

ROAD TEST

2003 Pontiac Vibe GT

Sir Alec's creation is redefined with 'resounding relevance.'

BY TONY SWAN

We should note here that the aside concerning powertrains is a big one. Our tester was a Vibe GT with a 180-hp DOHC 16-valve aluminum VVTL-i (for intelligent variable valve timing and lift) Toyota four-cylinder and six-speed manual transmission from Toyota's Celica GT-S.

There are issues with this engine-trans combo, particularly in a vehicle such as this one. Like some of Honda's high-output VTEC powerplants, Toyota's 2ZZ-GE engine doesn't really start racking up significant horsepower numbers until the tach hits 6200 rpm, and peak output doesn't occur until 7600 rpm. The engine

isn't reticent about letting you know aurally when it's approaching the sweet portion of its power band either, a trait aggravated by gear ratios that need to be a little closer and shifting that needs to be more precise. As it is, keeping the engine above its 6200-rpm *let's-go!* threshold requires revving right to the 8200-rpm redline before upshifting.

It gets way loud inside when you do this, and we wonder whether U.S. buyers, young or otherwise, will really be comfortable with this kind of driving regimen. We suspect not; perhaps most will be happier with the 1.8-liter base engine—Toyota's 130-hp, 1.8-liter DOHC 16-valve four, which also tows the new Corolla. Yes, 130 is a long way from 180, but the milder four makes almost as much torque (125 pound-feet at 4200 rpm versus 130 at 6800 for the GT version), and it allows the option of a four-speed automatic transmission. An auto shifter isn't offered for the Vibe GT (although you can get one with the high-output Matrix), nor does the GT offer the option of all-wheel drive. Vibe or Matrix, the viscous-coupled system is available only with the base engine, and a detuned, 123-horsepower version at that.

Still, with the serious cam lobes online and the valve timing advanced to max, the Vibe GT can do the 0-to-60



THE VERDICT

Highs: Toyota bones, Toyota mechanicals, package versatility, all-around competence.

Lows: Raucous powertrain, vague shifting, quirky nav system.

The Verdict: Another brilliant—and appealing—disguise for the station wagon.



shuffle in 7.3 seconds and cover the quarter-mile in 15.7 seconds at 91 mph. This is respectable by small sports-sedan standards and verges on the phenomenal for a tall, compact wagon. For a contrast, check the top times from our "White Snow and the 11 Dwarfs" cute-ute shootout (March 2001) recorded by the Mazda Tribute/Ford Escape twins, which are propelled by V-6s making 200 and 201 hp, respectively. The Tribute hit 60 mph in 8.2 seconds, the Escape was a smidge quicker in the quarter—16.3 seconds at 84 mph. Our most recent PT Cruiser (June 2000), a Touring Edition with a five-speed manual, produced similar results: 0 to 60 in 8.5 seconds, 16.7 seconds at 82 mph in the quarter.

The Vibe's braking performance isn't quite as noteworthy. Although GT editions come with disc brakes at all four corners (base and all-wheel-drive models are disc front and drum rear), repetitions resulted in progressively longer stops. Still, even though 184 feet from 70 to 0 mph is long by sports-sedan standards, it's midpack among compact sport-utilities, and it would probably improve with the Vibe's optional 17-inch wheel-and-tire package.



COUNTERPOINT

Just as skyscrapers layer maximal floor space onto minimal real estate, tall vehicles pack oodles of passenger and cargo volume in a package that casts a small shadow on the road. The Honda Civic wagon demonstrated that almost 20 years ago. Two years ago, the Chrysler PT Cruiser showed that you could wrap the packaging advantages of a tall wagon in stylish clothing. The Pontiac Vibe goes the next step by adding speed to the mix of style and utility. With 180 horsepower, the Vibe GT is the first tall wagon that can spin its tires as readily as it swallows mountain bikes. It's a great choice if you want driving stimulation to complement your high-adrenaline activities.

—Csaba Csere

Imagine if *Smokey and the Bandit* had used a Vibe GT instead of the Trans Am we tested in April 1977 with the optional 200-hp T/A 400 motor. Burt would have hit 60 mph in the Vibe two seconds faster and knocked out his quarter-miles 1.2 seconds quicker, turning 91 mph instead of 82 mph. Loaded up and truckin', the Vibe tops out at 129 instead of 110; no need to flatten mailboxes or hide behind hearses to lose the sheriff. The Vibe is 970 pounds lighter, so it would presumably jump farther, and there would have been space enough in the back to snog Sally Field and haul home the beer. Now, imagine if they shot *Knight Rider*...

—Aaron Robinson

Despite its slightly bloated look, I still like the overall shape of the Vibe just fine. And except for those goofy fog-light-shaped reverse lamps, I'm thinking the designers got the details right, too. But the coolest part is the rev-happy motor that screams "Asian hot rod" when you stand on it in first gear and stay on it to the redline. When the tach needle swings past the 6000 mark, the horsepower boost—thanks to VVTL-i—feels like a shot of nitrous oxide. A little more grunt in the lower rev range would be nice, but otherwise, it's a very entertaining piece. Look out, Honda. The Vibe could easily become the new darling of the street racers.

