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2009 Smart ForTwo City Car.

Overview

The Smart Fortwo is the smallest car sold in the United States. Stretching less than nine feet in overall length, it can be parked in the smallest of spots. Some have famously parked it 90 degrees to curbside without impeding passing traffic and we think it does indeed make for a smart city car.

As its name suggests, the Smart fortwo is a two-seater, designed to transport two people and not much else. The Smart fortwo comes in coupe and convertible versions, both two-door models. It's powered by a tiny 1.0-liter three-cylinder engine paired with a five-speed automated manual and rear-wheel drive. Meant for use in the city, it's capable of speeds of up to 90 mph.

The Smart Fortwo enters the 2009 model year with a few minor refinements and a couple of new options. First launched in the United States in January 2008, the current Smart Fortwo is actually a second-generation version of this product. The first-generation Smart Fortwo has been available in Europe since late 1998.

The Smart is produced by the Mercedes Car Group and sold through stand-alone Smart dealerships and Mercedes-Benz dealers in the U.S. It is imported by Smart USA Distributor LLC, a division of Roger Penske's Penske Automotive Group. Smart USA markets its name in fashionable lower case: smart fortwo.

We think it's best used as a city car. Its small size makes it easy to park and allows it to easily dart in and out of traffic. Designed to offer a low cost of ownership, it's meant to get drivers from A to B without frills. With fuel mileage of 33 mpg in the city and 41 mpg on the highway, the Smart car will appeal to commuters who make short trips by themselves. Its fuel economy numbers aren't as good as the Toyota Prius or Honda Civic Hybrid, but they're better than any other economy car.

At the same time, this car has its compromises. Its small engine wants for power, the transmission shifts awkwardly, the ride is busy, and it lacks a rear seat and cargo carrying capacity. Its owners are often okay with all of that, and in fact are often enthusiastic about it.

On the inside, the Fortwo has a spartan cabin dominated by economy-grade plastics. It is surprisingly roomy, with enough head clearance and leg room for very tall passengers. Shoulder room, however, will be tight for two large occupants. Cubby storage is minimal.



The rear of the cabin is an open hatch area. There isn't as much room as in most trunks and certainly not as much as what you'll find in a compact hatchback, but it has enough space for a trip to the grocery store.

The Smart Fortwo is available in two trim levels and two body styles. All Fortwo models are powered by a 1.0-liter, three-cylinder engine that makes 70-horsepower at 5800 rpm and 68 pound-feet of torque at 4500 rpm. The transmission is a five-speed automated manual that can be set to shift like an automatic or can be controlled manually via the gearshift or available steering wheel paddles.

Model Lineup

The Smart Fortwo Pure coupe (\$11,990) comes standard with cloth upholstery, fold-flat passenger seat, leather-wrapped steering wheel, outside temperature indicator, rear window defroster and wiper, power locks, remote keyless entry, and P155/60R15 front and P175/55R15 rear all-season tires on steel wheels. The Pure does not have a radio, does have provisions for radio installation; two radios are offered as options, both with two speakers. The Smart radio option is an AM/FM/CD unit (\$350), while the premium radio (\$495) is an AM/FM unit with an MP3-compatible six-disc CD changer. Other options include air conditioning with automatic temperature control and a pollen filter (\$600), alarm (\$160), power steering (\$450), heated seats (\$220), metallic paint (\$225), and silver metallic paint for the tridion safety cell (\$175). Daytime running lamps (\$50) are a new option for 2009.

The Passion coupe (\$13,590) adds a panorama roof with a sun shade, air conditioning with automatic climate control, steering wheel shift paddles, power windows, heated power exterior mirrors, an AM/FM radio with CD player, and alloy wheels. In addition to the Pure's options, the Passion offers fog lamps (\$110), a dash-mounted clock and tachometer (\$120), MP3-compatible six-disc CD changer (\$150), and the Smart premium sound system (\$350), which includes six-disc CD changer and replaces the standard two speakers with two tweeters, two midrange speakers and a subwoofer. Also offered is a Comfort Package (\$850) with power steering, heated leather seats, automatic headlights, and a rain and light sensor. New for 2009, a conventional solid roof may be substituted for the panorama roof for no charge.

