# [***Matrix is city slick***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:47KF-PW30-018S-3400-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

Time was, when something held five people and had a tailgate, it was called a station wagon.

But that isn't fashionable anymore, and the folks at Toyota prefer to call the 2003 Matrix a "crossover utility vehicle." Which is a shame, because as station wagons go, this is a pretty cool one.

Built exclusively in Cambridge, and based on the all-new Corolla, the Matrix is a sister to the Pontiac Vibe. Once behind the wheel, I'm seriously in love with the Matrix's instrument cluster. I'm 5 feet, 4 inches, and I've spent most of my life seeing only half the gauges. These are arranged in a semi-circle and are visible no matter how the wheel is tilted.

Torstar News Service

I'm less enthralled by their vivid shade of red, which I found hard on the eyes after a while. But it's an edginess Toyota is counting on to woo younger drivers. Tranquil blue just doesn't cut it with the neon-is-necessity crowd.

The dash is appealing, with metallic accents against a dark, glare-free surface. The stereo is up top and easily accessed. I give the heater controls a big thumbs-up, too. They're big, simple dials that turn easily, even with gloves. And the vents are way-cool. They open and close with a touch on the louvres, and spin to direct the air flow.

The seat, however, is thumbs-down. I've sat in a lot of home-built hot rods, with seats made of a plank and foam rubber. That's exactly what the Matrix feels like. It's tolerable for jaunts around town. But I can't possibly imagine driving this car on a long trip and still having any butt left.

The driving position is perfect for me. I was able to sit back far enough from the airbag and still reach the pedals, and I had sufficient side-to-side room for my legs. But the big-'n'-tall gentlemen I asked to sit in it didn't find it so. Their complaints ranged from a too-narrow seat to a tiny armrest on the door.

Since the small storage console is set back, to allow enough room for the somewhat awkward coffee-cup holders, one also said he didn't like not having a place to rest his right elbow.

That console, by the way, contains a power outlet, so you can hide your ***cellphone*** while it's charging.

A couple of the controls could use some fine-tuning. It's beyond me why the most convenient setting on the rear wiper control simply squirts a stream of washer fluid, without activating the wiper. (You have to go three more clicks to get both at once.) And since my car didn't have rolling locks, the power lock button -- and the interior light wheel -- should light up with the headlights on.

The rear seats offer more space than I expected, although if the front seats are set back or reclined, bigger passengers might be cramped. You're not going to haul four happy football players in this car, even with the expansive headroom.

Fit and finish is generally good, with no squeaks or rattles, although my tester had a discrepancy in dash fit against the windshield pillars, and the passenger visor mirror was improperly installed.

Matrix shines in the cargo department, of course. With the rear seats upright, I got 13 bags of groceries in the back, and could have put in half that many again without cracking the eggs. Under the floor is a small storage area around the spare tire, and a spot to stow the security cover, when you're not using it to keep your belongings from prying eyes.

The 60/40 rear seats flip forward to form a 1.4 metre (58 inch) long flat floor. The passenger seat also folds, to open the car 2.4 metres (8 feet) to the front. With both passenger seats down, and one rear seat up, I can haul both the lumber and the husband to carry it.

The folded-down floor is hard plastic, so it's easy to slide cargo in. Toyota thought about how to keep it in place, too. There are eight tie rings in the body and more in the floor (along with child-seat tether anchors). But, cleverly, there are also deck rails in the floor. Movable loops, with tie-down straps, can be used to secure the load no matter where it is.

A nice touch is a relocking feature on the keyless entry. If you open the car with the electronic fob but don't get in it for a few minutes, it locks again. Great for the days when you'd forget your head if it wasn't screwed on.

Under the hood is a four-cylinder, 1.8-litre engine that is noisy but efficient, if a bit sluggish. The engines are rated from 123 to 180 hp, depending on the model and driveline (it comes in Matrix, XR and the top-of-the-line XRS, and two- or four-wheel drive). I had 123 horses to motivate the "4WD" wagon, but it's a moot point; it's made at 6000 rpm, which I only hit momentarily by mashing the pedal. That'll get you out of tight spots.

In reality, it'll get those 13 grocery bags home without breaking the gas budget. Once up to speed, it moves along quite well. I frequently found myself checking the speedo to discover I'd passed the legal limit 20 km ago.

I spent $31.09 at 73.5 cents a litre (I never need fuel on cheaper days) to go 410 km. That gave me a real-world figure of 10.36 litres per 100 km in winter driving, with the four-speed automatic transmission.

My tester had a "4WD" badge on the tailgate, but it really isn't. Toyota calls the system V-Flex; it has a viscous coupling at the rear differential. In plain English, it's a front-wheel-drive car most of the time. If the front wheels start to slip, the back wheels start to turn.

It's a good system; when I gave it a shot of gas on my snowy driveway, I could feel the back wheels bite in. It gives the traction advantage of four-wheel-drive, but without the gas consumption when you don't need it. Whether it's worth the extra $3,670 will depend on your driving habits and conditions. Just remember that it's meant for slippery streets, not off-road capability.

The Matrix comes with a 36-month/60,000 km warranty and roadside assistance on the complete vehicle, and an additional 60/100,000 on the powertrain.

Base price for the 2WD version is $16,645. My 4WD version started at $20,315, with a $2,730 package including 16-inch alloy wheels, cruise control, remote-control mirrors and keyless entry (but no power windows). With freight and delivery it came to $24,040.

I really liked the car, but I'd prefer to see at least two grand come off that before I call it good value.

It's a cool, edgy package wrapped around a versatile cargo hauler that's perfect for city life, if not necessarily for long-haul trips. In short, a pretty good station wagon.

**Graphic**

Photo: The made-in-Canada Toyota Matrix is a car made for life in the city. It gets good fuel mileage and has enough room to haul around the groceries or golf clubs.

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