

CLASSIC DRIVER



Clever around town? The SMART Roadster in London

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Paradise for some.

Fancy cruising around Kensington and Chelsea in a mid-engined sports car? Can't quite run to a Gallardo or 360 Modena? Help is at hand from the people that brought you the innovative smart City cars.



With a starting price in the UK of £14,520 the little two-seater is a little over a tenth of the price of Italian exotica but will often get the same level of attention. Looking at the cost aspect first of all it, like all **smarts**, is not cheap to buy, and adding the odd extra will push the cost way above an oldish pre-owned Mercedes SLK or BMW Z3. The running costs are cheap however and you are unlikely to see another one as frequently as you would do one of the alternatives.

Like its multi-cylinder, maximum-performance, mega-money relations, **smart** Roadster ownership is all about making a statement. 'I don't need the practicalities, I have nothing to prove, I want to be different'. Jumping into a press car in West London the other day for an afternoon researching the Classic Driver '[LondonInside](#)' [Special](#), I certainly felt I was exploring the outer limits of car-ownership, if not performance - but we'll come to that later. The cockpit (like its upright two-seater brethren) is surprisingly roomy, although peering through the letterbox rear window is a challenge, and a brief sortie onto the start of the M4 lead to a feeling of slight insecurity (don't worry though, the car with its TRIDION safety cage is very safe) mainly due to visibility issues that are solved by adopting a racer's 'radar' that means you just 'feel' where the other cars are - even if you don't quite see them.

Driving along at hub-cap level means you are truly at one with the road and the big tyres and excellent suspension and steering only reinforce this feeling. The little car whizzes along propelled by the gravelly three-cylinder turbo-motor whirring away behind your head. Its weight less driver is 790kg, so the 80bhp @ 5,250rpm motor (maximum torque is 81 lb/ft from 2,250 - 4,500rpm) will produce some usefully sporty figures if not downright devastating. The maximum speed is 112mph (180km/h) and it will accelerate from 0-62.5 mph (0-100km/h) in 10.9secs. To be honest there was little time for a proper appraisal of the performance but as a fun car around town it certainly held its own, and I believe they really can travel on a motorway (the example I borrowed came complete with Swiss motorway carnet sticker, so someone been a long way in it).



One of the joys of the car is mastering the gearbox.

Now steady on, it is one of the much-criticised (or praised depending on which side of the showroom floor you stand) clutchless autos with either push/pull gear stick and paddle-shift manual (an extra fitted to 'our' car) or fully-auto modes. In auto it will annoy you unless you *just* lift off at the point it's about to change up before flooring it again. The result of doing this is a) smooth progress, and b) a delightful 'plop' from the turbo reminiscent of the Zakspeed Capris of the 1970s. Remember it will not 'creep' in manual or auto mode so a brisk take-off is probably achieved by holding the brake with your left foot while keeping the revs up with your right. I was never 100% happy at making swift exits from junctions or at roundabouts for this reason (it also rolls back without the handbrake on). The former a similar problem I seem to remember with an £80,000 Italian 4-door supercar not so long ago.

Shifting gear manually - if you must - is good fun and I suppose a trip outside London to some country lanes where the small size of the car, married to its fun handling and nippy performance would count, is the place for 'paddling'. In manual it will automatically select first when coming to a halt so you can slightly 'switch-off' even when not using full auto.

Luggage space? Well, there's not a lot really, particularly with the 'Targa' tops stowed away, but by buying the optional luggage for front and rear compartments you will make the most of it - and cut a dash Starbucks, the gym or wherever your destination is. Various grown-up accessories can be ordered such as Sat-Nav, rain/light sensor, leather seats and uprated sound system. Just be careful with the total price - it's all going to add up. Despite their size there's an awful lot of technology - mainly on the safety front, via ESP/EBD/ABS/ASR electronics - in these little cars so I suppose it all has to be paid for.

Classic Driver material? Well why not, I rather liked it and was sorry to hand the keys over after a shortish try-out, as a City car for the sporting enthusiast with an ability to do the odd longer trip it'll do the job, and if you want to get noticed it's right up there with the best of them.

In its natural element - heaven in London SW7.

With grateful thanks to **smart UK** and **smart Chiswick**

Text/Photos; Steve Wakefield/Classic Driver

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