

# THE EXTRA MILE

**Disappointed with a local restoration firm, Rivai Tan decided to find a specialist he knew he could trust to rebuild his 1992 Cooper – regardless of distance.**

Words Jeff Ruggles Photography Matt Woods

**T**he numberplate police must love this one. A red Rover Cooper, on black and silver plates with a 1969 'H' suffix? A spot of foul play, perhaps? But hang on, because there appears to be one too many numbers in there, making this particular plate a little more crammed than usual. That's the first clue that this traditional British icon, captured in a traditional Lancastrian town, is an awfully long way from its regular home.

So what's the deal? This super-clean 1992 SPi Cooper has just emerged from a restoration at Mini Sport, but this wasn't simply a case of taking a tired car to the nearest specialist. Instead, this one involved a journey by sea from the other side of the world – Singapore, to be precise. Owner Rivai Tan had been left disappointed by the work of a local restoration firm, and with his first child on the way, he decided to send the car overseas. That may sound a little extreme of course, but with the licence to own a car in Singapore costing a potential £35,000 every 10 years, you may as well ensure it's as good as possible.

## THE BUG BITES

Rivai's enthusiasm for the Mini really kicked off about seven years ago, when he saw a picture online. "It's a strange thing because it wasn't even the first time that I had seen a Mini, but I was absolutely smitten," he says. "I loved everything about it. The looks, the history, the philosophy behind it. After that it was down the slippery road of more internet research, a *Mini Magazine* subscription, Mini books, Mini toys, T-shirts and more..."

This Cooper, nicknamed Kopi, is the only Mini Rivai has ever owned. He estimates there's only around 20-30 Minis left in





## THE BUILD

After the car was shipped to Lancashire from Singapore, Mini Sport discovered plenty of areas that needed attention. It went to town with a full body restoration and respray, before fitting a whole host of new Cooper accessories.



The interior is laden with retro touches and genuine Cooper accessories.



**"To me, the red body, white top and white stripes define the Mini. I wanted to preserve its original character..."**

Singapore, the number decreasing each year. Once the 10-year licence has expired, the price to renew is set by a bidding system. This results in crazy prices, so many Mini owners don't renew and the cars are exported or even scrapped. Consequently, Minis are hard to find and are inevitably expensive when they come up for sale. They don't hang about long either, as Rivai discovered with his Cooper. "I first saw it in 2008," he explains. "It was owned by a Mini specialist garage. When I got there, another fella had just had it brought it around for a test drive. He bought it on the spot! It wasn't until two years later that I saw that it was advertised online again. I called the seller and found out that he was moving back to New Zealand, so I went down to look at the car and a deal was struck."

Initially, everything looked good. "I wasn't an expert in assessing a Mini's condition then, so I did a pretty cursory inspection," says Rivai. "The paint job was good, there wasn't any bubbling in the paint. And the interior was great as well. It started easily, gear changes were smooth, so I was pretty happy with the overall

condition. I believe that the first owner was 90-something. When he passed away, his family sold it to the Mini garage."

Sadly looks were deceptive, and although the car wasn't going to fall apart, a number of problems prompted Rivai to get the car restored locally in 2013. However, the work was far from satisfactory. "The engine bay wasn't tidied up, the paint job wasn't exceptional, there was loose wiring everywhere and the car creaked about too much," he explains. "Within a couple of weeks I had a clutch fluid leak, the headlamps were working intermittently and the engine was running a bit too rich for my liking. And the handling was nowhere near the legendary reputation of Minis. That's when I decided to work on the car myself."

A simple oil change would reveal just how bad the workmanship was. "Screws of odd non-standard sizes were used to hold the grille together, the spark plugs were black beyond belief, and the sump bolt was of a non-magnetic type and wrong thread size – it's like somebody just shoved it in there with some household sealant," Rivai reveals. "The passenger side door didn't close

properly either. When I asked the restorer about it, he literally said 'oh it happens. Keep slamming it and it'll fit better soon'. I was absolutely appalled."

