

Modern REVIVAL

We drive the retro-styled Mini Cooper S to Palm Springs, where the Mid-Century Modernism architecture movement once flourished.

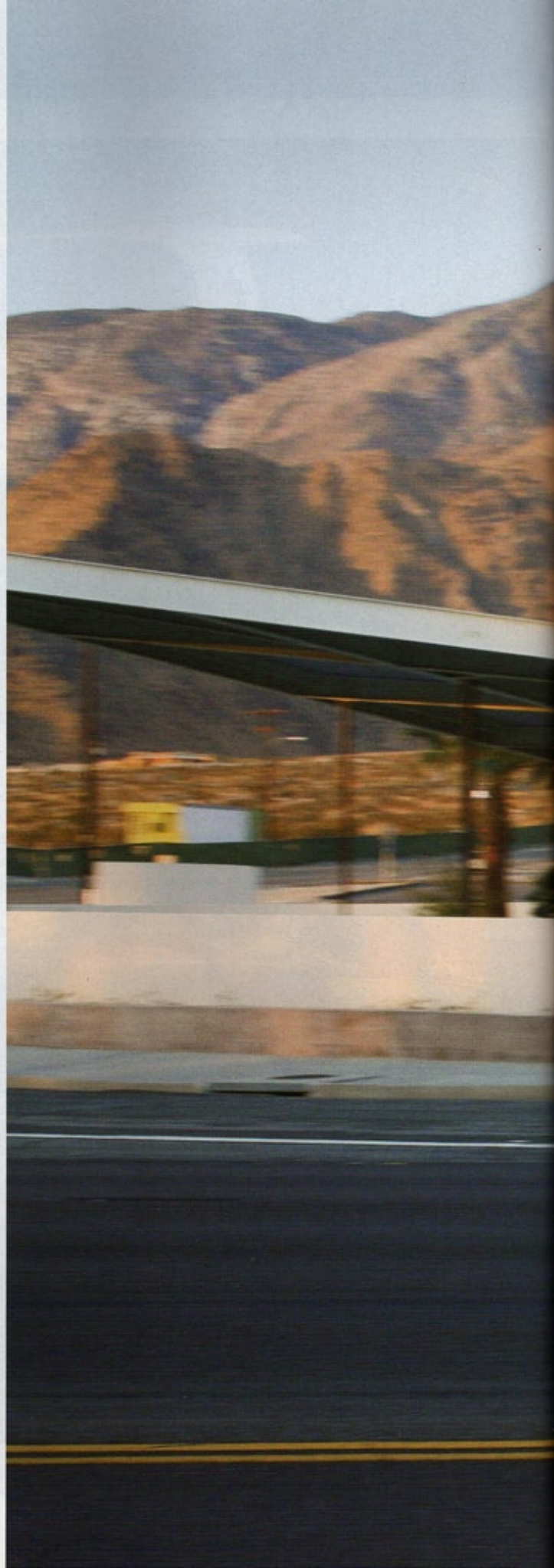
by JEFF GLENN photography by THE AUTHOR

When British Motor Corporation released the Mini in 1959, the modern architecture movement was in full bloom in Palm Springs, California. Albert Frey, E. Stewart Williams, Donald Wexler and others were designing glass walls, flat roofs and boxy shapes that worked in harmony with the desert and a culture of wintertime outdoor leisure. Along the same lines, BMC's little steel and glass box on wheels became synonymous with cheeky fun while redefining the use of space in small cars.

BMW's modern interpretation of the original keeps the flavor of the Issigonis design—flat roof, boxy shape, the wheels at the extreme corner—and performance worthy of the original's rally-winning accolades. This year, Mini added volume in order to meet European pedestrian safety laws, and made a host of other changes. Our knee-jerk reaction was to cringe. Had Mini ruined the recipe? To find out, we grabbed a 2007 Cooper S and planned a circuitous route from the San Francisco Bay Area down to (where else?) Palm Springs for a week of relaxation.

We hit the road early, with a Porsche Boxster S chase car following behind. Had the four of us packed light—say, a swimsuit and a change of clothes—the Mini would have sufficed, but our wardrobe demands exceeded its cargo capacity. In Palm Springs, we'd be staying in the Orbit In, a stylishly renovated Mid-Century Modernist hotel filled with original Eames, Noguchi and Shultz furniture, and we had decided to try and look the retro part.

To get there, we shunned the beaten path in favor of two-lane highways and rural roads that took us by the 700-acre stud farm of Jeopardy game-show host Alex Trebek near Creston, out to the oil town of Taft and up above the snowline on the Mil Potrero Highway. From there, we skirted the north side of the San Gabriel Mountains before rejoining the usual routes to Palm Springs.



On paper, the Cooper S gets two thumbs up right away: It has more power and less weight. It's a trend that BMW board member Prof. Burkhard Goeschel swears the company is working toward on all of its cars. This one actually lost 22 pounds (13 of them in the rear suspension) despite the added 2.5 inches of overall body length, and power is up from 168 to 173 horses.

From the outside, your brain registers "Mini" at first glance. Look closer, and the

his or her face. The steering, while no less precise, is weighted differently. The previous version felt slightly lighter on initial turn-in, while the new car has a bit more heft—a welcome change.

Better yet, the ride quality has been improved. The previous Mini Cooper S was a bit bouncy and stiff over expansion joints and high-speed bumps—it felt like when the shock reached the top of the stroke, the rebound brought it back too quickly—which could be tiring on long trips. The new



pedestrian-friendly front end manifests itself as an inflated, more bulbous snout. A larger grille was needed to feed the low-mounted intercooler; the central scoop on the less shapely hood is just for looks.