—Jeffrey Dworin



Not only is there more footprint—215/50R-17 versus the standard 205/55R-16—but the upgrade tire is a performance-oriented Dunlop versus the standard all-season rubber.

Which brings us to dynamics and deportment. Like the Matrix, the Vibe is a Corolla down there in its bones, a front-drive unibody riding struts up front, a twist-beam axle at the rear (all-wheel-drive models have an independent control-arm setup in back), and anti-roll bars at both ends. Steering is rack and pinion with variable assist.

How does all of this orchestrate on the road? Better than we expected. Like so many all-season tires, our tester's Continentals could be provoked into howls of outrage at the first hint of stress, and grip was modest—0.78 g on the skidpad. But for all their screaming, they never gave up completely, and the damping, though a tad firm, kept the rubber in contact with the pavement on all but the wartiest corners.

The Vibe's cornering attitudes, magnified by its relatively high seating positions, are a little more dramatic than what you'd experience in, say, a Ford Focus ZX3 but are still well short of lifeboat territory, and if the steering is a little slow at 3.3 turns lock to lock, it has decent feel and accuracy.

To give the Vibe its sporty feel, Pontiac tuned its suspension toward the stiff side of the dial, and there's more than a little impact harshness on patchy pavement. But even so, the Vibe's ride quality is well within the range of acceptability for a vehicle operating at the fringes of ute-dom.

So far, we're talking B minus to B. But in the realm of style and packaging, the grades go a bit higher. This is particularly true of the interior, which offers room enough for four adults to trundle around in comfort and has a nice airy feel, thanks to the high roofline. The front buckets would feel right at home in a Celica GT-S, the upholstery fabric is a high-grade mesh knit

that looks a couple price categories classier, and aside from the familiar Luftwaffe-red backlighting, the instrument panel is mercifully free of the usual Pontiac lookit-me-I'm-a-fighter-jock gingerbread.

Like the PT Cruiser, the Vibe's seat-and-cargo setup is minivan versatile. The rear cargo deck has a hard plastic floor that's far better suited to abuse than carpeting, and the split-folding (60/40) rear seatbacks are clad with the same material. Thus, when you flip 'em forward, which you can do without removing the headrests, there's a sizable flat load floor that won't mind hard cargo such as beer kegs, toolboxes, and chain saws. The surface is slippery, but with 16 different tie-down points—eight adjustable cleats set in longitudinal floor tracks, eight D-rings in the walls—cinching stuff down is a cinch. The wide hatch opening makes it easy to get at cargo, and the glass portion flips up separately. There's also ample small-object stowage throughout the cabin.



And the Vibe is indeed stylish. Chief designer John Mack says, "It's unmistakably Pontiac," and if we're not entirely sure about that—a *C/D* family friend wondered if it was a "pneumatic Focus"—we do think the Vibe is a snappy and distinctive interpretation of the tall wagon genre, one that shares almost no exterior sheetmetal with its Toyota counterpart. Although there's plastic cladding on the bumpers, wheel arches, and rocker panels, it's restrained by Pontiac standards and is consistent with the mini-ute look. Beyond that, it does seem to attract the attention of folks in the intended age group, which is the whole idea.

The numbers will probably look attractive, too—a base price of \$16,900 for a front-drive Vibe and \$19,900 for a GT. Add about \$1000 for all-wheel drive, \$600 for the Power Group (windows, mirrors, locks, keyless remote entry), and \$500 for the Sun and Sound package (audio upgrade and power sunroof). There's also a DVD-based nav system, which adds \$1600 and cannot be called user-friendly by any stretch of the imagination.

Although you won't be able to order a sunroof and nav system in the same Vibe,



our pilot-production tester was so equipped, which would add up to \$22,600.

Mack sums it up as "a successful crossover design combining the best elements of an SUV and car handling."

We wouldn't go quite that far. Pit a Vibe

GT against a Ford SVT Focus, and we'll give long odds on which one will be first to the finish line. On the other hand, we'd be hard pressed to argue with the word "successful." The Vibe—and the Matrix—have all the earmarks of winners. ●

2003 PONTIAC VIBE GT

Vehicle type: front-engine, front-wheel-drive, 5-passenger, 5-door wagon

Price as tested: \$22,600

Price and option breakdown: base Pontiac Vibe GT (includes \$560 freight), \$19,900; navigation system, \$1600; Power Group (includes power windows and locks, keyless entry), \$600; Sun and Sound package (includes sunroof and CD player), \$500

Major standard accessories: power steering, A/C, tilting steering wheel, rear defroster and wiper

