



A WORKS DRIVE

by JAMES GENT

PHOTOGRAPHY by FABIAN KIRCHBAEUR

Does our deputy editor have the same speed of 1967 Rally Monte Carlo winner Rauno Aaltonen, on-track, in the brand new MINI John Cooper Works? We know who our money is on...

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T TURNS OUT RAUNO AALTONEN IS quick. SERIOUSLY quick. And I say this having just spent the last 10 minutes trying – and failing – to hang onto the 1967 Rallye Monte Carlo winner's tail around Circuit Mallorca. It's tempting to be the bad workman and blame the

tools, but it would be wildly unfair to do so since said tool is the new MINI John Cooper Works.

Yes, that name should be familiar to you. As well as a nod to original Mini Cooper developer John Cooper, JCW is also – as of 2008 – MINI's official pimpification tuning arm, akin to BMW's M sub-brand. This is also not the first time we've seen the JCW treatment on a MINI. You may remember the 2006 iteration, or indeed the slightly more performance focused John Cooper Works GP that appeared in 2012 and set a 8m 23s laptime at the Nürburgring, a full second faster than a Lotus Exige S. And yet this, the second generation JCW, top trumps its predecessor as the most powerful production MINI ever made.

Like the Cooper S on which it is based, the new JCW is powered by a 2-litre TwinPower Turbo four-cylinder, but a larger intercooler, revised cylinder heads, tuned turbochargers and new pistons means the unit now produces 231bhp, 20bhp more than its predecessor. With this comes 236lb ft of torque, a 246kph top speed, and a 6.1sec 0-100kph time, a tenth faster than the outgoing JCW (if you opt for the six-speed Steptronic automatic that is). Lacking in grunt this lively minx certainly is not.

The updates continue, the JCW bespoke bodywork receiving a larger front apron and rear spoiler for improved aerodynamics. Suspension remains largely the same, though a newly revised – and lighter – electronic diff allows that extra horsepower to make its way to the tarmac without the newboy torque steering its occupants into the nearest lamppost. Unsurprisingly the brakes have

also been given a Brembo overhaul.

And yet despite this impressive specs list, I'm still struggling to pull together a clean lap around the Mallorcan track. My main issue is the high-speed, sweeping right-hander at turns two and three that leads onto the back straight. I just can't carry the momentum in the same way that Rauno (now a sprightly 77 years old) can with the same machinery: while he hits the apex and scrubs barely any speed, I'm sawing the wheel almost hilariously after getting my turn in wrong time and time again.

Fortunately our track expert here today is not only very approachable, but enjoys a good natter. And given his career to date, there's plenty to discuss: as well as securing his famous Monte Carlo victory in a Mini Cooper S, he took the 1965 European Rally Championship, two national championships in his native Finland, and was also first over the line at Bathurst in the 1966 Gallaher 500 endurance touring car event. Want a true level of his commitment? Rauno managed to coerce various Opel and Datsun machinery to the runner's up spot six times on the torturous Safari Rally. Even today, his motorsport heritage lives on via his son Tino, who is head instructor at the Aaltonen Motorsport ice driving program in Finland.

I'm hopeful then that, given his bountiful experience, Rauno will be able to give me a few pointers. Although I time my introduction quite badly as he reaches for a medicinal cup of coffee, he's still more than happy – beaming smile affixed – to give me some pointers.

"The secret is to lift completely off the throttle, then get back on it," the amiable Rauno mentions in pitch perfect Finnish English. "Not like this," at which point he gestures a slow release of the throttle with his hands, "but completely. When you do this, the car balances itself and gives you a better line through the apex. If you push too hard too early, you'll wash wide and not go forwards."

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Right: The Mini Cooper S, the legend that brought Rauno Aaltonen his most famous victory

Still I'm frustrated, not least because – not to be overly boastful – I'm nailing the tight infield section beautifully, due in no small part to the JCW itself. The balance of the newboy is just remarkable, maintaining a composure through the tighter corners even at ambitious turn-in speeds thanks to its low centre of gravity and clever weight distribution. There's little in the way of weight-transfer affecting the poise under load. Power may still be fed through the front wheels, but grip at the rear is beyond ridiculous, even with all stability systems turned off. As Rauno mentions, "it will not spin, never spin."

