

2005 Mini Cooper S Convertible
Motoring with a Grin
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For The Wheel

BMW should be heartily congratulated for having the good sense to leverage their assets. After having purchased the rights to the Mini name – bringing back this icon of sport and economy was sheer genius. There are few marques in the world that elicit such adoration, nostalgia and raw enthusiasm as the venerable Mini. While the Lamborghini Miura S may receive more reverence, the Mini is “every-mans” classic – one that we all can relate to and envision tossing about on back roads near wherever we call home. Thus, the typical excellent execution by BMW of a new generation Mini that builds on the good and improves on the bad has resulted in an awesome automotive option to those who have “spirited motoring” in their blood. And while not being dirt cheap at the mid to upper \$20,000 price range, the new Mini appears achievable to many mere mortals with credit scores that are not too awfully tainted. We had the pleasure of tooling about in a 2005 Mini convertible for seven days, and we got our money’s worth out of the time we had together. First, some daily driver stuff – Safeway runs, dry cleaning, parking lot mayhem at the mall. Then a four hour interstate run down Highway 5 to attend a track event at Buttonwillow – where somehow this little red pocket rocket insisted on “having a go” on the track to stretch her legs. Followed by an exquisite drive over Highway 58, west from Buttonwillow, over the coastal range to Pismo Beach, then home to the Bay Area via the 101. During this week of varied applications for this automotive shoe box of fun, we veritably fell in love with the car and were ready to sign up for the local Mini Club. The Mini is competent in many areas, a regular Eagle Scout – and yet the limitations of the car are exactly what one would expect and didn’t seem to bother us. The first part of our road test week was spent bustling about town showing that the Mini may be the BEST grocery getter available to the spirited driver. Where else can you get 25mpg, use the rear fold down seats to accommodate a full-on Costco run, park between two Ford Excursions with room to spare, get caught in traffic and not care – all while zipping about with a light touch, peppy performance and the public giving you the thumbs up at every stop sign? The Mini is a perfect car for running about town. On the freeway, we strongly suggest that your trip be limited to a driver and passenger. Anyone who’s really studied the Mini will realize that the rear seat is for emergency runs home from school only. While four adults will fit – it’s by the skin of their collective teeth and they had better be good friends. Also, if there are four in the car, there is not room for anything beyond a couple of lunch boxes in the trunk. Bottom line here is that for any long trip, consider the Mini as a two-seater and you’ll be fine. Drop the back seat and you’re set for a vacation. Back to the freeway, other than the fact that the Mini is on the narrow side (they do call it a Mini!!), and thus you’re fairly close to your passenger, this car is a perfect freeway cruiser. Punch the cruise control at the magic 9mph over the limit and smile all day. What is truly amazing is that, from the driver’s perspective, with an empty back seat, the Mini *feels* Maxi. Many cars of much more substantial bulk will crowd you with a sloped windshield angle and a tight cockpit. The Mini sits you up straight with tons of headroom, and the cowl/dash/windshield feels a mile away out in front. The car feels downright spacious, which is especially appreciated on a long drive.

