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FEATURES **European First Drive: 2005 Smart Forfour Brabus**

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A larger front spoiler and 17-inch alloy wheels further toughen the Forfour's appearance. Just a few feet from where

Europe's Baddest Benz Builders Give a Performance Injection to Tiny Smart

By: [NICK KURCZEWSKI](#)
Date Posted 09-19-2005

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Asking an American to convert kilometers to miles per hour on the fly is like asking a dairy cow to do trigonometry. Thus, it was not until late in the evening that yours truly calculated exactly that I had hit 145 mph in the Brabus-tuned 2005 Smart Forfour on German *autobahnen*. Now I understood the surprised expressions from Audi, BMW and Mercedes drivers. No one expects a Smart car to pass them going 145 mph.

Blame Brabus

Had the famed German tuning company tweaked Smart's otherwise humble Forfour sedan with anything less than its exceptional level of quality, I might not have been so brave. For those unfamiliar with Brabus, the Bottrop-based company has been making Mercedes-Benzes go a lot faster for over 20 years. Every vehicle associated with the three-pointed star — from G-wagens to the SLR supercar and even the

mighty Maybach — has received some degree of Brabus modification.

Suffice it to say, Smart could do no better when looking for a company to significantly up the performance bar of the Forfour.

Taking It to the Strasse

So, Brabus knows a thing or two about creating high-velocity DaimlerChrysler products. Can this translate to the Smart Forfour, a vehicle built for urban driving, ease of parking and frugality?

In base form, the Forfour has a 64-hp, 1.0-liter, three-cylinder engine — not the most obvious candidate for tuning. Brabus tossed it aside and swapped in a 177-hp, 1.5-liter, turbocharged four-cylinder. It is an engine unique to the Brabus model and causes 0-60-mph times to tumble from over 15 seconds with the 1.0-liter three-banger, to a whisker under seven. With a curb weight of 2,400 pounds the car feels eager, with a smooth buildup of torque and turbo boost as the rev counter sweeps up to the horsepower peak at 6,000 rpm.

Even better than the available grunt is the Forfour's feeling of heft, both in the car's structure and all major controls. The clutch, brakes, gas pedal and five-speed manual shifter work with the same weight to them, like they were tuned by one expert engineer rather than by committee. Steering is electronically assisted and maintains a robust feel. This does not mean that there is Porsche Boxster, or even BMW 3 Series, levels of information being transmitted to the driver's fingertips. However, Brabus' superb-looking, incredibly comfortable, and thick-as-a-pregnant-python sports steering wheel goes a good ways toward alleviating the desire for more feedback.

Up front is a capable suspension system of wishbones, MacPherson struts and antiroll bar that soaks up jolts and bumps. Meanwhile, the simpler (i.e. cheaper) rear system is like an overeager and uncoordinated kid tripping on his shoelaces trying to keep up. On several occasions, a bump easily absorbed in the front had the back end jolting high enough to elicit unprintable exclamations from both driver and

passenger.

Whether reveling in life without speed limits on the autobahn, or slowly prowling the streets of Düsseldorf in search of the best currywurst, the Forfour Brabus has that intangible sensation unique to expensive cars. Inside the cabin are Brabus logos aplenty. They are on dials, the floor mats, the gear knob and dashboard. Added to this is a tasteful sprinkling of silver plastic details on the dials and doors, leather seats and two fixed-glass roof panels.

Why fixed-glass panels? A good question, especially considering that the Forfour employs Smart's steel "tridion safety cell." This is a stretched version of what's found in other Smart models and includes solid side members and sills to give a very strong vehicle platform, easily capable of handling the power offered by the Brabus model without sacrificing interior space. It is a shame then that the doors shut with a clang, not a thunk. Everyone who got out of the car ended up closing the doors once, twice, sometimes *three* times. They never felt shut.

High Style and Sticker Price

Brabus did an excellent job of making a cute car look menacing — the automotive equivalent of a snarling dachshund. The suspension is lowered 3 centimeters and is coupled to an aggressive front spoiler with twin diamond-pattern mesh intakes. Chrome-plated twin exhaust tips peek out of the rear diffuser and the rear spoiler is purported to reduce aero-lift by up to 50 kilograms. Lowered rocker panels and Brabus' gorgeous 17-inch Monoblock VI alloys with low-profile 205/40 front and 225/35 Michelin Pilot Sport tires complete the look. Even the engine looks good, with its bright-red cam cover and — you guessed it — bold Brabus lettering. On top of all these goodies is Brabus' own 3-year/100,000-kilometer warranty.

We've avoided the subject for as long as possible. There is no more getting around the fact that the Smart Forfour Brabus is an expensive little car. At 24,900 euros (\$30,700) it is pitched against heavy competition, jutting even into lower-spec Audi A4 and BMW 3 Series territory. Yes, it comes loaded with features such as satellite/navigation (a huge asset in Germany, where street names seem to contain

every letter of the alphabet), power everything, and front and side airbags.

Pricey Smart or Cheap Brabus?

During my weekend with the car, the citizenry of Düsseldorf and the surrounding environs gave the car plenty of looks and enthusiastic comments. Germans know Brabus, and Brabus is cool. Despite recent financial difficulties and model shake-ups, Smart also remains high on the car cool-o-meter. Viewed as the most expensive Smart car, the 2005 Forfour Brabus is far from the most rational purchase. On the other hand, when seen as the cheapest way into the world of Brabus-tuned vehicles, it makes a heck of a lot more sense.