Smoothness through the tighter turns is the key he says, since jumping on the power too early will unsettle the front end as 231bhp is launched in one big lump towards the front axle, ultimately leading to a slower laptime. And if, he continues, I find I need more than a 180-degree lock on the steering wheel, I'm either over-driving or have got my corner entry VERY wrong (a mark which, fortunately, I don't overstep). With that, Rauno points at the traction control switch – or the 'fun button' as he terms it – tells me to turn everything off, and jumps into the JCW that will lead me at speed around the Mallorca circuit once again.

I sense that for my benefit he's taking the opening few corners easier than he could, but Rauno is still romping away through the high-speed turns two and three as

once again I lift off too little and leap on the power too ferociously, the car sluicing sideways. On the back straight though the grunt from those four-cylinders is very aggressive, extra juice around the mid-range mark from BMW's TwinPower system, encouraging me to push well into the high revs. Changes through the short-shift six-speed manual gearbox allow me to keep the momentum up, a tangible punch from the engine as the revs rise again.

As things get serious I switch from Normal to Sport driving mode. Immediately there's a noticeable difference in heft from lock-to-lock over the slightly woolly handling in Normal. It's making me work harder but the feedback is much better, the grip from those 17in front wheels keeping understeer at arms length. It's this point-and-shoot mannerism of the JCW that is making my run at Mallorca, though at times frustrating, so enjoyable. Nauseating as the 'go-kart' cliché might be, it does ring true.

Now through the infield – a fast-paced collection of left-right-left switchbacks – and onto the final run before the start-finish straight, the vented discs brakes are proving seriously impressive under heavy braking (and offer a good amount of travel in the pedal out in the real world), the nose jinking only slightly as I downshift into the final chicane. Bouncing over the kerbing both right and left, the JCW once again maintains its composure onto the main

straight as the lap is completed. With Rauno still ahead, though now at slightly higher pace, we head towards turns two and three, and my Achilles heel.

Entry speed through one is good, and I manage to cut the apex cleaner than I have hitherto. Heading into turn two, I place the MINI as wide as I dare, full commitment and a good line into the high-speed turn three my goal, plus lift-off as instructed...

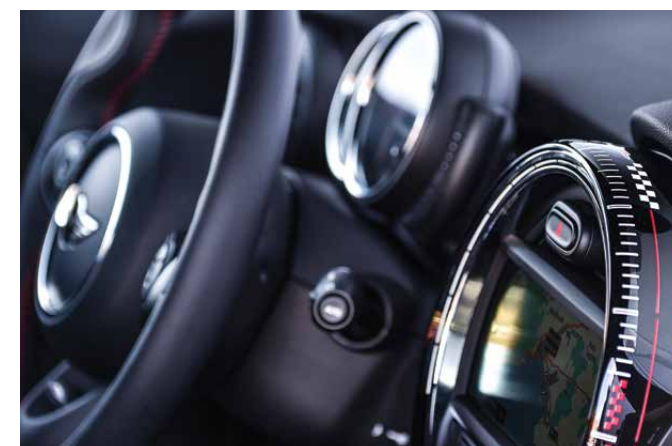
It's an improvement but the car is still sluicing sideways with the camber, Rauno ahead opening up the gap once again. Off the throttle the JCW has balanced itself beautifully but I'm still jumping on the throttle too aggressively, said action loading up the front end, lift off livening up the rear axle, and quick inputs at the wheel trying to keep the car going straight. From behind, this must look only barely controlled as the rear end dances back and forth. I've much more confidence in this seat than I would have in other, more powerful models, in which I'd likely be facing the other way by now. It's this sense of agility and nippiness that allows me to push harder than I probably otherwise would. And again, while the run may be frustrating, I'm enjoying it immensely, the kick from that turbo hypnotic, the handling superb and the poise remarkable. Turns two and three may still take some practice though. Time for another lap Rauno...? ❏

MINI JOHN COOPER WORKS

Engine In-line 4-cyl, TwinPower Turbo, 1998cc
Power 231bhp @ 5200–6000rpm
Torque 236lb ft @ 1250–4800rpm
Transmission Six-speed Steptronic sports automatic
Front suspension Single-joint McPherson
Rear suspension Multilink
Brakes Vented
Wheels 7J × 17in light alloy (front and rear)
Tyres 205/45 R17 88Y XL (front and rear)
Weight (kerb) 1295kg
Power-to-weight 178bhp/ton
0-100kph 6.1sec
Top speed 246kph
Basic price \$36,100

EVO rating: ★★★★★

Below, left: The MINI JCW is dancing through the infield, but our man just can't hook up the high-speed turn three



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