



Fiat 500 ▲



Scion iQ ▲



Mazda2 ▲



TOY CARS FOR AMERICAN MEN

Design is more important than size

[BY SAM SMITH]

If you are a man in America, you want a few things: a decent hamburger. A clean garage. An insightful television show about the events of the day that doesn't involve yelling. And while we try not to talk about it, everyone wants to feel cool.

Like most innate desires, this want sometimes defies logic or practicality. Ever worn a cell-phone holster on your belt? Ordered chardonnay at a bar? Chardonnay tastes good and cell-phone holsters make sense. But both make us feel ridiculous, so we avoid them at all costs. Same with Segways, the elliptical machine at the gym, and the kids' menu.

Then, of course, there's the big one: We don't do dinky wheels.

That's the thing about small cars—they usually make you look small. While fuel economy, convenience, and green cred are important, no man wants to buy something

that makes him look like a jackass.

And yet for all the failed minimodels over the years—remember the Yugo and the AMC Gremlin?—there are some exceptions: the Volkswagen Beetle, which looked like Eleanor Roosevelt in a bowler but made everyone from janitors to physicists feel smarter. The first Honda Civic, which blew off Detroit's '70s excess and used technical subtlety to make cheapskatery hip. And the Mini Cooper, which proved that speed and irreverence could overpower anything, including the ability of a Union Jack decal to make you look like a colonized eunuch. These mechanical midgets worked because they were larger than life. Size matters, but image matters more.

Three new asphalt tiddlers key in on this idea. At the top of the heap is the 140-inch-long Fiat 500 (101-hp I-4; \$15,000; 38/42 mpg, estimated), a chipmunk-cheeked tribute to Italy's postwar runabout of the same name. The 500 (pictured left) is classic Italian half-pint—getting into the rear seat is like stuffing yourself into a Pringles can, but the front-mounted four is funky and rev happy, and corners are snarfed up in zooming, giddy lunges. Think of it as *Roman Holiday* colorized by a bunch of cracked-out Apple engineers, or maybe a Dean Martin album breathed on by Lady Gaga. Drive a 500, you're simply a guy who likes stylish minimalism, no strings attached.

Two other fresh runts, the Mazda2 (100-hp I-4; \$14,730; 27/33 mpg) and the Scion iQ (90-hp I-4; \$15,000; 36/41 mpg, estimated), both hail from Japan. The Mazda shares a platform with the Ford Fiesta but is about 270 pounds lighter and a razor-sharp handler. The Scion is essentially a Smart Fortwo done right, with a usable backseat, a pillowy ride, and none of the Smart's math-geek-on-acid vibe. Like the Fiat, both offer adult bones that hang around long after the clown-car novelty wears off. You end up feeling as if you've downsized because it makes sense, not because someone told you to.

At the end of the day, that's the greatest hurdle—coming to terms with driving what my smart-assed southern grandmother once called a "road gnome." For ordinary people, the stigma is harsh: In the land of the free refill and the home of the monster truck, small car perpetually equals small steak and slight stature. As with most things, the answer is confidence. Cool is what you make it, so if you're going to drive little, think large. It takes a big man to pull it off, but if you live around here, size is in your blood.

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Ford Fiesta

The Fiesta is the smallest car that Ford sells here, a \$13,995 gem that offers up a soft ride and a whisper-quiet interior. Fiestas of old were tinny, jokey runabouts. In a welcome break from tradition, this is a real car.



Mini Countryman

A high-riding, four-door version of the brand's hatchback with available all-wheel drive. The Countryman is larger than the other cars here, but because it's basically a miniature SUV, the size bump is forgivable. A spacious interior and forgiving suspension are standard, and a grunty turbo four is optional.

Essentially you're driving a detuned backwoods racer for \$22,350. Sort of.

—S.S.