

Mini challenges drivers: Have more open-air fun



Mini may have pulled the plug on the Mini Roadster, but they have not completely forsaken ragtop fans. The new Mini Convertible, which debuted at the LA Auto Show, will go on sale in the U.S. in March 2016. It will be available in both Cooper and Cooper S versions; it will also be the first open-top Mini built with the newest BMW Group engine technology and architecture.

Mini fully expects its new convertible owners to take advantage of the extensive customization options offered by the company. Eleven exterior colors will be available, including the new Caribbean Aqua and Melting Silver. Inside, Mini has upgraded the materials and design. For example, Mini buyers might choose the new Malt Brown leather with diamond stitching “reminiscent of a classic English Chesterfield sofa.” They might also choose the new Mini Yours soft top that features an embroidered Union Jack with herringbone-patterned detailing.

“The new Mini Convertible has a great balance of playful personalization and sophistication. It’s open-top driving without compromise,” said David Duncan, vice president of Mini of the Americas. “The bespoke levels of customization set it apart from other convertibles on the market, while the front-wheel-drive BMW architecture and engines make it fun to drive and practical in any driving conditions.”

The Mini Convertible can be had with either a BMW Group-developed three- or

four-cylinder Mini turbo engine mated to a standard six-speed manual gearbox. A six-speed Steptronic automatic transmission is optional.

For Mini Convertible owners who keep track of such things, the car will come equipped with an “Always Open” timer that calculates the number of hours driven with the top down. [If Satch had such a device, it would be worn out by now.] The Mini Connected infotainment system with 6.5-inch high-resolution screen is standard; a larger 8.8-inch screen is an option. With the upgrade comes a navigation system that also tells drivers about impending storms so that they aren’t surprised by a rain shower when the convertible top is down. [Satch has a similar device: He stops and puts the top up when his glasses are so wet he can no longer drive. Okay, not exactly similar.]



Rumor: front-drive BMWs and Minis might get DCT

Mercedes-Benz offers its small CLA front-wheel-drive with a seven-speed dual-clutch transmission (DCT). Volkswagen, Acura, and Hyundai have front-drivers with DCT, too. So why not BMW, now that the BMW Group is building BMWs, Minis, and X1 Sports Activity Vehicles in the front-wheel-drive configuration?

According to BMWblog.com, rumors are coming out of Munich that BMW is doing just that. New front-drive BMWs and Minis come with either a manual six-speed gearbox or an eight-speed Aisin automatic transmission. A computer-controlled DCT could make normal transmission operations quicker and smoother, and in a high-performance vehicle like an X1 M—if there were such a thing—or a Mini John Cooper Works, a DCT would be a natural match for faster sprints and quicker upshifts and downshifts.

Speculation is that if BMW were making a DCT that would mate to front-drive BMWs and Minis, we would not see it for at least two years.

Normally, we don’t put a lot of stock in rumors, but we’re willing to make an exception in this case. Since we can’t talk BMW out of front-wheel-drive cars, it might as well make them quicker. But please keep the manual option.

Those Germans really, really like their Minis

The Germans seem to have a love affair with their little English cars—especially the ones made with some German engineering. The new Mini, which the BMW Group calls part of its premium-small-car segment, received the top customer satisfaction rating for small cars in the most recent ADAC Customer Barometer. ADAC, the German Automobile Club, surveyed 20,000 car-owners (online) who had registered their vehicles for the first time between October 2011 and December 2014. Respondents were asked about driving performance, comfort, safety, environmental compatibility, fittings, price, and the customer’s service experience. The new Mini improved from its previous score to 79.8%, enough to take over first place in its class.

Unsurprising to anyone who has ever driven a Mini, the owners spoke highly of driving fun. They also appreciated the new Mini’s more modern fittings, style, quality, and ride comfort.