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BEHIND THE WHEEL | 2008 SMART FORTWO

Ready for Its Hollywood Close-Up



Carol Zulman for The New York Times

The Smart Fortwo may be the cutest production vehicle to arrive in this country since the 1950s.

By ERIC A. TAUB Published: May 11, 2008

IF Smart USA, distributor of the Smart microcar, could get every person who shouted, whooped, ran into the street, stopped traffic and corralled me for a chat to actually buy a Fortwo like the one I drove around Los Angeles, Daimler's factory in France would have to run 24/7.

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2008 Smart Fortwo

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There is no great secret to the car's appeal: the Smart Fortwo may be the cutest and most unusual-looking production vehicle to arrive in this country since BMW's front-loading Isetta 300 of the 1950s.

To see if the Smart was more than a fashion statement — the charm of its shape and colors draws admirers as if it were the latest gadget from Apple — I drove the company's better-equipped model, the Passion, for two weeks, scooting around the San Fernando Valley suburbs and across the freeways to Venice, Santa Monica and Beverly Hills.

Starting at \$14,235 (\$15,475 as tested), the Smart Passion came with many features Americans have come to expect:

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Carol Zulman for The New York Times

Rounding curves on city streets, the body roll was pronounced, causing a friend to reflexively grab the dash.

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Carol Zulman for The New York Times

In Los Angeles, most city streets are as wide as Italian autostradas, and finding a parking space on the street is usually no problem.

air-conditioning; power steering, windows and door locks; CD player; front fog lights; and a huge moon roof. For all the bells and whistles — it even comes with an electronic stability system — cruise control was left off the list. Perhaps Smart's product planners didn't think many drivers would take their cars for extended freeway trips.

But I did. The 3-cylinder 1-liter engine had no problem getting up to speed, joining the flow and cruising at 80 miles an hour, the prevailing off-peak pace of Southern California freeways.

But once at speed, the engine thrashed and the car was buffeted by the wake of passing tractor trailers, giving me pause when I thought about taking one hand off the wheel. The experience was akin to crossing the upper level of the George Washington Bridge in a 1960s Volkswagen Beetle on a windy day.

Rounding curves on city streets, the body roll was pronounced, causing a friend to reflexively grab the dash. When accelerating, the dreadful 5-speed automated manual transmission shifts awkwardly and slowly. It may be enough to make you reach for the Dramamine: the engine temporarily slows as the car is about to upshift, jerking the driver forward and then back with each shift. Several times, my wife threatened to walk home.

This may bring back fond memories of your first pathetic attempt to drive a manual transmission car. The solution — if you can time it right — is to lift your foot off the accelerator when you think the transmission is about to shift, something I was able to pull off about 50 percent of the time.

The air-conditioning was strong enough to cool the interior even during a recent spate of 90-degree days. But the fan was noisy and seemed to have a mind of its own, speeding up and slowing down as the compressor kicked in.

In Europe, the Smart is a pint-sized solution to narrow, congested streets, thimble-sized parking spaces and astronomical gas prices. In Los Angeles, though, most city streets are as wide as Italian autostradas, and parking spaces are defined by meters and lines. Finding a space on the street is usually possible, even if you are driving an S.U.V. in Beverly Hills on the weekend.

While the car is teensy on the outside, the Smart's generous headroom lets you quickly forget that you're in the

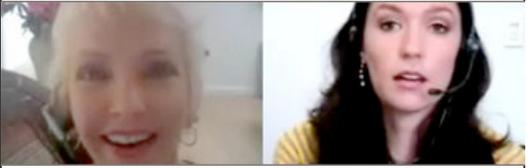
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smallest car sold in the United States — until you turn around and wonder, like [Ronald Reagan](#)'s character in "King's Row," "Where's the rest of me?"

The interior has two supportive and attractive seats and a small shelf behind them, and that's it. A clock and a tachometer, whimsically mounted like crustacean eyes on the fabric-covered dash, were cute and easy to read.

The shelf is large enough to carry one standard suitcase and a carry-on bag, but not much else. You can increase carrying capacity by folding the passenger seat forward, though that requires pulling a lever awkwardly placed between the seats. My wife summed it up best: "This is a car for people without much of a life."

In the mileage department, the Smart also failed to live up to expectations. Even with its tiny engine, the two tankfuls of gas consumed while I had the car worked out to readings of only 30 and 34 miles a gallon. That was less than the 36 m.p.g. [E.P.A.](#) rating for combined city/highway driving, and certainly not "amazing" as Smart's press materials proclaim.

"That's worse than my Honda," a man yelled indignantly at me in a Santa Monica parking lot. He expected the Smart to do better, and so did everyone else I asked. In an informal survey of friends, relatives, people who stopped me on the street and even the U.P.S. deliveryman, the consensus was that a car this size should go 50 to 60 miles on each gallon. Learning that premium fuel is recommended was an added downer.

With its limited carrying capacity, seemingly mediocre fuel economy, erratic handling and fitful acceleration, one question that potential buyers in this part of the world should be asking is, what's the point?

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