## ON A BOAT

With his wife expecting, Rivai knew he wouldn't have time to continue working on the Mini and decided to get it properly restored overseas. "I've always known about Mini Sport as a major parts retailer, but I never knew about their restoration services," he says. "When I decided to get the Mini professionally restored, I must have sent out at least six e-mails to what I believed were the top garages in the UK. Only Mini Sport came back to me. Their replies were quick, detailed, and very professional. I have to say I've been very impressed with Chris, Graham and Rob from the Mini Sport team. Coincidentally, Brian Harper was in Singapore around that time. We met up for a quick run through of what needed doing to the Mini, and a coffee later, I had made up my mind."

To get the bodysell up to scratch, The Padiham-based firm's resident bodywork guru Basil Unsworth went the whole hog. New floorpans, a complete toeboard assembly, outer sills, a door step, repairs to the flitch panels and seat crossmember, rear arches, a complete boot floor, rear valance and closing panels took care of the

underside, with a new door, rear quarter, rear panel, A-panels, both wings and a front panel sorting matters on top. With all the new metal welded in place and the bodywork prepared, it was then time for a respray in the car's original paint scheme of Flame Red with a White Diamond roof.

"I struggled for a while with the colour choice," says Rivai. "But before I shipped the Mini off, I drove it to a gas station and there was a bunch of bikers who just absolutely

swarmed the car. One of them said: "Bro, your car is 'legend' man..." and I knew I had to preserve the colour, at least for now. To me, the red body, white top and white racing stripes define the Mini. I wanted to preserve its original character."

Helping to further preserve the character are the Cooper Car Company upgrades, the modern day equivalent of the range that proved so popular during the 1990s. "Before the reintroduction, I was faithfully

It's unmistakably a Rover Cooper, but the fat Minilite wheels and twin exhaust pipes give it a unique look.



Rivai can't wait to get behind the wheel in his native Singapore.



# ROVER COOPER

## TECH SPEC

**BODY** 1992 Mini Cooper SPi bodysell restored with new floorpans, complete toeboard assembly, outer sills, door step, repairs to the flich panels and seat crossmember, rear arches, rear valance and closing panels, complete boot floor, new rear panel, rear quarter, wings, A-panels and front panel, Group 2 race arches, stainless bumpers with overrides and corner bars, spotlights, Aston fuel filler cap, Cooper S decals, John Cooper window decal, wind deflectors. Paint Rover Flame Red with White Diamond roof.

**ENGINE** 1293cc Mini Sport short SPi block, Cooper Car Company 82bhp SPi conversion with Mini Stage 3 1275 SPi head in Cooper Blue, 1.5:1 roller tip rockers, K&N cold-air induction kit, aluminium rocker cover with chrome Cooper car and chrome T-bars, oil cooler with stainless pipes, Manifold LCB Exhaust Manifold in black, Manifold twin-box side-exit twin-upswept exhaust system in black with stainless tailpipes, new SPi radiator, Lucas sports coil, factory-fitted air conditioning set-up, new wiring loom.

**TRANSMISSION** Rebuilt four-speed rod-change gearbox with 3.2:1 final drive ratio.

**SUSPENSION** New powder-coated front and rear subframes, new Moulton rubber doughnuts, Adjusta Rides, KYB AGX adjustable gas dampers, adjustable bottom arms and tie-rods, refurbished top arms, adjustable rear camber/ track brackets.

**BRAKES** 7.5-inch brake assemblies with gold four-pot callipers, billet aluminium drive flanges (front), new backplate assemblies, Superfin drums and Mintex shoes (rear).

**WHEELS AND TYRES** 6x10-inch Minilite wheels with ET-15 offset (Japanese market), Cooper centre caps, Yokohama 165/70x10 A032R tyres.

**INTERIOR** Cobra Classic bucket seats with red piping, MkII Cooper-style rear bench seat, Newton Commercial doorcards, moulded carpet and headlining. New sun visors. Cooper Moto-Lita steering wheel, aluminium gear knob, pedals, door furniture and conversion plaque. New seatbelts, black custom dash with the three auxiliary Cooper magnolia gauges and air conditioning vents, black vinyl centre console.

collecting bits and pieces of the original John Cooper accessories range on eBay,” says Rivai. “I believe I got my hands on the door handles, winders, pedals and clocks. So when I found out the Cooper parts were being introduced again, I asked to complete the collection.”

