

Watto's made a lightning tour of England and come back with a swag of stories to last a couple of years.

**Three weeks in England** to promote *The Mini Experience*, and do some features for the magazine, was a bit of a daunting prospect, with my only previous overseas exploit being to New Zealand for the 2005 Mini Nationals (see Issue 5).

At least I knew that in the UK they also drive on the correct side of the road, from an Aussie perspective, so I assumed I would have no problem adjusting. I hadn't figured on the amount of traffic. Many people over there complain about the motorways, and how terrible they are. In fact, the motorways themselves are very good roads, and the network across the country is excellent. But with 60 million people in an area the size of Victoria, the sheer volume of cars means that only the slightest hiccup will turn even the best motorway into a carpark.

On my first day, after seeing how busy the M25 ring road can become, I kept to many smaller A-roads and B-roads, and decided that I would avoid the motorways wherever possible for the rest of my stay. You certainly learn more about a country by taking the back roads, and I've always preferred them to highways, for enjoyable driving, anyway.

The problem here was that getting around England is about 98.5% based on local knowledge, and, with two rather dodgy map books and even dodgier road signs, I managed to get lost or take at least one wrong turn every single day I was on the road – which was most days.



Back lanes in UK are VERY narrow.



London Mini Centre makes use of every square inch of space, inside and out.

Still, even wrong turns can be a blessing when you find unexpected treasures. One of these was the Glastonbury Tor, which I spied through roadside hedges from afar, and managed to navigate towards. I had a couple of hours free, so climbed the tor (rocky hill) to the top, where the ruins of a 15th Century church remain. The view was spectacular, but I then found myself running late for my next appointment.

**Thankfully**, I didn't need to worry about hiring a car for this trip, thanks mainly to the generosity of my mate Anthony Braggiotti from London Mini Centre - my first port of call once I'd landed in the Old Dart. Anthony lent me his own daily-driver Mini for the first two weeks I was in the UK. The car was a black 1998 Cooper with Sports Pack, a decent CD player and a little work to the engine.

It wasn't anything outrageous, but it cruised all day on the motorway, if I was so inclined, at 80mph, and ran beautifully, reliably and economically, for the two weeks I had it.



Coil-sprung Pickup at Minispeed



GC Motors had over 160 Minis for sale.



Anthony's business was an eye-opener for an Aussie used to wide, open spaces. Located on a street right beside the River Thames in the inner suburb of Putney, it has a standard-sized shop front on a corner. A number of Minis were squeezed into the tiny showroom at the front, with others lining the footpaths around the shop. At the back is a small workshop, barely big enough for a couple of Minis and the usual equipment and tools. Anthony does the whole gambit of Mini business - selling cars, maintenance, and selling spare parts.

I was soon to find that this usage of every available square inch of space is common practice throughout a country so deprived of wide streets and large blocks.

With such a hectic schedule for the trip, I was pleased to visit eight Mini specialists. After London Mini Centre, these were GC Motors in Swanley, Minispeed in Byfleet, Mini Spares north in Birmingham, Somerford Minis in Greater Somerford, Mini Sport in Padiham, Mini Mart in Gateside....

If you would like to read the rest of this story, get your copy of *The Mini Experience* from your local newsagent, or subscribe today and save 25% off the cover price.



Mini Sport is like a supermarket of Mini parts.