

THE MAGAZINE FOR THE MIGHTY **MINI**

# MINI

W O R L D

## Cooper's Grand Prix Return





*Winning*

## **When John Cooper puts his name to a limited edition car, you can expect it to be something a bit special. Mike Askew got a sneak first test drive**



**T**here's something about a birthday that makes people go overboard when it comes to making presents. This is especially true when it comes to the Mini. As we exclusively previewed in our August issue, Rover has developed three special versions of the Mini to celebrate the car's 35th Birthday. Naturally, John Cooper has also spent time in the workshops developing a Mini, and as you might expect, it's just a little bit special.

Everyone knows that the Mini was launched in 1959, a fact we are celebrating now, 35 years on. But how many of you know that 1959 was the year in which John Cooper's Formula One team achieved a remarkable world championship constructors victory, a feat he went on to repeat the following year. With this double celebration in mind, John Cooper and his team have developed the Cooper Grand Prix, a serious Mini with a serious heritage.

If you're after the ultimate in road-going Minis, this car must be somewhere near the top of the pile, but before we go into all the glorious detail, it's worth knowing how the idea for the car was developed. To get mega power out of the humble A Series is a relatively simple task. Doing the old tricks of fitting a big-bore engine, fat exhaust, a pair of Webers and a hairy cam is a surefire way of boosting a standard engine. But anyone who has carried out any of these mods will vouch for the fact that the engine instantly sounds like a space shuttle and is terribly peaky – delivering much of its power with the tach needle buried deep into the red zone.

Added to this, the new Cooper EFI (Electronic Fuel Injection) has a bonnet-full of wires and electronics that make conventional tuning techniques fairly ineffective. John Cooper Garages have for a while now been offering performance tuning packs for the EFI Cooper that strikes a balance between traditional tricks and electronic jiggery pokery. The packs are widely regarded

as the bench mark to which other manufacturers compare their own products, and the approval of Rover itself merely confirms this. But what has this got to do with the Cooper Grand Prix? Well, quite a bit, because John Cooper's vision for the car was one that would have all the punch of a well tuned road-racer, yet with all the sophistication and refinement of an executive saloon. An impossible task? It certainly sounds it until you take it for a spin, and seeing as 40,000-odd readers would have a job getting into one Cooper Grand Prix, you'll just have to believe what I say!

The overall theme of understated power is reflected in the exterior styling. **MiniWorld's** first view of the car was a brief glimpse of an ultra-shiny British Racing Green Cooper with a row of spotlights adorning the front, sitting in the corner of the Cooper workshop. With a longer stare it becomes apparent that this is no ordinary Cooper, and a much closer look confirms this. The whole stance of the car is dominated by a set of special alloy wheels that more accurately reflect the original Minilite wheels that Cooper helped develop. John's son, Mike, spent a lot of time trying to get hold of exactly the wheels he wanted for the car, and spent many hours on the telephone to wheel suppliers.

From the word go, this was going to be a unique car, and Mike wasn't prepared to accept second best for the Grand Prix. With the wheels sorted, a set of Dunlop 165/70x12 tyres were fitted to give the car the wide wheel look and a more aggressive feel. Working from the ground up, the original Rover arches were binned in favour of a set of flush fitting ones, painted body colour and complete with neat black piping. A battery of auxiliary lamps sit on a specially made rail, adding a rally look to the front of the car. Most of the other standard Cooper bits have been retained like the thick slat grille and white door mirrors, although the famous Cooper emblem has been

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removed from the rear panel and replaced with a snazzy Grand Prix logo. Continuing the sporty look created by the wheels and lamps, a posy little Cooper filler cap stands proud on the back panel. Somewhat surprising is the lack of the John Cooper signature on the obligatory white bonnet stripes – a decision made by Mike, who wanted the car to look as low-key as possible. The John Cooper name does appear however on the kick plates of the door frames

If the exterior is understated, the interior design is far less reserved. Upon opening the door, the smell of leather and walnut invades the nostrils and as you sink into the luxurious seats, the last car you think you're in is a Mini! Anyone with a recently built standard Cooper will appreciate that the new seats are a vast improvement over the original ones that have changed little over 35 years. Not satisfied with the trim on these new seats, Mike Cooper sent a set to the USA where he knew of just the man to transform them into the ultimate Mini seat. The result is the same comfortable chair covered all over in mega-expensive beige leather. The rear seats too haven't been ignored, being finished in the same beige leather with a neat pleated effect.

Once sat behind the wheel – a Mota-Lita one, covered again in leather with a John Cooper signature engraved into one of the spokes – the dashboard catches the eye. A full-length walnut dash has been fitted, complete with the three-pack binnacle that blends into the overall panel. In addition to all the usual dials, there's also a volt-meter, oil pressure gauge and a clock. The gauges themselves are fitted with a chrome rim, specially produced for the Grand Prix. Few elements of the original Cooper exterior actually remain in the Grand Prix with even the door furniture being changed completely. Every surface or gadget you touch makes you say, "That's different", or "Why doesn't mine have one of these!"

