

Simple fun: Dinan's S2 MINI

As the trackability of Bimmers is on the decline thanks to escalating prices and weight, the MINI is finding an audience among track junkies. As a cheaper, lighter and perhaps even more fun alternative to the M3—until now the ultimate track-day BMW—the MINI Cooper S is perfect for those who don't need 300+ horsepower, who don't like driving cars that weigh 3,500 lbs. or who don't want to risk writing off a \$50,000 car if they make a mistake.

For a much more modest \$20,900 (base MSRP) a stock MINI Cooper S delivers 168 hp at 6,000 rpm and 162 lb-ft torque at 4,000 rpm from its 1.6-liter supercharged mill, yielding a 134-mph top speed and zero-to-sixty in 6.8 seconds. Weighing in at just 2,678 lbs., it also delivers an EPA-estimated 25 city/32 hwy mpg.

Of course, mileage will go down somewhat if you send your MINI to Dinan for a power and performance upgrade, but in exchange you'll get a car that delivers more fun and excitement than most of us can even dream about.

Dinan gives the Cooper S a supercharger boost, a software revision, a new cowl induction intake system, a high-flow throttle body, a free-flow exhaust system, Stage 3 suspension and a strut tower brace along with a numbered plaque for just \$4,880 (plus installation).

That's about what you'd pay for BMW's John Cooper Works Engine Kit, which goes

for \$4,775 but doesn't include the suspension, strut brace or the sexy plaque and only gives the MINI two additional hp over Dinan's 205 hp at 7,000 rpm and 180 lb-ft of torque at 4,500 rpm. (We doubt many will opt for the Dinan sport camshaft that bumps power to 209 hp for another \$700, but it's there if you want it, and our test car had it.)

Rarely would we call a Dinan car a bargain, but the Dinan S2-MINI Cooper S certainly qualifies. It's also really fun to drive. Getting into it after driving Dinan's S3R-M3 was almost a relief, despite how enamored we were of the latter. The MINI won't kick our asses over a small mistake, which means we can happily drive it at 9/10th without worrying about winding up wedged upside down between two trees fifty feet off the ground and incurring the wrath of Steve Dinan in the process.

Once we learn to ignore the acceleration-induced torque steer—something that every front-driver has, and which is no doubt accentuated by the added supercharger boost—the Dinan S2-MINI reminds us of a well-set-up 2002. It has a jaunty, point-and-squirt quality that larger, heavier cars rarely have. There's nary a hint of understeer, and entering long sweepers at speed reveals nicely perceptible weight transfer with little to no complaint from the front tires.

Our Dinan S2-MINI was notably equipped with Dinan's own lightweight wheels shod with 225/35-18 Michelin Pilot Sport tires—the

largest setup that will fit on the car. Behind those wheels are gigantic Dinan Brembo front brakes, which are indispensable on the racetrack but are complete overkill anywhere else.

The Stage 3 suspension consists of Dinan's performance spring set, Koni adjustable shocks and shocks, a 19mm adjustable rear anti-roll bar and front camber plates. The setup yields ride quality that's better than stock and characteristically Dinan—the product of superior and costly engineering. You really do want the Dinan Stage 3 suspension, trust us.

The Dinan-modified engine responds beautifully, the exhaust musical as we flash from gear to gear on the desolate back roads of Northern California. The pedal layout is perfectly placed for heel-and-toe work, and outward visibility is outstanding.

The Dinan MINI's additional 37 horsepower, combined with a well-tuned and tossable chassis, give this car a fun factor that's better than anything short of a Lotus Elise where contemporary cars are concerned. For a better comparison, we'd have to reach back to a tuned 2002 or Porsche 914—simple, lightweight machines whose ability to deliver fun, fast driving has largely been lost nowadays.

Never mind that the tires and wheels on the Dinan MINI cost as much as a halfway decent 2002. This car recaptures the simplicity and enjoyment of those earlier vehicles like nothing else today. —Mike Miller



Mikey likes it: With 205 hp and sharper-than-stock handling, the Dinan MINI is superbly fun to drive.