The Passion cabrio (\$16,990) has a power soft top with heated glass rear window and the five-speaker premium sound system with in-dash six-disc CD changer. The Passion cabrio is also offered with the Comfort Package, as well as the various separate options available on the other models.

Safety features on all Fortwo models include dual-stage front air bags with passenger side occupant sensor, head- and torso-protecting side air bags, tire-pressure monitor, traction control, electronic stability control with Hill Start Assist, and antilock brakes with electronic brake force distribution and brake assist. The Fortwo also has cornering brake control, which applies less braking force to the inner wheels when braking in a turn to help prevent a skid or spin.

Safety features include six air bags, ABS, traction control and electronic stability control.

Walkaround

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According to Smart, this structure has longitudinal and transverse beams that displace impact forces over a large area of the car to protect occupants in a crash. The tridion safety cell is available in black or silver, as elements of it, including the front pillars, are visible from the outside. Smart says that slip tubes up front and a steel rear structure will prevent front and rear crashes of up to 10 mph from affecting the tridion cell. Smart also says the wheels and tires, as well as side braces, will help dissipate energy in a side crash.



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At only 106.1 inches overall, 61.4 inches wide, 60.7 inches tall and 1808 pounds, the Fortwo is the smallest car offered in the United States. By comparison, a Mini Cooper is nearly 40 inches longer and more than 750 pounds heavier. While the length and width are quite small, the Fortwo is slightly taller than a Honda Fit, which gives it plenty of interior headroom.

The convertible's top is power operated and has a heated glass rear window. It has no latches to work and can be operated at any speed. With the top down, a pair of structural beams can be removed from the roof above each door, creating an even freer open air feeling. The up-level Passion coupe is available with a fixed glass roof with a manual sunshade.

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The Smart design features wheels pushed outward to the corners of the car. Up front, the Fortwo seems to be grinning, with its high-set headlights, central grille and open lower fascia that is also home to the optional fog lights. The short hood leads to a tall windshield. Along the sides, the exterior portions of the tridion safety cell trace the shape of each door. The car ends shortly behind the seats, leaving a small hatchback opening at the back and giving both the coupe and convertible an egglike shape.

At only 106.1 inches overall, 61.4 inches wide, 60.7 inches tall and 1808 pounds, the Fortwo is the smallest car offered in the United States. By comparison, a Mini Cooper is nearly 40 inches longer and more than 750 pounds heavier. While the length and width are quite small, the Fortwo is slightly taller than a Honda Fit, which gives it plenty of interior headroom.

The convertible's top is power operated and has a heated glass rear window. It has no latches to work and can be operated at any speed. With the top down, a pair of structural beams can be removed from the roof above each door, creating an even freer open air feeling. The up-level Passion coupe is available with a fixed glass roof with a manual sunshade.

Walkaround

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Interior Features

Hop in the Fortwo, grip the small steering wheel, and you are confronted with a minimalist interior. There are no luxury amenities, and the materials are largely plastic.

Behind the steering wheel is the speedometer, printed on a white background with black numbers. Below it in the same bezel is a digital readout that displays the current gear, odometer, trip odometer, outside temperature and time. An analog clock and a tachometer are available as separate gauges that sprout from the top of the dash in their own pods. There are no water temperature or oil pressure gauges in this spartan interior. For 2009, there is a separate warning light to indicate a loose gas filler cap.

The dash is made of reasonably well assembled plastic, some of which is dressed in cloth that matches the seat upholstery. The climate controls are located at the top of the dash, with sliders for the fan speed and available automatic temperature control. A radio is optional in the Pure

model, but is standard in the Passion. It is located below the climate controls and has large, easy to operate buttons and a central volume knob. The radio and climate controls move easily enough, but they are light to the touch and lack a quality feel.

Interior small items storage space is minimal. It consists of two cupholders in front of the gearshift, a small glovebox, and new-for-2009 expandable storage nets in each door, which replace the rigid map pockets used previously. There is no center console. Small trays are also found on the dash on either side of the steering column. These areas lack rubber mats to hold items in place, so items can slide around rather easily. We would recommend against using these areas for storage.

