

SPIRITUAL SUCCESSOR.

Words and photos by Craig Watson

The new MINI is a fair bit bigger than the original, but anyone who criticises it as not being a real Mini has obviously not driven one.

While the new Cooper is a fine cruising car and great around town, try to stir up the neddies and the chassis wants to get up and go, but the engine's power seems to have got up and went.

The Cooper S addresses that admirably, thanks to its inter-cooled supercharger. This lifts the maximum power from a meagre 85kW to 125kW. Maximum torque is up from 149Nm to 220Nm. There's no turbo-fee kick in the pants acceleration, rather a progressive buildup of power that really gets going over 3,000rpm.

Potter around and it's still a comfortable, sedate, smallish town car that cruises nicely at highway speeds. But turn off the freeway down a winding country road, put the boot in and Dr Jeckyl takes a back seat to Mr Hyde. Keep the revs up over 3,500rpm and stir the close-ratio six-speed through the gears and the car seems to come alive.

0-100km/h in seven seconds may not be quite in WRX STi territory, but with the



handling, aided by the standard Sports Pack suspension and optional 17" alloy rims with Pirelli rubber on our test car, it corners flat and sure. Thump the brakes and it pulls on the reins with ease.

After four days with the car I had a grin from ear to ear, which was only matched by that on my wife's face. The Cooper S also got the thumbs up from our greatest critic, our then four-year-old son.

The centre console is great to look at and very functional, but where there could be a recess to hold one's mobile phone or wallet is just an empty, useless void. The pockets in the doors take their cue from the original Mini, but are too restrictive to be particularly useful. The plastic dash is etched to look a little like brushed aluminium, which I didn't like, but my wife thought it looked great.

For Australian consumption the central speedo, another style kickback to the original Mini, has been replaced by about the biggest tacho you'll see, while a smaller speedo is mounted on the steering column.

If you specify satellite navigation, the big tacho is replaced with the sat-nav, while the original UK-spec tacho then sits on the column. The new model's dash looks quite a bit sportier in the photos I've seen.



However, any criticisms are more than compensated for by the excellent styling of the exterior and the drivability of the car. The major differences to set the S apart from the Cooper are the air scoop in the enlarged bonnet, bigger front and rear bumpers and side skirts, a hatch-mounted rear spoiler and twin centre-exit tailpipes. There is also a set of fog lights, Xenon headlamps and numerous S badges.

But, the obvious question is can it compete with an original Cooper S in its handling? The short answer is, absolutely.

Longtime Mini driver and Targa Tasmania entrant, Craig Williams from Adelaide, said recently, "I'd put my Cooper against anything else on the road in a corner. It may not have it between the corners, but the braking and cornering ability is phenomenal." Craig's Cooper is fitted with the sports suspension from the S, which improves the already agile Cooper significantly.

The supercharger gives the S that extra bit between the corners. Blasting from corner to corner (keeping well within the legal limit of course) is as much fun as throwing the car through the bends.

Today's Cooper S also has huge potential to live up to the competition heritage of its forebear. Even more so, thanks to the recent release of tuning kits from the likes of John Cooper Works (see our news section on Page 6 for details).

I was recently taken for a spin around Eastern Creek racetrack in Sydney, in a Cooper S with around 160 kW (210 hp). It was simply awesome. Talk about grin-factor.