The leather found on the seats is used to good effect again for the door and rear quarter panels with more walnut trim making up a set of door capings. On the tiny glove compartment door is a small brass plaque that contains a rather unique number. You see there will only be a maximum of 35 Cooper Grand Prix built, and each one will be individually numbered. Naturally the car we got to test was number one.

Although much of the work carried out by the engineers at John Cooper Garages has dictated the overall look of the car, development work on the engine has been equally intense. As

mentioned earlier, getting big power from the A Series is a fairly simple affair. However, getting big power and retaining things like catalytic converters and engine management systems is less straightforward. Mike and his team have spent many a long hour in the workshop trying to hit the perfect formula. Sensibly, the engine team used a development car, unwittingly volunteered by a member of the garage staff! The search for the perfect engine was a long one, a fairly familiar scenario to most Mini tuners. No fewer than seven different cams were tried in the engine before settling on the right one – a specially designed unit unique to the Cooper Grand Prix. Modifying the fuel injection system also proved to be something of a headache. At first, a twin throttle body set-up was tried, and although this gave an improvement in performance, it was decided that a modified single unit was preferable. The car employs the state-of-the-art Weber Alpha fuel injection system – the same as the unit used on Paddy Hopkirk's Monte Mini Cooper. The cylinder head was also improved with the use of larger valves and gasflowing.

The amount of noise generated by an engine is largely governed by the choice of exhaust and air filter. A free flowing pipe will give bags of power, but will often be intolerably noisy. Again Mike Cooper spent a long time looking for the part that would give the Grand Prix all the performance, but with little of the ear-splitting noise. Not only that, but the strangling effect of the catalytic converter could not be avoided.

A week before the final spec for the car was chosen, Mike Cooper took his father for a spin in the development car for his approval. John decided that although the power and handling was spot-on, the noise was just too much. Another re-think and telephone call resulted in the Janspeed exhaust unit used on the final production car.

With the increase in power, the engine has been fitted with an oil cooler to prevent the engine's precious lubricant becoming too hot and risking damage to the engine.

So there's the spec, what's it like to drive? Well, as you might expect from the spec list, this is one special Mini. The first thing to notice is the engine noise – or rather the lack of it. It's hard to believe that the engine is a tuned one, and the low-down torque is quite incredible. The car will easily pull in top from as low as 20mph, up to well over 100! Driven sensibly, and when in traffic, the motor is as docile as any Mini and doesn't have any of the lumpy throttle-blipping characteristics of many



*Above: Clean and tidy engine bay is packed with electronics*



*Above: Leather trim and alloy door furniture add to the luxurious effect*



*Right: Leather seats are made in the United States*

*Below: Two driving and two fog lamps dominate the front of the Cooper Grand Prix*



*Below: The man himself stands by his latest creation*



*Left: Re-worked ECU lives under the driver's seat*



*Left: Individual plaques indicate authenticity*

Below: Mota Lita steering wheel and unique chrome-rimmed dials make for an extremely opulent interior



a tuned A Series. Town driving, though, is not what the Cooper Grand Prix is about. As its name suggests, the car is most happy when on full song, screaming through twisty A roads. The suspension has been updated all round to handle the extra power, and the result is a supremely confident back road racer. When winding the car up, there are no noticeable glitches or dips in the acceleration curve, the modified lump delivering the power right until the needle approaches the 6000 rpm mark. The Cooper Grand Prix has, somewhat surprisingly, avoided the current trend to fit a five-speed gearbox, instead the engine characteristics have been built around the four-speed unit. It may sound like an odd idea, but the end result is impressive. Fourth gear acceleration is seemingly endless, and motorway cruising in top can be achieved with very little noise creeping into the cabin. The improved torque curve delivers instant urge for those do-or-die overtaking manoeuvres, avoiding the need to scream the engine by dropping down to third. The remarkable part about this car is that while you're zapping along the highway pretending to be Damon Hill hauling the Williams around Silverstone, the surroundings are that of a sensible executive saloon, a weird but wonderful mix!

Giving the Cooper Grand Prix back to a relieved-looking Mike Cooper was the worst part of the test, and while snapper Hodson moved in to take the pics you see here, I was left with the sad realisation that there are 35 lucky people out there, and I wouldn't be one of them.



Above: Unique red badging

Left: Grand Prix logo embossed on back panel



#### MINI COOPER GRAND PRIX

**Engine:** 1300cc Cooper injection. Large valve, ported and gasflowed cylinder head. New camshaft and valve rocker assemblies. Weber Alpha injection system.

**Exhaust:** Janspeed unit retaining catalytic converter

**Wheels:** 12 inch Minilite-replicas

**Suspension:** Adjustable shock absorbers all round.

**Performance:**

**Power output:** 86bhp

0-60 mph: 9 sec

**Top Speed:** 105mph

**Torque:** 20% increase over standard unit.

**Price:** £13,495 on the road

**Where:** John Cooper Garages Ltd, 50 Ferring Street, Ferring, Worthing, Sussex. (tel: 0903 504455) (fax: 0903 507194)