Though the Fortwo is a small car, there is a lot of room for occupants. Head room and leg room are plentiful. I drove with a 6-foot 6-inch friend who had just enough room in both dimensions. The one dimension that is lacking is shoulder room. The Fortwo isn't very wide, so two linebackers will have a tough time sitting next to each other.

The seats are fairly comfortable, with built-in headrests, but they lack the contour for best long-trip comfort. Visibility from the driver's seat is generally good in both models. The convertible has a smaller rear window and the driver's view to the rear is partially blocked at the bottom when the top is down.

Out back, the coupe's rear glass opens separately and both body styles have a tailgate that folds down to allow for a low liftover height. The tailgate itself opens to reveal a shallow storage tray. Behind the seats there is 7.8 cubic feet of cargo room, which leaves enough space for groceries or a couple of gym bags. Smart says that cargo room expands to 12 cubic feet if the rear hatch area is filled to the roof, and it expands further with an available fold flat passenger seat. You won't be able to haul around TVs in your Fortwo, but it should have enough room for most weekend errands.

Driving Impressions

The small stature of the Smart Fortwo is both a benefit and a curse. Given the short wheelbase, Smart engineers have had to work to make the Fortwo safe and stable. On that count, they've done a good job. By making electronic stability control and cornering brake control standard, Smart has electronically lengthened the wheelbase. While the handling doesn't feel sporty, the Fortwo never feels like it's going to tip over, even if you charge into a turn. And while it's not best suited for the highway, it feels planted at highway speeds.



The Fortwo is most at home in the city, where its small size allows it to pop in and out of traffic, make tight turns, and fit in parking spots other drivers can't even consider.

While the Fortwo is generally fun to drive, it's not nearly as sporty as, say, a Mini Cooper. The steering feels direct and reacts quickly upon initial turn in, then seems to slow. The car leans very little in turns, and recovers quickly to allow for quick changes of direction. With a turning circle of only 28.7 feet, the Fortwo can turn around in the middle of a city street to get to that parking spot in the opposite direction. The brake pedal feels a bit stiff, but we found that the brakes were easy to modulate and provided quick, confident stops.

As might be expected given the short wheelbase, the Fortwo's ride is firm and busy. Most road imperfections can be felt, and the car is prone to lots of up and down motions on broken pavement. However, we were never jarred or jolted, and we wouldn't call ride quality a deal breaker if we were considering this car.

The Fortwo is one of the slowest cars on the road today, but it's still not a moving traffic jam. Smart quotes a 0 to 60 mph time of 12.8 seconds, which is quite slow, but the three-cylinder engine delivers sufficient thrust for the car to keep up with the flow of traffic. It can even hold its own on the highway. It gets up to highway speeds reasonably well, and feels stable, though darty and jittery, at 65 mph.

The five-speed automated manual transmission works like an automatic in that the driver has no clutch, but it feels like a manual, with pauses between gears. It can be set to shift automatically or the driver can choose the shifts via the gearshift or a pair of steering wheel paddles. We preferred to use the manual mode because it allowed for greater control. The pauses between shifts in automatic mode are annoying, mostly because you don't know when they're coming. The pauses are still there in manual mode, but you control them.

When we drove the Fortwo on the highway, we found the transmission only wanted to downshift one gear when power was needed, which made it hard to keep up with traffic. Switching to manual allowed us to downshift to lower gears, but with only 70 horses on tap, the Fortwo struggled on long slopes. And any passing maneuvers required lots of room and enough time to build up speed.

While power isn't the Fortwo's forte, fuel economy is. According to 2009 EPA estimates, the Fortwo gets 33 mpg in the city and 41 mpg on the highway. That's better than other economy cars and close to hybrid performance without the expense of a hybrid powertrain. By comparison, the Honda Civic Hybrid gets 40 mpg city and 45 highway, and the 1.5-liter Toyota Yaris gets 29/36. However, Smart recommends premium-grade fuel.

Summary

The Smart Fortwo will not be the best choice for drivers that need an all-around vehicle to haul people and cargo, but it will work as a second car or city vehicle. It's generally fun to drive. The pricing doesn't make it an outstanding deal off the showroom floor, but the Smart Fortwo should be inexpensive to operate and help owners leave a smaller carbon footprint.



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