As we arrived from our long distance run to Buttonwillow Raceway, the temptation was just too much. It was kind of like Herbie the Love Bug needing to race....the Mini just had to go out and try the Riverside turn, the Grapevine, Lost Hills and the Bus Stop – all highlights of this fun CalClub owned facility. We checked the local track rules about convertibles, and due to the substantial integrated roll bars under the convertible top, we were good to go. So strap it on we did....with not even a tire pressure adjustment – the prep for the track amounted to emptying our snorkels, suitcases and laptops out of the back seat, putting a helmet on and turning left at the pit entrance, hoping this was the correct direction. Immediately the upgrades of the Mini S version from the 2004 version became apparent. While we never tested the 04 in anger, the extra 5 horsepower was certainly appreciated. But the real significant improvement came with the new optional limited slip differential (LSD). Our test vehicle was so equipped, and without it, we would have had a lot less fun. The Mini Cooper S is the best handling front drive car we've driven. While never complaining of anything more than a taught ride, which is expected for this size of car, the S turns like a race car with camber plates set at 4 degrees negative. With quick steering and turn-in, body roll is well-controlled and thus a graceful transfer of weight occurs, allowing the tail of the car to predictably slide out in a controlled oversteer that is truly confidence inspiring. The driving position is also excellent, with an upright stance and adjustable steering wheel, we were able to sit tight as we turned up the wick. The stock run-flat tires are not exactly gumballs, so there is a sense of hard compound slippage and some whine from the tread, but give the Mini a break here – sticky tires would be a natural first step if one really wanted to track the car on a regular basis. Getting back to the LSD, every time we came out of a slower turn in need of instant speed, we could feel the front end pull strong and true, while feeding back NO torque steer. While acceleration is not blinding, the Mini S holds its own in getting down the road. With a 0-60 time of 7.0 seconds, it would seem that this is a weak point in its sporting character. But in real world step-on-it situations, we never felt we had to wait for long before we were barreling into the next turn and using the excellent brakes. Driving the car at 8/10ths, the brakes were stout and, while the pedal softened a bit, they did not fade. The Mini S is a great package, with good handling, reasonable power, quick steering, and a slick shifter. In fact, the Mini S is the perfect car for a track day. Having said this, the real test of a street car's ability to be run hard on a track comes around 4:30pm when its time to turn for home. While our time on the track was limited, we clearly had the supercharger spooled up on three separate runs on a 103 degree day, so if signs of fatigue were going to appear, we would not have been shocked. But no, the Mini just opened up for us to reload the suitcases, snorkels and the laptop and head west. After a half hour cool down session, the brake pedal even returned to normal. Other than telltale black brake dust on the cute white 16 inch wheels the Mini S was able to transform back to a road car in less than five minutes.

Here is where we must digress just a bit from the discussion of the Mini S. We took highway 58 west from Buttonwillow (you just have to see downtown Buttonwillow and the world famous Buttonwillow tree!) for a 70 mile jaunt to Highway 101 just north of San Luis Obispo. The 70 miles took two hours, and we saw exactly one other car and one pickup in that time. The road has switchbacks over the first cut of the coastal range, straight runs through the high Carizza Plain, and a rolling hill finish similar to the Gold

Country as you approach the coast. This was a driver's road if we ever found one. And the Mini was a blast in all elements of the drive. Nimble in the twisties, fast on the straights, and easy to drive through the scenic oak hills near Santa Margarita. If you can think of an excuse to make this drive, we highly recommend it. This was a family outing for us, and even my daughter who got stuck leading the way in our family SUV had fun cruising with no traffic whatsoever. You might have noticed by now that there has been no reference to top down motoring in this review of the Mini S Convertible. Well, we had technical difficulties. We couldn't get the top down and determined that it was not our fault. Seems a motor had failed and we simply didn't have time for a stop by the dealer during our week. One feature that we were surprised and delighted by is an ingenious bit of engineering to create a sunroof in a convertible top. If you press the correct button, the first third of the convertible top slides back from the top of the windshield about two feet. This was a lot of fun and functions at any speed. From other Mini Convertibles we've seen with the top down – we can safely say that this would simply enhance the driving experience on a warm summer evening. Was there the dreaded cowl shake so prevalent with chop tops? In a word, it was negligible. This is a taught chassis and even without the top of the shoe box in place, rattles and squeaks were nowhere to be heard. We thoroughly enjoyed the week we shared with our little red Mini. To say that this car line has a bright future in light of the cost of gasoline is an understatement. Two cautions if you are considering joining the Mini club....don't let a dealer abuse you. There are dealers out there that will sell the car for factory sticker. And simply be aware that spare parts and repairs will be done at a dealership that is a cousin to the BMW store. This company is not known for cheap service and parts. Having said that, we must conclude with an overt statement of praise. The Mini Cooper S is the perfect runabout car, interstate travel car, track day car, and canyon cruiser as well. All at a practical and affordable price. Plan on taking two on the trip – and ENJOY!!