



PREVIEW

# 2003 Toyota Matrix

A crossover utility vehicle aimed at the young and the young at heart.

BY BARRY WINFIELD

**“Y**oung buyers want a vehicle with a sporty image and high functionality,” says Toyota general manager Don Esmond. That’s the explanation for the Corolla-based Matrix you see here. That and the fact that the median age of Corolla buyers has been climbing of late. To age 44, for Pete’s sake, five years above the median age for a Honda Civic.

Thus, the Matrix: a Ford Focus/Civic Si look-alike wearing well-proven Corolla underthings but with that indefinable air of adventure. With this vehicle Toyota hopes to recapture some of the youth market. By sharing standard drivetrains and platform mechanicals with the Corolla, the Matrix can be built alongside the Corolla at Toyota’s plant in Ontario, Canada.

The Caltz design center’s theme for the Matrix was “street performance utility,” and if that conjures an image of a public toilet for outdoor entertainers, we found that the Matrix looks better the more you see it. There are some interesting contour lines on its sides to foil any slab-sidedness, achieved by what Toyota describes as “sharp surface edges with rounded, weblike contours to create strong, flowing character lines.”

We think the combination of a downward-arching roofline and an upward-arching beltline produces an interesting greenhouse and understates the Matrix’s extra height. That height provides the Matrix with a driver’s seat about two inches higher than in the previous Corolla, and with an impressive 40.6 inches of headroom.

The Matrix also offers good convertibility with its split-folding rear seatbacks, providing ample space for cargo along with eight tie-downs to keep it in place. One can even fold the right-rear and front-pas-

senger seatbacks forward to accommodate long items and still have tandem seating for two. The floor also boasts structural load rails for use with movable tie-down accessories.

The Matrix will be available in three model variants: base, XR, and XRS. The first two use the same 1.8-liter engine and transmissions found in Corollas. The top-of-the-line Matrix XRS is fitted with the high-output (180 hp), high-revving (8200-rpm redline) engine from the Celica GT-S, with that car’s six-speed manual and four-speed automatic transmissions.

The Matrix differs most from the Corolla by offering an optional all-wheel-drive system, which uses a viscous coupling between the driveshaft and rear differential for automatic slip sensing and torque redistribution. It is not, says Toyota’s chief engineer Takeshi Yoshida, an off-road system. It is primarily intended for slippery road conditions.

The 130-hp base engine loses 7 hp when coupled to the four-wheel-drive system, which is not available with the 180-hp 2ZZ-GE engine. That engine was evidently chosen to make the Matrix a more overtly

sporting model. However, it seemed to us the vehicle might have been better served with a bigger, torquier powertrain.

Sitting in a position not unlike that in a small SUV or minivan, we found the frenzied revs and intense sound effects a little inappropriate. There was also something odd about the clutch and accelerator relationship on the prototypes we drove that made smooth coordination slightly tricky.

The Matrix comes standard with 16-inch wheels, and 17-inch wheels are available as an option. Moreover, four-wheel-drive versions get a double control-arm rear suspension. (The standard system on the Corolla and Matrix is a twist-beam axle.) Inside the Matrix is a unique interior, with an asymmetrical center console trimmed in silver and instrument gauges housed in a cluster of silver-rimmed barrels. The gauges have so-called Optitron backlit fluorescent red numerals, and they’re pretty hard to see when wearing sunglasses. But red gauges do that.

The availability of a GPS-based navigation system also differentiates the Matrix from the Corolla. The system uses a 5.8-inch LCD, which has an interesting split-screen function for varying applications, one being to display the current map simultaneously with a schematic of an upcoming intersection.

Like all Toyotas, the Matrix is a carefully designed, impeccably executed vehicle. With compact three-box sedans becoming a harder sell every year, the Matrix provides an adventurous new wrapper for the well-conceived Corolla platform.



**Vehicle type:** front-engine, front- or 4-wheel-drive, 5-passenger, 5-door wagon

**Estimated base price:** \$17,000–\$20,000

**Engines:** DOHC 16-valve 1.8-liter 4-in-line, 123–180 hp, 118–130 lb-ft

**Transmissions:** 5- or 6-speed manual, 4-speed automatic with lockup torque converter

**Wheelbase:** 102.4 in

**Length:** 171.3 in

**Width:** 69.5 in

**Height:** 62.0 in

**Curb weight:** 2600–2950 lb

**C/D-estimated performance (6-sp):**

Zero to 60 mph ..... .73 sec

Zero to 100 mph ..... .196 sec

Standing 1/4-mile ..... .15.7 sec @ 91 mph

Top speed (drag limited) ..... .129 mph

**Projected fuel economy:**

EPA city driving ..... 24–29 mpg

EPA highway driving ..... 29–35 mpg