



SMALL TALK

2013 CHEVY SPARK 2LT

MSRP: \$12,245 (BASE) · AS TESTED: \$15,795

How small is big enough? It's the question we tackle with this week's road test of the Chevy Spark.

Spark is a micro subcompact. While cars this size are new to our market, they've been on sale elsewhere for years. Europe, for example, has been dealing with high fuel costs for far longer than we have. They've adapted by greater use of diesel fuel vehicles, and by accepting cars smaller than the norm (and, owing to their geography, their cars were smaller to begin with). So, first we saw the introduction of cars one size smaller than we were used to here (Versa, Fit). And more recently, we've seen cars smaller still — like iQ, Smart and now, Spark.

Like all microcars, Spark is something of a specialty player. It works well in cities, where small size is a big advantage. It'll fit in parking spaces that other cars wouldn't even slow down to consider. It's nimble enough to thread through traffic-occluded streets, and it's good on gas. It's less suited to those functions where bigger is better. Carrying passengers, for example, or cargo.

Spark is offered in LS, 1LT and 2LT trim levels, and the car's styling is geared at grabbing attention. From the aggressive front end (with the "my, what big eyes you have" headlights) to the eye-stretching color choices, the littlest Chevy is bent on making a strong visual statement.

Dimensionally, Spark's numbers define the micro subcompact class. It's just over 12 feet long. To give you a visual yardstick, Spark is about 2 inches shorter than the MINI Cooper, and fully 2 feet longer than the Scion iQ.

The size results in compromise on the inside. I'm 6-foot 1-inch, and while my legs were slightly less extended than I'd like while driving, it was fairly comfortable. With someone my height in



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front, legroom in back is effectively erased, leaving kid-sized room. Cargo space is 11.4 cubic feet — small, but usable and easily accessed through the back hatch. The back seatbacks split and fold, transforming Spark into a

more effective floor plan (two seater with 31.2 cu. ft. of room for gear). But, to get to that flat load floor, you must first move the front seats up, flip down the rear seat cushions down, and remove the headrests. Storage space in the forward cabin fares well, with trays on the dash and center console, the glove box, door pockets with bottle holders and three cup holders

The main gauges sit in a motorcycle-like pod above the tilt-adjustable steering column. Despite its budget price, the Korean-born Chevy demonstrates that an inexpensive car doesn't have to look cheap inside. Granted, the simplicity of controls is easier to achieve on an entry level vehicle, because it doesn't have a lot of bells and whistles on it. However, Spark's interior design is clean, and

even the base model is equipped with air conditioning, power windows and GM's OnStar telematics system.

Chevy's MyLink radio is fitted on 1LT and 2LT models. Driver's use a combination of touch pads and virtual buttons on the 7-inch color touch screen to access various functions. As with other touch screens we've used recently, it often takes multiple taps to get the desired result, which contrasts with the simple efficiency of the HVAC's knob controls.

The sound quality of the upgraded audio system on my 2LT tester was pretty low fidelity, but it did include XM radio, a USB port and Bluetooth audio streaming of Pandora and Stitcher, via your smart phone. Another nice feature is waiting in the wings. During the model year, BringGo navigation will become available. This is an app that you can buy for your smart phone, and then connect with the Spark to display on the car's touch screen. As



Chevy and a few other manufacturers are discovering, one way to integrate new technology into budget cars without breaking the budget is to leave the heavy lifting to the phones that the consumers already have.

Spark is powered by a 1.25-liter four-cylinder engine, which was linked in my car to a five-speed manual transmission. The engine makes just 84 horsepower and 83 lb. ft. of torque. However, it's only tasked with moving 2,269 lb. As a result, the car has adequate power, despite the motor's small displacement. The car takes about 11.4 seconds to get from 0-60. This compares with 11.8 for iQ. As the numbers suggest, passing takes planning, and Spark does best when you use the manual transmission to wind it out.

The EPA estimates for gas mileage predict 32 mpg's city and 38 highway. Given the car's size (and engine size), it's surprising that the highway number wasn't higher. However, it compares with 36/37 for the iQ.

Spark's ride quality is good — perhaps surprisingly so, given the short (93.5") wheelbase. Large bumps will register some impact harshness. The car feels agile if not sporty, and the tidy turning radius quickly rights wrong turns.

The number of micro subcompacts in the U.S. market is still small, so the jury is out on how big the demand will be amongst buyers.

As with others of this breed, Spark's size is the source of both its strengths and its shortcomings. It works best as a city ride or a commuter car; is less suited to carrying passengers and cargo. The purchase price is easy on the wallet, and the thirty-something mileage estimates are a good antidote to gas pains.