



Motoring focus



Retro style aplenty but old-fashioned value in short supply

Costly to join this Club

FIRST DRIVE

MINI CLUBMAN
£14,235 TO £20,455

The latest incarnation of BMW's iconic Mini takes cues from British Leyland's idiosyncratic 1969 Mini Clubman Estate.

Direct competitors are few. But for a hefty £17,600 (including options), prospective owners have a wide choice of alternatives to the Cooper D (diesel) Clubman we drove. These include well-equipped medium cars and small MPVs – both with more space, if not the Clubman's gawky throwback looks.

The basic Cooper D (£15,400) is quite sparse and, even with the options on our car, it's hardly packed with features. The retro-style controls mimic those in the original car to some extent – and take some working out, too.

The Clubman is nearly 24cm longer than the standard Mini – the wheelbase is 8cm longer. This takes the edge off the standard Mini's go-kart handling, but improves the ride. It's still jiggly over bumps,



but no more so than most cars of this size.

The 108bhp 1.6 diesel engine is pretty smooth and refined, with plenty of poke for overtaking. And BMW's 'Stop Start' system – which automatically cuts the engine when you slip into neutral – pushes claimed fuel economy to 68.9mpg. But we managed only 47.8mpg during our first drive.

Back-seat access is aided by an extra rear-hinged door on the driver's side, but, when open, the driver's seat belt stretches across the opening – you could lose your teeth if you catch your foot in it trying to get out. And while the Clubman claims to be a five-seater, in reality it's still strictly for four – if you can fit their luggage in the boot.

VERDICT Some will love the idea (if not the looks), but the high prices and costly options leave us feeling short-changed.

The 'Stop Start' system cuts the engine when you slip into neutral

Your say

Dan Roberts, a 25-year-old marketing manager from London, drives a four-year-old Mini One D. He tried the new Cooper D Clubman.

'There's plenty of power,' he said, 'but I'm a little disappointed with the space.

The van-style rear doors improve access, although visibility through them is poor. I had difficulty getting used to the controls. The indicators don't have positive positioning and are difficult to cancel without signalling the opposite way.

'I still like it, but prefer the styling of BMW's original Mini.'



500 is an Italian supermini from the old school

Fiat's new baby

FIRST DRIVE

FIAT 500, £7,900 TO £11,402

One of 2008's most anticipated cars is Fiat's 500 city car. Like the Mini, it exploits a rich heritage – the 1957 rear-engined 500.

It might look similar to the old-timer, but it's considerably larger and heavier. That boosts safety – the 500 has a five-star Euro NCAP rating for adult occupant protection.

We drove a 1.4 petrol version with standard six-speed manual gearbox. It's sprightly and returned 41.5mpg (Fiat claims 44.8mpg).

Fiat wants buyers to customise the 500 using

the extensive range of options. That's fine, but it can get expensive – go-faster stripes cost £100 and a sunroof adds £500.

There's plenty of space for two adults up front, and the boot holds 185 litres (465 litres with the seats down). But the rear seat is cramped. The dash layout is friendly, but the speedo houses other gauges, which are hard to read.

The 500's cheerful character certainly turns heads. But it costs around £300 more than the more practical Panda (before discounts).

VERDICT The 500 is lovable and safe, but we'd hold off buying an early car to see what reliability is like – not often Fiat's forte.

**95%**

less soot emitted from new diesel cars than those made 15 years ago

SOCIETY OF MOTOR MANUFACTURERS & TRADERS

**£2bn**

a year for needless repairs due to poor bumper design

THATCHAM

All-new supermini shapes up to bid for the Best Buy crown

Mazda2 slims down

FIRST DRIVE

MAZDA2

£8,499 TO £11,799

It may not have been fashionable, but the previous Mazda2 successfully blended practicality, driving fun and reliability into a *Which?* Best Buy package. So does the stylish all-new 2 pick up the baton?

Unusually, it's lighter than the old car. Mazda's weight-watchers regime has saved only around 55kg, but it demonstrates that 'less is more' – fuel economy and emissions are improved, not to mention acceleration and agility.

We drove the higher-powered 1.3 and 1.5 petrol versions, and the 1.4 diesel. The 86bhp 1.3 seems the pick of the bunch – it revs keenly and the car hangs on gamely through bends. Even though it's fun around corners, the ride remains fairly comfy.

Inside, the switchgear is logical, and the high-mounted gear lever is a genuine



New 2 looks sharper and should attract more buyers

The 1.3 revs keenly and hangs on gamely in bends

improvement. The boot will hold 240 litres (560 litres with seats folded down) – this is similar to the previous Mazda2.

VERDICT Mazdas are usually reliable, but there were a few rattles and squeaks in our test cars – possibly a result of all that weight-saving. But it offers good value – especially in mid-level TS2 trim.

Black & Decker battery booster plugs into cigar lighter

Avoid jump starts

BATTERY CHARGER

BLACK & DECKER BDV 030 'SIMPLE START' BATTERY BOOSTER, £50

Flat battery? No jump leads? No worries – if you have this new battery charger to hand, that is. Black & Decker's 'Simple Start' delivers a 15-minute trickle-charge to your car's battery via the cigar lighter socket – you don't even need to lift the bonnet.

It has an internal battery that needs charging for at

least eight hours from the mains when you take it out of the box – it doesn't work well if it's only been partially charged.

We tried it in various situations, having drained the battery on our test car (as you would by mistakenly leaving the lights on, for example). As claimed, after 15

minutes, the unit gives a visual and audible signal to say the car is ready to start. Obviously, it can't perform miracles – it won't revive a totally dead battery, for instance.



Revive your car's battery from the comfort of the cabin

This Black and Decker unit is ideal for having around the office car park, or for someone who owns a car that's used only occasionally. The BDV 030 is suitable for cars up to 2.0 litres, and it costs £50 at Argos. There's also a BDV 040 model for engines over 2.0 litres.

In brief

Honda pushes hybrids

Honda predicts that hybrid cars will make up 10 per cent of its global sales by 2010. Currently, Honda sells only the Civic Hybrid in the UK, but by 2009 we'll get the new Global Hybrid, which Honda says will be 'more affordable'.



Crash helmet safety ratings

Launching this spring, the Safety Helmet Assessment and Rating Programme (Sharp) will give independent crash-protection ratings for motorcycle helmets. Scores will range from one to five stars. It is estimated the government-backed programme, which also offers advice, could save 50 lives a year. See <http://sharp.direct.gov.uk>.



Revamped G-Wiz

This month sees the launch of the G-Wiz i, which claims to offer better safety, comfort and performance. The manufacturer, Reva Electric Car Company, has worked with Lotus Engineering to improve front and side crash protection, and also claims a 30 per cent increase in braking performance.



New arrivals

Mazda 6 (large car, on sale now, from £15,100 – pictured), Renault Grand Modus (mini MPV, now, from £10,250), VW Tiguan (small 4x4, now, from £19,370), Chrysler Grand Voyager (MPV, Feb, from £25,995), Jaguar XF (luxury car, Mar, from £33,790), Hyundai i10 (supermini, Mar, from £6,500), Citroën C5 (large car, spring, from £15,495).