Sound system: Pontiac AM/FM-stereo radio/CD player, 6 speakers

ENGINE

Type4-in-line, aluminum block and head
Bore x stroke3.11 x 3.60 in, 79.0 x 91.5mm
Displacement109 cu in, 1794cc
Compression ratio10.0:1
Engine-control systemToyota with port fuel injection
Emissions controls3-way catalytic converter, feedback air-fuel-ratio control, EGR
Valve gearchain-driven double overhead cams, 4 valves per cylinder, hydraulic lifters, variable intake- and exhaust-valve timing and lift
Power (SAE net)180 bhp @ 7600 rpm
Torque (SAE net)130 lb-ft @ 6800 rpm
Redline8200 rpm

DRIVETRAIN

Transmission6-speed manual
Final-drive ratio4.43:1
Gear Ratio Mph/1000 rpm Max. test speed
I 3.17 5.0 41 mph (8200 rpm)
II 2.05 7.7 63 mph (8200 rpm)
III 1.48 10.7 87 mph (8200 rpm)
IV 0.17 13.5 110 mph (8200 rpm)
V 0.92 17.1 129 mph (7550 rpm)
VI 0.72 21.9 113 mph (6200 rpm)

DIMENSIONS AND CAPACITIES

Wheelbase102.4 in
Track, F/R59.7/58.9 in
Length171.9 in

Width59.9 in
Height62.2 in
Ground clearance7.9 in
Curb weight2862 lb
Weight distribution, F/R58.8/41.2%
Fuel capacity13.2 gal
Oil capacity4.8 qt
Water capacity7.1 qt

CHASSIS/BODY

Typeunit construction
Body materialwelded steel stampings

INTERIOR

SAE volume, front seat50 cu ft
rear seat43 cu ft
cargo volume, seats up/folded25/57 cu ft
Front seatsbucket
Seat adjustmentsfore and aft, seatback angle, front height
Restraint systems, frontmanual 3-point belts, driver and passenger airbags
rearmanual 3-point belts
General comfortpoor fair good excellent
Fore-and-aft supportpoor fair good excellent
Lateral supportpoor fair good excellent

SUSPENSION

F:ind, strut located by a control arm, coil springs, anti-roll bar
R:ind, trailing arms integral with a transverse member, coil springs, anti-roll bar

STEERING

Typerack-and-pinion, power-assisted
Turns lock-to-lock2.3
Turning circle curb-to-curb35.4 ft

BRAKES

F:10.8 x 1.0-in vented disc
R:10.6 x 0.8-in disc
Power assistvacuum with anti-lock control

WHEELS AND TIRES

Wheel size6.5 x 16 in
Wheel typecast aluminum
TiresContinental ContiTouringContact, P205/55HR-16
Test inflation pressures, F/R32/32 psi

C/D TEST RESULTS

ACCELERATION

	Seconds
Zero to 30 mph	2.8
40 mph	4.0
50 mph	5.7
60 mph	7.3
70 mph	9.7
80 mph	12.2
90 mph	15.4
100 mph	19.6
110 mph	25.3
Street start, 5-60 mph	8.4
Top-gear acceleration, 30-50 mph	12.8
50-70 mph	13.6
Standing 1/4-mile	15.7 sec @ 91 mph
Top speed (drag limited)	129 mph

BRAKING

70-0 mph @ impending lockup184 ft
Fadenone light moderate heavy

HANDLING

Roadholding, 300-ft-dia skidpad0.78 g
Understeerminimal moderate excessive

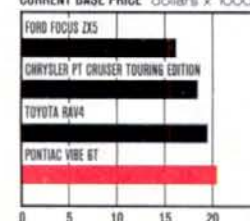
FUEL ECONOMY

EPA city driving21 mpg
EPA highway driving28 mpg
C/D-observed fuel economy22 mpg

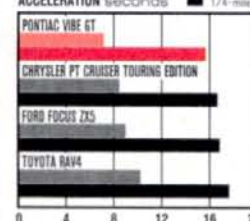
INTERIOR SOUND LEVEL

Idle47 dBA
Full-throttle acceleration79 dBA
70-mph cruising71 dBA
70-mph coasting71 dBA

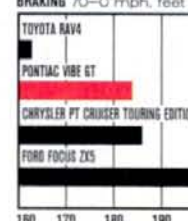
CURRENT BASE PRICE* dollars x 1000



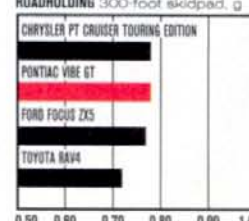
ACCELERATION seconds



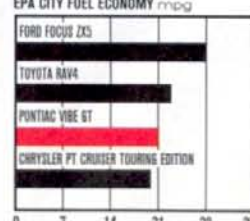
BRAKING 70-0 mph, feet



ROADHOLDING 300-foot skidpad, g



EPA CITY FUEL ECONOMY mpg



*Base price includes freight, any performance options, and all applicable luxury and gas-guzzler taxes.