

# Automobiles

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DRIVING

## A Maxi City Gives Thumbs Up to a Mini Car

By PENELOPE GREEN

I had a Mini for 24 hours last week on a crisp day before the rain came. Cobalt blue and with a Union Jack tattooed to its roof, the 12-foot-long car was as cute as a puppy, and just as magnetic.

"Wicked car, Miss, wicked," the city enthused as one voice, revealing itself to be both overwhelmingly multicultural — though possibly the British flag skewed the quarry — and overwhelmingly fond of the thumbs-up sign.

"I was drawn by the Union Jack, yes," said Yomi Gbolade, a 40-year-old British actor in black denim and a black beret. Mr. Gbolade circled the car as it was perched on 16th Street on the west side of the Greenmarket at Union Square in Manhattan, and said, "It's a bit like Oxford Circus, isn't it?"

Within minutes, four more Britons, one Jamaican and two Middle Europeans had joined Mr. Gbolade, all of them squinting and bobbing and weaving around the car and each other as if the Mini were a new sort of maypole. They climbed into it, and inched under it; they grabbed one another by the elbow and told stories about their own Minis, their youths in faraway places.

The original Mini is clearly a madeleine for Europeans of all ages, even though it was introduced by the British Motor Corporation in 1959 and was English to the core: fast and petrol-thrifty, and with a high grooviness factor.

Diana Rigg's Mini matched her catsuit; Ringo Starr's was custom-fitted with a hatchback for his drums. I don't know if Mary Quant had a Mini, but folklore says she took its name for the you-can-guess-what-skirt in 1965.

Minis were sold in the United States in the mid-1960's, too, but they never made much headway against the Volkswagen Beetle. By 1967, they had been discontinued in this country, with only 10,000 cars having been sold. In Europe, however, 5.3 million classic Minis were made, the last one rolling off the assembly line in 2000.

BMW, which acquired the brand in 1994, has re-imagined the Mini with a wink and wiggle, plus two more feet of car. I drove the Mini Cooper, the version that BMW has just brought to the United States; a high-performance model, the Mini Cooper S, will soon arrive, appealing to the cult of racing that grew up around the



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times  
In the West Village, the Mini, at almost 56 inches high, gets human attention but none from Sony, a Rhodesian Ridgeback who measures 33 inches high when seated. She belongs to the architect Gustavo Bonevardi.

first Mini. (To distinguish this new Mini from the original one, BMW is promoting the car with the name written in cheerful capital letters.)

The Mini fits into a continuum of adorable and stylistically iconic cars like the Miata and the New Beetle. As if to underscore its fashionableness, the Mini comes with its own catalog of clothing and accessories: chic bucket hats and canvas totes and young models with dreadlocks and stubble, looking like spillover from an Abercrombie & Fitch campaign.

The Mini, with a base price of \$16,850, wants to be a new urban touchstone, a fetish with a soul: "Let's sip, not guzzle," reads a snippet from a little Mini ad booklet that was tucked into The New Yorker magazine a few weeks back. Mini of Manhattan, which opened its doors on West 57th Street on March 22, had sold 14 cars by the next day.

New Yorkers, whatever their country of birth, greeted my Mini with unabashed delight last week. I had warm encounters with half the U.P.S. fleet serving Greenwich Village and SoHo. On University Place, I met a man in an "I Love NYPD" T-shirt who claimed to have built 29 classic Minis from scratch, and also said he had played harmonica on five Muddy Waters's records.

Two waiters at Spice, a Thai restaurant on East 10th Street, stroked its perky bonnet and its huge, canted headlamps.

Robert James, a 30-year-old hedge fund manager, and Chris Sheller, also 30 and an actor, slid up behind the Mini on a Honda motorcycle.

"It's a starter car," Mr. James said.

"You mean a junior one-bedroom car," Mr. Sheller said. "An alcove-studio car."

In the West Village, I picked up Gustavo Bonevardi, an architect and a member of the design team responsible for the World Trade Center's glowing memorial last month. Mr. Bonevardi, 42, riffed a bit on a residential paradigm, as Mr. Sheller and Mr. James had done.

