a black springer front-end, chopped fender, fat wheels front and rear, high ape-hanger handle bar, a lowered suspension and a single leather seat 675 mm above the ground, it makes a mean and powerful statement. This one will definitely shake the midlife crisis out of your bones. And remember, when buying a 'delivery bike' (which applies to any two-wheeled motorised vehicle for your business), you'll get the VAT back. Web www.harley-davidson.com or www.harley-davidson-capetown.com.



Exciting adventure competition

Landrover's G4 Challenge is the ultimate playground for big boys. Successor of the famous Camel trophy, it's an exciting global adventure competition with driving at its core, run in support of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. The programme begins with a gruelling series of selections and culminates in the three-week Challenge Finals, where teams of two competitors from each of the 18 entered nations will compete for victory. The Challenge Finals take place in some of the world's truly spectacular urban and wilderness locations and combine off-road driving with activities such as mountain biking, kayaking, climbing, orienteering and abseiling, pitching competitor teams against each other in tests of driving skill, initiative, strategic thinking and physical fitness. The entire G4 Challenge fleet will run on diesel and the event will involve all vehicles in the Land Rover line-up: the Range Rover Sport, Range Rover, Discovery 3, Freelander 2 and Defender. The 2008/09 Challenge Finals are due to take place in Asia. Web www.landroverG4challenge.com.



Stuck

I was trying to pull my boat out of the Birha (pronounced Bigha) River between East London and Port Alfred, but didn't realise how soft the mud was until too late. It took a tractor and a long rope to get my Willys Jeep free.

Robin Slater-Jones, Roodepoort

If you have photographs of a 4x4 getting stuck, e-mail them to wheels@getaway.co.za or post them to Getaway Wheels, PO Box 180, Howard Place, 7450 Cape Town. You could win a Nissan Secure Tech Survival Kit worth R1 000, comprising an Off-Road Tactic manual and DVD, as well as a recovery bag with pull strap, shackles and a pair of gloves.