The main constituent here is of course the engine. Based around a Mini Sport 1293cc short block, the engine has been treated to an 82bhp Cooper SPi conversion, which includes a Stage 3 head, roller-tip rockers, a unique Manifold exhaust and an oil cooler amongst other goodies. Squeezing the latter in place must have caused a few head-scratching moments, as the car retains its factory-fitted air conditioning and it's all very cramped in the engine bay. Nevertheless, it all looks great in there.

In addition to the fresh engine, the gearbox has been rebuilt and virtually all of the running gear renewed. New powder-



Four-pot callipers, KYB AGX dampers, adjustable camber - it's got all the right bits.



The Japanese-market Minilites are still a rare sight in the UK.



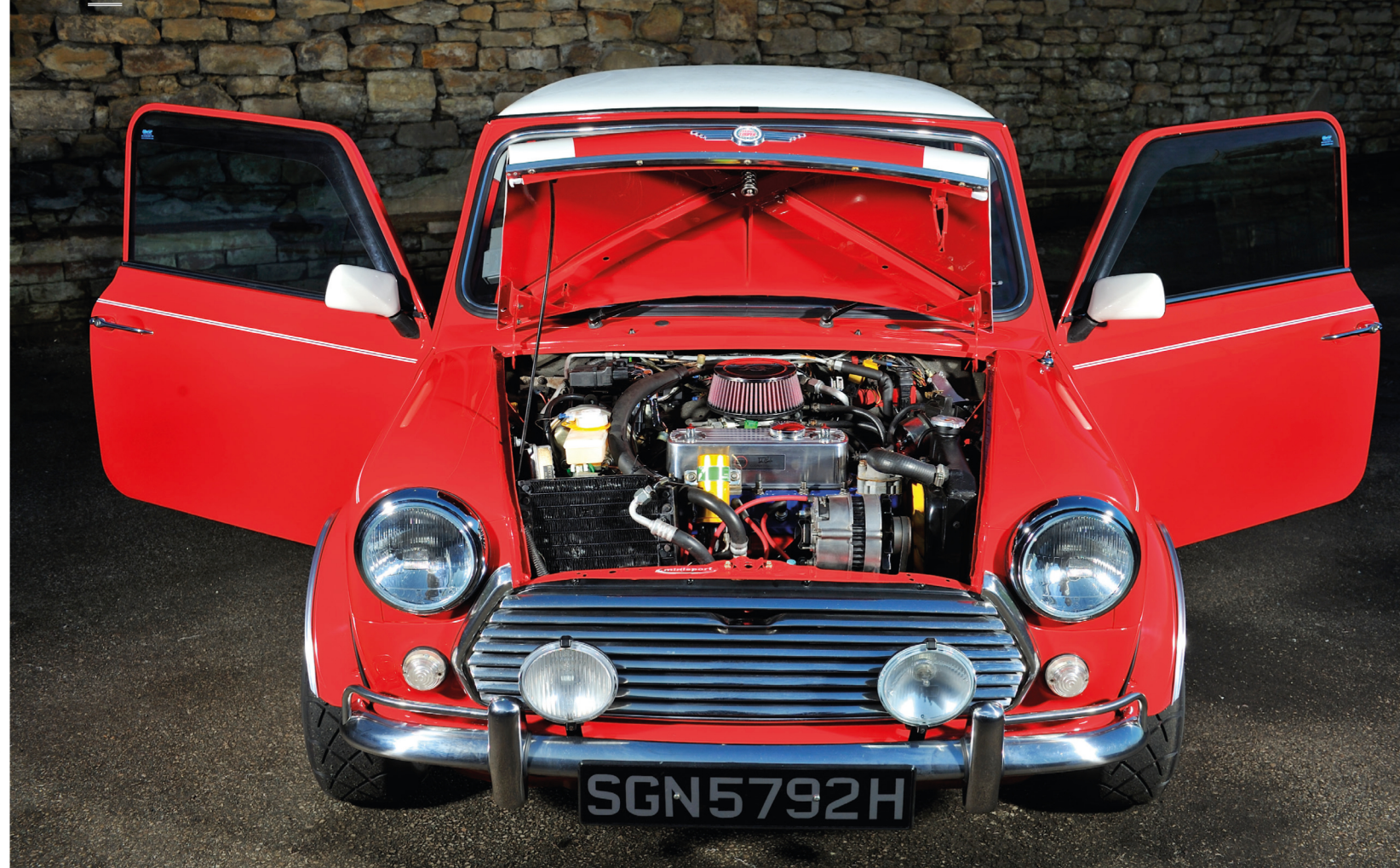
coated front and rear subframes have gone on, complete with Adjusta Rides, new rubber doughnuts and some KYB AGX adjustable gas dampers. Adjustable bottom arms and tie-rods have also been fitted up front, and there are negative camber/track brackets on the rear too. The brakes, meanwhile, are 7.5-inch Cooper S assemblies with gold Mini Sport four-pot callipers at the front, and Superfin aluminium drums at the rear.