"If you consider that most of us feel like a city street is an extension of our own living rooms," he said, "then our opinion about these cars is a matter of some importance. Cars are furniture, as much as they are vehicles. We all have to live with them. This car is appropriate for all sorts of reasons, not the least of which is that it actually fits into the space."

On Greene Street, just below Houston, we parked in front of Moss, Manhattan's most urgent design emporium, where gray chairs squatted like enormous backpacks in the windows. Murray Moss, the store's principal, slid a critical eye over the Mini and described a childhood marked by Beetles.

"I went to college in my yellow Beetle," Mr. Moss said, elegant in a crisp white shirt and black pants. "I drove across the country and to New York in it. It was the only car I was comfortable driving."

Mr. Moss slipped behind the Mini's tiny wheel. "This doesn't look like it's trying to be nostalgic," he said, "or like it's the sixth car in your garage in L.A., if you know what I mean. I have no nostalgia, and I far prefer this to the re-issue of the Bug. There are all these vroom-vroom details, and the door handle is fantastic."

We paused at the Mini's rear end. "If this were a garment," he said, "it would be really unflattering Ñ all narrow shoulders and wide hips. But in a car, that shape gives you a feeling of safety: it's crouched and strong." Mr. Moss mimicked a linebacker's squat.

J. P. Fran\*ois, a manager at the Blue Hill restaurant, appeared suddenly on a bright blue electric scooter called a Phat Flyer.

"You can't get anywhere in this town anymore," he said. "I'm so tired of New York being all S.U.V.'s and trucks. We need to be smarter with our space and our gas consumption."

Mr. Fran\*ois had put 125 miles on his scooter; I proudly trotted out the Mini's vital stats: 43 miles on the highway and 26 in town. We smiled like old

friends.

At four-and-a-half-feet wide, the Mini's has many parking options. We double-parked for lunch at Florent on Gansevoort Street, providing talking points for the wildly global crew of an Australian wedding designer's fashion shoot, all of whom had stopped for lunch, too. You could see a flutter of white tulle on a garment rack parked behind them.

"This is what's required for this country," said Henry Roth, springing up from a chair and gesturing with some brio at the Mini.

Mr. Roth, along with his sister, Michelle Roth, was responsible for the tulle.

"This is the future," Mr. Roth continued. "If we keep going as we have been, if we ignore this, we will have no resources."

I felt the Mini should take a bow. A model bride in an ankle-length veil tripped down the cobblestones and tucked herself into the Mini.

The next morning brought a thin drizzle, and less approbation. At 11 a.m., I took Mario Buatta, the self-styled Prince of Chintz, for a spin around his Upper East Side block. He was dressed in a blue Barbour jacket Ñ the Upper East Sider's gender-free uniform Ñ and laughed when I rolled the car into a yellow taxi.

"You know I love all things English," he said, fingering his Barbour and admiring the Mini's clever ovoids and huge dials, its oversized speedometer like one in an old Cessna. "And of course I think they should make a Mini in chintz. I always thought women should have pretty cars."

I double-parked in front of the neo-Italian town house on East 74th, this year's theater for the Kips Bay Decorator Show House.

The entry was obscured by a flurry of quilted Barbours in all colors. Despite this unanimous and rather loud English signifier, none of the Barbour-wearers glanced at the Mini or its vivid Union Jack topper.

"We've made a psychographic rather than a demographic evaluation of a typical Mini buyer," Andrew Cutler, a Mini communications specialist, said the other day. "They are sort of pre-trend individuals, who go out and look for something unusual and eclectic. For example, someone with a lot of money can go out and buy a Tag Heuer watch and hang it on their wrist like a piece of jewelry, and what they're really interested in is the name."

"The kind of person who would buy a Mini, however, is someone who would go online and find some interesting French watch and maybe buy it from a pawn shop," Mr. Cutler said. "And so it wouldn't be a piece of jewelry but something with an interesting story behind it."

Derek Hemmings, a 39-year-old British engineer working that morning on East 74th Street, stopped for a bit to admire the Union Jack, and to share his own classic Mini stories. I left him to his memories, and as I drove off a Jamaican man yelled out, "Wicked car, Miss, wicked!"