

## Seeking Street Cred:

### Commuting in a Smart Car

By Roger Witherspoon

SAN JOSE – Anders Jensen was emphatic.

“Drive down any highway and look at the cars in the high occupancy, carpool lane,” he said. “Eighty percent of them will be big, expensive cars with only one person in them – the driver. The average family spends most of its money on the car they use to commute back and forth to work, and then spends a lot more on a car to drive the family in.

“That doesn’t make sense. You need a vehicle that is designed for commuting, a car designed for urban life.”

Commuters need, in Jensen’s view, a Smart Fortwo. This is an urban oriented vehicle which resembles nothing so much as a colorful toy car which miraculously became life sized, drinks real, premium gasoline, and provides a comfortable way to zip in and out of town.

It even has a toy engine: a three cylinder power plant that is miniature by normal standards and cranks out just 70 horsepower. That is not enough power to get the average Volkswagen Bug up a mild hill, but it is more than enough to let the Smart Fortwo run along merrily at 85 miles an hour and rack up a not so cheerful speeding ticket or two. Part of the joy of driving the Smart Fortwo on the highway is watching the astonished looks on the faces of the drivers you pass – looks which usually morph into broad grins accompanied by a thumbs-up wave.

This is a toy which can move. It has a five-speed automatic transmission augmented by a manual mode which is activated by using paddle shifts on the steering column. In automatic, the little engine is rough, and the car notably jerks as you shift from one gear to another. The paddle shifts, however, operate rather smoothly and responsively and give the little toy a sports car feel. It lacks the raw power of BMW’s Mini which, in size, is actually a third longer and designed to race in the triple digits.

But the comparison with the Mini is misleading. The Smart Fortwo is intended as a commuter car, not the family car or the first choice for a road trip. The Mini is expected to be a car for all occasions – including commuting – and holds four passengers. The Smart Fortwo is a two seater and was never intended to roam the countryside. It can do something the Mini cannot: you can park two of these, perpendicular to the curb, in a normal city parking space.

It has one other innovation that is surprising on a sub compact, low cost vehicle. It is a convertible. Instead of having set positions, the roof of the Smart can fold back to wherever you want it: a couple of inches just to let in fresh air, or all the way back. If it starts to rain while you’re driving that is not an issue, either because you can raise or lower the roof while in motion as long as the roof rails are in place. When these are up, the Smart’s cabin resembles a small, miniature version of the Jeep Wrangler. But, with the push of a button, you can remove the roof rails and stow them in convenient slots in the trunk and have a more complete convertible look.

The Smart is a cheerful looking car: the color pattern on the outside is continued in the interior. In the test car, that was a candy apple red and silver augmented by bright

leather seats with a crisscross pattern. The bright red on the dash was offset by chrome, continuing the theme of a toy for grownups.

But you have to ask if Mercedes Benz is correct to invest in this subdivision aimed exclusively at commuters, primarily urban motorists and denizens of college towns. For practical purposes, there are those who would gravitate towards a more traditional, entry level, all encompassing vehicle like the new Kia Rio 5.

The Rio 5 is a four-seater with a hatchback. Its four-cylinder engine, cranking out just 110 horsepower, isn't much more powerful than that of the Smart Fortwo, but it is sufficient to get four adults where they are going. It is not a car for big people, particularly in the rear, but the average adult will roll through 100,000 miles or so without complaining about being cramped.

The external styling is pleasant enough, with a sleek front and spare lines that hint at a vehicle with more power than this one. But it is not particularly eye catching, and its appeal will rely primarily on its price and utilitarian value.

It is a small car which, as a starter vehicle, can be everything to someone just starting in the workforce. It is small enough to flit in and out of urban traffic and fit into most parking spaces and, with the seats folded down, has enough storage capacity for a couple taking a week-long road trip. Surprisingly, it has the standard AM/FM radio, but lacks a connection for an MP3 player or iPod, items which the younger generation of motorists has come to expect.

But if you buy a Rio 5, you do not need another car to have a vehicle meeting all of your motoring needs. The Smart, on the other hand, is intended to be a second, utilitarian member of a two-car garage.

Both these vehicles will get you where you are going. All things considered, however, the Rio 5 is a lot more useful, and the Smart Fortwo is a lot more fun.

## **2008 Smart Fortwo Cabrio**

<b>MSRP:</b>		<b>\$16,590</b>
<b>EPA Mileage:</b>	<b>33 MPG City</b>	<b>40 MPG Highway</b>

### **Performance/ Safety:**

60 cubic inch, 3-cylinder engine producing 70 horsepower and 68 pound-feet of torque; 5-speed automatic transmission with manual mode and paddle shifts; electronic stability control; anti lock brakes; 15-inch, 9-spoke alloy wheels; driver and passenger head, thorax and side airbags; power steering; fog lamps; heated side mirrors.

### **Interior/ Comfort:**

AM/FM radio; 6-disc, in-dash CD and MP3 player; power windows, 3-spoke, leather wrapped steering wheel with shift paddles; retractable roof and roof rails; heated leather seats; tilt steering wheel.

## **2008 Kia Rio 5 SX**

**MSRP:** **\$15,415**  
**EPA Mileage:** **32 MPG City** **35 MPG Highway**

**Performance/ Safety:**

1.6-Liter DOHC, 4-cylinder engine producing 110 horsepower and 107 pound-feet of torque; 5-speed manual transmission; independent front suspension; torsion beam rear suspension; power rack & pinion steering; power front disc/ rear drum brakes; dual front advanced airbags; full-length side curtain airbags, fog lights.

**Interior/ Comfort:**

AM/FM radio, single CD player; cloth seats; tilt steering wheel; leather wrapped steering wheel; 60/40 folding rear seats.