

Need a Ride?

It looks (and accelerates) like a bumper car, but the Smart Fortwo is a joy in the city.

**Car at right not actual size.*

BY ARIANNE COHEN

A decade after Europe got them, the Smart Fortwo is finally working its way into New York; nine dealers in the region now carry the ultracompact, which has a base sticker price of \$11,590. At roughly nine-feet-by-five-feet, it seems perfect for city driving and parking, but can it handle the FDR? I took it to Fairway, Ikea, and up the thruway (with two dogs) to Albany to see if it felt like more than a golf cart.

ON THE HIGHWAY

Fueled by a 70-horsepower engine, the Fortwo's weak pickup makes merging onto the FDR in the rain at rush hour terrifying. But after I got over my urge to floor it (useless given the tortoiselike "automated manual transmission"),

I realized that it's a surprisingly good ride. A bit loud and bumpy, maybe, but it speeds along cleanly up to 70 mph (the maximum is 90). **The biggest problem is other people:** Instead of passing, they press their faces against the glass and mouth, "I like your car."

Who Should Buy a Smart

➔ Frequent renters who visit Hertz or Avis more than 35 days a year (that's ten long weekends). **Payoff time:** Three years.

➔ Drivers shelling out \$400 a month in parking fees. **Tip:** Find a garage (like one operated by Garage Management Company, 212-888-7400) that has a five-foot-three-wide slot behind a pole, too small for other cars, and ask for a discount. **Payoff time:** Five years.

FUEL EFFICIENCY

Not as good as you'd expect. The three-cylinder gas engine gets **40 mpg in the city and 45 mpg on the highway** (I hit 50 mpg on my drive upstate), but with premium gas.

This is double the mileage of most SUVs but only four mpg more than the larger Honda Civic Sedan.

PUBLIC RESPONSE

This is not a ride for the shy. My mother, riding shotgun, was mortified: "**Does it have to be such a bright color?**" she groaned. "Everyone's

looking!" Weeks after I returned the car, neighbors, doormen, and the nearby construction guys still ask about it.





SAFETY

Fatalities are always higher in smaller, lighter cars, but most safety ratings put the Fortwo on par with the Toyota Sienna van. **The most notable hazard is that you're almost always in someone's blind spot.** The solution: prophylactic honking.

SPACE

Despite the small tires and steering wheel, **the car feels normal size because it's quite tall**, with high, comfortable seats and more-than-adequate leg room (I'm six-foot-two). Numerous Fairway bags fit into the 7.8-cubic-foot trunk (as did my two dogs), and you can transport large Ikea shelving units if you're willing to lower the front seat and open the back window.

DESIGN

Brilliantly intuitive. There are cubbyholes on either side of the steering wheel for stashing keys and wallets. The passenger seat rests six inches behind the driver's seat to give the driver more arm room. **The polycarbonate sunroof covers nearly the entire ceiling, making it feel like a skylight.** The clutchless manual stick-shift, along with "plus" and "minus" panels on the steering wheel and a "shift now" arrow on the console, is like shifting for dummies.

PARKING

Teasingly narrow spaces that so often befuddle parkers—the buffer zones straddling fire hydrants and corner crosswalks; the sliver of curb between driveways; the not-big-enough spots left over by double-space hoarders—are suddenly viable options. (You could literally park this car in your nine-foot office. Though it's illegal in New York, **some Smart drivers even pull perpendicularly, like motorcycles, into curbside spaces.**)

Around the corner from my favorite taco shop in Hell's Kitchen, I reared up next to two tightly parked SUVs. A shocked pedestrian watched as **I paralleled in without hitting either of the cars.** Then he clapped.

I never had trouble finding a spot near my apartment either. For the first time ever, I could see myself owning a car in the city.

MAINTENANCE

The outer color panels are easily swapped, **saving you hefty body-shop fees if you get a dent.** The catch: If you find yourself beyond

the metropolitan area, nowhere near one of the region's nine Smart dealers (go to Nymag.com for a full list), you're looking at a wait.