The smaller brakes allow for the fitment of one of Rivai's favourite features – the deep-dish genuine Minilite wheels. They're produced for the Japanese market and feature a whopping a ET-15 offset, which means they're ideally suited to the chunky Group 2 race arch extensions that have been fitted. They're pretty rare too; we can't remember seeing more than a handful of sets in the UK, and one of those belongs to us! “I was trawling around The Mini Forum one day, saw these wheels and decided I needed to get them,” says Rivai. “As I mentioned, I'm big on staying true to the philosophy of the Mini, and it felt like it was designed for 10-inches.”

To continue the classic theme, new bumpers with overrides and corner bars have also been fitted. However, aside from those wide arches, the rest of the exterior is unmistakably Rover Cooper, white mirrors, spot lights and all. Naturally the standard



The standard front seats have made way for these retro-style Cobra Classic buckets.



Cooper laurel decals have been upgraded for Cooper S versions, which look just as good now as they did when Cooper Garages was first fitting them back in the 1990s.

The retro touches continue inside, too. Rather than the stock 'Lightening' fabric seats, Rivai has specified a pair of Cobra Class low-back bucket seats with contrasting red piping, which have been combined with a MkII Cooper-style rear bench. Newton Commercial supplied the new doorcards, moulded carpet and headlining, and there's the obligatory Cooper Conversion plaque on the seat crossmember. There's also a Cooper Moto-Lita steering wheel, aluminium gear knob, pedals and door furniture, while the dashboard is unique. Finished in a neat

gloss black, it not only incorporates the three auxiliary John Cooper gauges, but the air conditioning vents too. And because that set-up doesn't allow for a radio to be fitted in the normal location, a smart centre console has been fitted to house it. “The dash had to be custom made because I wanted to fit in the John Cooper clocks and air conditioning, and still retain the space for a radio upgrade,” says Rivai. “Special thanks to Chris (Harper) for making that happen.” After six months of hard graft, the Mini was completed and ready to be sent back to

**“It looks absolutely fantastic... I can't wait to try it for myself!”**

Singapore. It had only just arrived as we spoke to Rivai, but he's understandably delighted already. “It looks absolutely fantastic,” he says. “I had frequent updates from the team, so I saw the different stages that the Mini went through. I trust Chris' evaluation of how it drives, but I can't wait to try it for myself.”

## FAMILY TRADITION

Rivai admits the hardest part of the restoration has been being without his car for the best part of a year, but the wait is over now. In fact, by the time you read this, 'Kopi' should be stretching its Yokohamas under the bright lights of Singapore. Rivai plans to use it as weekend toy, and is looking forward to taking his son Asher, now a year old, out in the car with him. It's hoped that they can work together on the car, and when Asher is old enough, it'll be his turn to get behind the wheel. With that in mind, the classic Mini looks set to be ably represented in Singapore for many years to come.

## THANKS TO:

Rivai would like to thank: “Chris, Graham, Rob and Brian from Mini Sport, my wife Vivian and my son Asher, who's brought so much joy into my life!”