



PREVIEW

2009 TOYOTA MATRIX

THE SPORTY MATRIX RETURNS. HEY, DID ANYONE EVEN NOTICE IT WAS GONE?

BY STEVEN COLE SMITH PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK ELIAS

» Toyota, notwithstanding its own mid-'90s RAV4, insists the Matrix "started the crossover utility vehicle trend" when it was introduced for 2003.

Built on the Corolla platform, it is sometimes referred to as the Toyota Corolla Matrix to help pump up Corolla sales figures, and since the grand total in 2006 was about 340,000, that seemed to work. Toyota also hoped the Matrix would help attract younger customers, but no luck there: The median age of the Matrix buyer is 52, and for the Corolla proper, 47.

Still, some 50,000 Matrixes a year is 50,000 a year, so the second-gen 2009 Matrix, a mechanical twin to the Pontiac Vibe, is *très* familiar.

Matrix fans will be pleased to hear that the AWD version and the performance-oriented XRS, dumped for 2007, are back. Other models are the Standard and the S. There is,

incidentally, a 2008 Matrix, but production ended in December 2007.

The base engine remains a 1.8-liter four-cylinder that now has variable valve timing on both the intake and exhaust. Horsepower is 132, up six from '08. For the first time, a bigger engine is offered—the 158-hp, 2.4-liter four-cylinder from the Scion xB, although it still has six fewer horses than the last XRS. All but the AWD get a five-speed manual. A four-speed automatic is offered on the Standard; the mid-level S and the XRS get five-speeds, although the S all-wheel-drive model only gets a four-speed. As before, the all-wheel-drive Matrix S is not remotely a sport model, so don't get your hopes up.

The '09 Matrix has the same 102.4-inch wheelbase as the '08 model, but the length has increased a bit, and the senior senator from Idaho may appreciate the slightly wider stance of the '09. The modest growth and

the usual stiffening add up to a weight gain of about 200 pounds.

We drove multiple Matrixes and found that the 2.4-liter's extra torque—162 pound-feet compared with the 1.8-liter's 128—helps move the extra pork. Besides the 2.4, the XRS has the reasonably smooth five-speed manual, stiffer suspension tuning, a strut-tower brace, and 215/45R-18 radials on alloy wheels.

The XRS also has a new independent rear suspension, and we'd like to say that makes a big difference, but it doesn't. The Matrix's electric power steering felt slightly different on every model, ranging from numb to very numb.

Handling was reasonably crisp, the ride smooth except when the low-profile tires dived into a pothole. Toyota's 0-to-60-mph estimate of 8.1 seconds seems a little on the slow side, especially since we tested the original XRS at 7.5 seconds [June 2002].

Otherwise, the Matrix is well screwed together, has a roomy, makes-sense interior and very nice instruments and controls, and, with the optional navigation system, is fairly upmarket. Toyota won't talk price, but we'd wild-guess that a Matrix Standard will start at about \$16,500 and a loaded XRS will certainly top \$21,000.

New but familiar: That seems to work for this company, even if we'd like a little more. Look for the '09 Matrix in early 2008.



VEHICLE TYPE: front-engine, front-wheel-drive, 5-passenger, 5-door wagon

ESTIMATED BASE PRICE: \$16,500

ENGINES: DOHC 16-valve 1.8-liter inline-4, 132 hp, 128 lb-ft; DOHC 16-valve 2.4-liter inline-4, 158 hp, 162 lb-ft

TRANSMISSIONS: 4- or 5-speed automatic, 5-speed manual

DIMENSIONS:
Wheelbase: 102.4 in Length: 171.9-173.0 in
Width: 69.5 in Height: 61.0-61.4 in
Curb weight: 2900-3400 lb

PERFORMANCE (C/D EST):
Zero to 60 mph 7.7-10.0 sec
Standing ¼-mile 16.3-17.5 sec

PROJECTED FUEL ECONOMY (MFR'S EST):
EPA city driving 20-26 mpg
EPA highway driving 26-32 mpg

