

## Shifting Gears

### [Smart ForTwo: When Half a Car Is Still a Lot](#)

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It was a small parking spot, even by New York City standards.

The man walking his Scottie paused and looked, with obvious incredulity, as I drove the Smart ForTwo into the gap with room to spare. He walked around the car twice, stopping at one point to hold out both arms and noting his wingspan was about the length of the vehicle.

“How fast can this thing go?” he asked.

“The top speed is 90 miles per hour,” I said. “And I’ve had it at about 85 miles an hour going uphill on the highway.”

“Really?” he asked, quizzically. “What kind of engine fits into that little thing?”

“It’s got a three cylinder engine pushing about 70 horsepower,” was the answer.

“Three cylinders? Seventy horse? That’s just half an engine,” he snorted.

“Well, yeah,” I replied. “But look at it. It’s only half a car. Half an engine works just fine.”

And so it goes for the Smart ForTwo, the ultimate urban vehicle. The \$14,000 car was designed to comfortably hold two large people and little else. As an example of the scale, the Smart ForTwo is just 106 inches long, which is just a shade over eight feet, and weighs 1,808 pounds. The speedy

Mini Cooper S, with a 185-horsepower, four cylinder engine and a top speed of 138 miles per hour, is 146.2 inches long, or just over 12 feet. The more staid Honda Civic Coupe, with a 140-horsepower, four-cylinder engine, is 175.5 inches, or about 14.5 feet. In short, you can fit two Smart ForTwo cars in the standard parking space.



But the Civic and Mini are intended to be full time, go everywhere cars with adequate trunk space for extended getaways. There is a different mission for the Smart ForTwo, which is designed for one main purpose – commuting around the city. Which means the shelf behind the front seats has enough room for a briefcase, some groceries, or an instrument – though not a bass fiddle – and little else. Despite its diminutive size, however, the front seats are more than adequate for a six and a half foot tall, 350 pound passenger whose legs were stretched out, not doubled around his chin.

The Smart is not, however, a traditionally designed sedan which had an unfortunate encounter with a buzz saw. Its style can best be described as perky, with a painted on curve around the doors which resembles a rolling smile. As might be expected, the three-cylinder vehicle is slow to accelerate, taking almost 13 seconds to go from zero to 60 miles per hour. But once it gets rolling, it has not trouble keeping ahead of the normal highway pack. And in city driving, where speed is impossible anyway, the maneuverability of the little Smart is an asset. In addition, the car has an EPA rating of 33 miles per gallon in city driving, and 41 miles per gallon on the highway.



On city streets, motorists and pedestrians do a double take when they see the sporty half-car. On the highway, some motorists find it hard to accept the fact of being passed by something little

bigger than a colorful riding lawn mower. A motorist in a Mercedes E-350 was startled when the Smart passed him at 85 miles an hour, and immediately changed lanes to follow. When I exited at a gas stop he pulled up alongside and yelled “what is that thing and who makes it?”

“It’s a Smart ForTwo,” I said. “And it’s made by the same guys who make yours.”

Smart is a division of Mercedes Benz, with German precision engineering, though it is assembled in the French-German border town of Hambach. In the US, it is solely distributed by the Penske Automotive Group and sold by Smart dealers. Some of these are affiliated with existing Mercedes dealerships.

The engine is in the rear and is mated to a five speed, automatic transmission with an electronic manual mode operated by paddle shifts behind the leather wrapped steering wheel. The Passion Coupe model is a two part convertible. At the touch of a button, the soft top can roll back along a set of roof side rails. It can be opened or closed while at full speed with no problems.

Of, if one wants a completely convertible look, the roof rails over the windows pop out at the touch of a button and store in special slots in the trunk door. If the weather turns ugly, you will have to pull over to reinsert the rails, but the process takes seconds. And the car comes with fog lights for the road, and heated seats to keep you comfortable.

Inside, the Smart is not barren. It has power windows and there is an option for a factory installed navigation system. It has just AM/FM and no satellite radio, but there is a six-disc CD player and jack input for an MP3 or iPod. There are only two speakers and a sub woofer, but that is more than enough for the small passenger cabin.

The Smart ForTwo is not the car you would leisurely drive across the country. It is comfortable enough for the trip, but there is no room for your luggage. But if you want a car just to get around town or get you to and from work, it might be a smart car to look into.



### **2010 Smart ForTwo**

**MSRP:** **\$13,990**

**EPA Mileage:** **33 MPG City** **41 MPG Highway**

#### **Performance / Safety:**

**Top Speed:** **90 MPH**

**0 – 60 MPH** **12.8 Seconds**

1.0-Liter, 3-cylinder, aluminum engine producing 70 horsepower and 68 pound/feet of torque; 5-speed automatic transmission with electronic manual mode with paddle shifts; lower wishbone, McPherson strut, front suspension; DeDion axel, coil spring rear suspension; disc brakes; electronic stability and traction control; rack and pinion steering; 15-inch aluminum wheels, driver and passenger airbags, head/thorax side airbags.

#### **Interior / Comfort:**

Tilt, leather wrapped, 3-spoke sports steering wheel with shift paddles; AM/FM radio; 6-disc CD player; MP3 and iPod connections; 2-speaker and subwoofer sound system; heated seats; fold flat passenger seat; roll-back soft roof; removable roof rails.