The interior is stylized almost to a fault. The previous-generation cockpit looked like a production car paying homage to the original, with a central speedometer and conventional radio and temp controls. The new interior, with its Jetsons-like detailing, looks more like a concept car's. The speedo is even larger and now incorporates the stereo; the temp controls feature large rotating dials seemingly fashioned from plastic Tonka truck tires painted silver; toggles on the roof panel control mood-lighting color. It's all just a bit much.

On the brighter side, it was quickly apparent that the redesign hasn't taken the edge off of the Mini's handling feel. It's a ridiculously capable machine, allowing the driver to place it on the road with razor-like precision and never failing to put a smile on

Cooper S is a much better travel companion in this regard. The only price for the smoother ride is a slight increase in body roll, which translates into a small reduction in responsiveness. The new car isn't quite as alert as its predecessor

Two things you notice immediately on the '07 Cooper S are the lack of supercharger whine and the more immediate engine response from the new turbocharged all-aluminum motor. Thanks to direct fuel injection and a hand-sized turbocharger feeding 11.6 psi of boost, the motor's 177 lb-ft of torque is easily accessed, especially since the engine mates well with the 6-speed manu-matic on our tester. Pin the throttle, and the engine's electronic management system allows for a rev-limited (4,500 rpm) overboost that results in 192 lb-ft of torque. Unfortunately, the engine and exhaust sounds aren't all that inspiring; we kind of miss the burbliness of the supercharged engine, especially the 168-hp version (it debuted in 163-hp guise), which had a mild

Far left: Speedometer has grown to ludicrous proportions; so big, it swallowed the radio.
Left: Turbo four a model of pep and civility.



backfire on overrun as part of its vocal repertoire.

The original Cooper S was *the* giant killer of its day, but driving one in earnest resulted in crazy amounts of torque steer trying to rip the wheel from your hands. The best technique for autocrossing an early Mini is to floor it, steer and occasionally left-foot brake when you need to turn, never lifting the throttle—unless you need to put the car sideways.



BMW has engineered out most of these quaint attributes from its version of the quirky box, but with stability control turned off and the throttle on the floor through switchbacks, a little of that old character still comes through. You feel a slight tug side to side as the front tires hunt for traction on different pavement conditions. In stock form, the biggest limiting factor for the whole package is grip. The 16-inch Goodyear Eagle RSA run-flats on our tester howled when we came near the limit, telegraphing to anyone around that we were exceeding the posted speed limit.

The 6-speed manual-style shifts smoothly, and behaves like a typical automatic in Drive. Pulling the lever toward your right leg moves it into a sportier, manual-style mode, giving you control over upshifts and downshifts via the steering-wheel mounted paddles. Or, you can pull back or push forward on the stick to grab the next gear up or down, respectively. If you're too aggressive

To S or not to S



TAKING THE "S" from the Cooper isn't the same as taking the "F" out of fun. Recently, I had a chance to try the normally aspirated Cooper, and despite the lack of turbocharged power, I was pleasantly surprised by how enjoyable the more economical version was to pop around in. The new 118-hp aluminum-block motor pulls the little car along quite well. It's no dragster, but it feels peppy throughout the rev range.

On the handling front, I liked the addi-

tional roll and feel that the taller 15-inch tires' sidewalls provided—they allow the car to rotate at the rear a little more. Sure, the lower-profile rubber on the S creates more grip and allows the car ultimately to be driven quicker, but it also encourages a straight-to-understeer handling characteristic at the limit. The steering on both cars is equally good, but the standard Cooper's ability to pivot and slide at lower speed made it more rewarding to drive.—J.G

on downshifts, it won't complete the transition on demand.

Pushing the "Sport" button hidden just in front of the shifter speeds the manually controlled shift times and recalibrates the throttle to open quicker with less foot action. If you intend on playing with the sport setting with passengers on board, they'll quickly refer to it as the "rough" button—the shifts may be milliseconds quicker but they also jerk the car around more, and the throttle becomes noticeably touchier.

As a self-guided tour bus for four, the Mini was in its element for hopping around town in search of modern architecture—a by-product of its own boxy shape which yields good outward visibility. We also probed the realistic limits for four-place touring on a day trip to the Salton Sea, once touted by developers and speculators as the Lake Tahoe of the Desert. Back in the late '50s and early '60s, when things were booming in Palm Springs, Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra

drove speedboats on this lake during the day and performed at the fledgling resorts at night before everything changed.

As it turned out, the Salton Sea is really just a 370 square-mile puddle created when an agricultural canal fed by the Colorado River broke in 1905. It took two years to stop the flow that rushed into the dry lake bed that was once a prehistoric finger of the Gulf of California. Roads were paved and utilities brought in during massive speculation in the late '50s, but salinity and temperature variations caused algae blooms that turned the water the color of iodine; the resulting mass fish and bird die-offs sent pleasure seekers back to Palm Springs. Remnants of resorts remain, along with several small, mostly mobile-home, communities. It's still one of the largest stopping points for migratory birds in North America, and served as a rather surreal, and odiferous, destination for a picnic.

The better part of a day on the road, combined with funky smells, toxic-looking water and liver sandwiches, left our back-seat passengers a little worse for wear. Even though Mini carved out a bit more leg room from the front seat backs for '07, the rear seat is best reserved for shorts jaunts.

Had we not been so excited about the Cooper S's increased power and excellent high-speed cruising ability, we probably would have seen better fuel economy. Early in the trip, on a boring highway stint, we pulled off 32 mpg, but most of the time hovered around 24 mpg on fun roads.

The '07 Mini's new nose didn't grow on us, nor did some of its strange interior appointments, but as a stylish urban safari icon capable of running with bigger and supposedly faster challengers, the Cooper S has no peers—just like the original. ●

