



The revised rear license plate valance and the removal of the oversized badge makes for a much better presentation from the back.

just isn't any need. And with that, I'm over it.

One other thing that I'm surprisingly over is automatic start-stop. When you're stopped at a light, the engine automatically shuts off, then restarts when your foot comes off the brake. The first time it happened, I didn't notice; then, when it started with just a little vibration, I thought it was the a/c compressor kicking in. Nope; I just sat through a really long light, saving gas with the a/c cranking and the engine off. If it really bugs you, flip the Sport switch at the base of the shifter, and the feature is disabled.

In fact, flipping the Sport switch transforms the car. I wanted to determine just how much, but real-life Puerto Rican roads, real-life Puerto Rican wildlife, and real-life Puerto Ricans got in the way. Plus we got lost. I wanted to blame Lauren, but when I took over navigating halfway through, I got us just as lost. As a result, we ended up on roads that were a lane-and-half wide, or roads where there were no lanes—roads where the locals drove on both sides or up the middle, and parked wherever they felt like it, like on both sides or up the middle. At the same time. And we're not even talking about the blind crests

or blind corners, of which there were plenty; they parked there, too. And apparently the phrase "leash law" means that it is illegal to have a dog on a leash. By the way, if you're missing a pregnant dog, it's out there in the Puerto Rican back country.

As a result, we had no opportunity to see if the claims that the new car's handling was even more go-kart-like were true. I can confirm that the brakes and ABS work really well, with good bite and modulation. We confirmed this when a school bus abruptly backed out in front of Lauren.

Some of you are going to be cranky about the steering feel. It's not the same as the first-generation Mini—well, the first BMW Mini—and lacks that direct motor-to-cortex link. I mentioned the issue to both the marketing and engineering people to make sure I wasn't out of my mind. They agreed—and told me that it was done on purpose. Here's the deal: The market demands a smoother and more refined driving experience. That translates to reducing what engineers call NVH: noise, vibration, and harshness. So they did—and they will sell a lot more cars. I should note, too, that this is the first car with run-flats

that hasn't actively frosted my Cheetos. I still don't like them, and if you blow out a sidewall halfway between Denver and Salt Lake City, you're going to be spending at least four-and-a-half hours on a flatbed getting dragged to the nearest compatible tire.

When I asked about that narrow market segment that likes a little noise and harshness, they mentioned the GP with a smile. Nothing was official, but a third-generation Mini GP seems likely, though it would be nice if they cranked it out now. And yes, I did tell them that when they "de-content" the car, leaving things off and leaving things out, it should be cheaper, not more expensive. I'm betting they weren't listening.

The car has a Green mode—think BMW Eco Pro—and it's a little lethargic, though on a long commute or freeway cruise, it may be worth it. This may be more appropriately labeled as the road-trip switch.

After lunch, we swapped into a Cooper S with an automatic, flappy paddles, and a two-liter turbo four cranking out 189 horsepower. The base price here is \$23,600. While I tried to put together a couple of corners and use the paddles to downshift and run back up



The sport seats in the third-generation cars are probably the best stock seats ever placed in a Mini.

through the gears again, rain, potholes, pedestrians, wildlife, traffic, and big trees and buildings at the edge of the road conspired with my sense of self-preservation to preclude any serious testing. It seemed like the car would hold a gear in Sport mode, but I can't say that with any certainty. I finally just dropped it into automatic mode and let the car figure out the gearing for the rest of the drive. Apparently the predictive-driving app worked, because whatever it figured out was good enough for 40 mpg highway, 32 combined.

There was one thing I hated: the audio navigation system. Despite a reliable and calming English accent, that malevolent wench kept telling us to drive up drive-ways, through walls, and off of cliffs. We both got so frustrated that we started yelling at her—mean things. Horrible things. Physiologically impossible things.

The hood scoop on the Cooper S is non-functional—a good thing, given how much this one was splashed as part of the introduction.

We finally turned the sound off; at that point, the visual directions, particularly in the split-screen mode, were perfectly adequate. I'm assuming that this glitch will get fixed in the production models, but I'd rather save the money and stick a \$300 Garmin to the window.

By now you've no doubt concluded that the third-generation Mini is as much electrical as it is mechanical. Whether or not this is a good thing depends on how well all it works in the field. Mini is well aware of this, since they've taken a few hits over the years. I had a long conversation over Mojitos with a couple of engineers about the JD Power & Associates ratings. Their question: "Do they matter?"

My answer: "Yes and no."

Most of today's cars work so well that they're basically appliances; they just work. The differences between those at

the top and those farther down the list are relatively small, despite the numerical differences in the ratings. Car guys know this, and, assuming no grievous flaws, they are willing to trade a few reliability points for performance and character.

Other buyers—those who base their buying decisions on non-performance criteria—just want image and function. As long as the actual workings are transparent, they care little about the how-and-why part. To these people, the JD Power ratings are a huge factor in the buying decision—and these are the people whom Mini has targeted with the third-generation cars.

In short, the third-generation Mini has grown up. It's a real car—and a better car than the either of the previous generations. But it's still a Mini. If all the stuff works, they're going to sell them by the

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Because the twin-turbo base Cooper is so quick, the back end may be all some see of it.

