



"If you are planning on robbing a bank, a smart would not make a good getaway car."

The smart fortwo passion cabriolet

Venus: While I always look forward to our test drives, I had been eagerly anticipating this drive since I sat in a smart at the North American International Auto Show. Due to the popularity of the smart, we could only have one for twenty-four hours instead of the usual week for our review vehicles so we made plans to pack as much driving as possible into that period.

Mars: I'd been waiting for this event even longer. I originally drove the first-generation smart in Europe back in 1999, and always thought they would be great in America. Despite several false starts, it finally is truly here. And it couldn't have come at a better time when you consider the gas situation.

Venus: We started our drive at smart's USA Headquarters in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, which is located adjacent to their only Michigan dealership. There we were told it's all about the cars. As a result, the dealerships are designed very carefully in a contemporary, minimalist way that spotlights the cars. Then open environment and white floors create a calm, inviting atmosphere with no pressure. But of course, high-pressure sales aren't needed since they sold all that they could get—more than 10,000—in the first six months of 2008.

Mars: To begin their assault on America, smart has chosen to bring three models, the pure coupe (5% of sales), the passion coupe (62%), and the passion cabriolet (33%). (By the way, the smart's three models are always written in lower case, with no capital letters. Spell check doesn't like that at all.) All are gasoline powered, since the diesel version does not meet current emission standards, and all are equipped with a 5-speed automated manual transmission. As a diesel fan, I had to ask if we would be getting a diesel in the USA. smart officials told me that future plans would more likely include an electric version, possibly as early as 2010.

Venus: There is so much to say about the car itself that we better leave the tech info for a different story or we'll never be able to tell our readers about our driving experience. Before we left, we were warned: be prepared for rock star status. We were also given the answers to the four questions that everyone would ask: Is it safe? Can I fit in it? How many miles to the gallon does it get? And, how much does it cost? The answers are; absolutely, definitely, 41, and \$11,590 for the pure coupe, \$13,590 for the very well-equipped passion coupe, and \$16,590 for a passion cabriolet like we drove.

Venus: Rock star? They weren't kidding! You'd better have your hair and makeup just right because a smart draws a crowd. After the dealership, our first stop was for coffee at a Starbucks. We drew a crowd of 30-some-things before we could even get out of the car. And guess what? We got asked all four questions. Fortunately, we had been well prepared with the answers. Our lunch was delayed while we answered more questions and let interested bystanders try the car on for size. Everyone was amazed how comfortable the car was and how well they fit into it. When we went inside, the questions and interest continued from the staff, who had been peering out the windows.

Mars: Our hotel for the evening, which was located across town, was our next stop. I was amazed how quickly you adapt to the smart, forgetting about its minuscule size. I was merging and passing with the best of them and didn't feel concerned at all about what I was driving. It may be a small car but it doesn't feel small when you are behind the wheel. Amazingly, when we got to the hotel, the doorman was a smart fan. Luckily, he knew how to unlock the trunk to retrieve our luggage. I never would have guessed that we would encounter a smart expert there.



The smart cabriolet's soft-top electronically retracts and can be stopped at any position.



Venus: Later that evening, I convinced Mars to open the top on our way to dinner. The fully automatic soft-top retracts like a Roman shade and can be stopped in any position. For the full top down effect, the roof sidebars can be removed and stored in a special, fitted compartment in the tailgate. Of course, that drew a crowd as well. We had been told that two smarts could occupy a single parking spot. Sadly, we couldn't find a second smart to test that theory.

I have to admit I had some trepidation before I got behind the wheel to begin my portion of the drive. However, I quickly found myself maneuvering easily through traffic. Deciding to throw caution to the wind, I decided to experience paddle shifting for the first time. It was a gas! Of course, I had a little bit of an edge because the arrow on the instrument panel told me when it was time to shift up. However, I quickly developed my own rhythm and didn't need the arrow any longer. While I was driving, a car full of teens passed me waving enthusiastically. I loved all the smiles that the smart generated everywhere we went.

Mars: I see we are approaching the end of our column. Unfortunately, we haven't even begun to touch on all the great qualities of the smart. The smart is a car that conserves, rather than consumes, while remaining fun to drive. It is the right car, in the right place, at the right time. It is cool, "green," gas-friendly, and provides urban mobility. As we were told, it is on the cutting edge of a trend, as opposed to a fad, meaning that a trend has sustainability. A fad is a whim.

Venus: My words of wisdom? If you are planning on robbing a bank, a smart would not make a good getaway car. •



The interior is surprisingly spacious for a car of this size.

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