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Makeover gives Matrix power boost and fresh look

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Canada's compact car segment is a key battleground for automakers, accounting for 26 per cent of all cars sold last year. Toyota is a big player in the compact wars, so any redesign of its "foot soldiers" is important to both the brand and consumers.

Toyota has given its sporty Matrix compact crossover a complete makeover, the first since it originally debuted in 2002 as an '03 model. In addition to retaining the functionality and sporty dynamics of the original Matrix, the new edition adds a fresh look plus enhanced power, improved handling, more standard features and a lower price than the comparable 2008 base model. The 2009 Matrix starts at \$15,705, \$1,495 less than the previous version.

Toyota is offering the made-in-Ontario (Cambridge is the sole source for this vehicle) Matrix in four trim levels -- base, XR, XRS and AWD, the last marking the return of all-wheel drive after this feature was dropped in 2007.

The tester was the revived AWD iteration with the optional XR Sport Package, which added vehicle stability and traction control systems, 17-inch alloy wheels with sporty P215/45R17 tires, an upgraded audio system, a power sunroof, additional body trim and other upgrades. The package boosted the price to nearly \$28,000 from the base \$22,330, but you could skip the add-ons and still enjoy the sure-footed benefits of all-wheel drive in a nicely equipped vehicle for less than \$23,000.

The main reason Toyota abandoned all-wheel drive on the old model was because it wasn't selling -- and the reason many consumers were giving it the cold shoulder was the notion that its four-banger was wimpy. That issue has been addressed with the addition of a larger 2.4-litre four-cylinder under the hood. In fact, this more powerful engine (158 horsepower and 162 foot-pounds of torque) is standard across the lineup, except for the base Matrix, which makes do with a 1.8-L four that puts out 132 ponies and 128 ft.-lbs. of torque.

A five-speed manual transmission is standard on all front-drive models.

Interestingly, Toyota offers a five-speed automatic with the larger engine for the XR and XRS, but it reverts to a four-speed autobox for the AWD model. While the tester's performance was satisfactory, the addition of a fifth gear would have enabled Toyota's engineers to revise the ratios, adding a bit more sportiness at lower speeds without sacrificing fuel economy.

The transmission choice also seems a bit odd, given Toyota chief engineer David Terai's passion for performance. For example, he insisted that the Matrix have disc brakes all around, unlike its redesigned Corolla sibling, which gets a front disc/rear drum system on most models. He made that choice because he expected Matrix buyers, who are typically more performance oriented, would appreciate the better braking the all-disc system delivers.

Handling, too, has a more sporty feel than in the Corolla, especially with the 17-inch, 45-series tires fitted to the tester. While the slim side walls didn't absorb road irregularities as well as the standard all-seasons, the revised suspension system, with struts up front and a double wishbone setup in back, was still compliant enough to provide a comfortable ride

over cracks and heaves left over from a brutal winter.

On the highway, the car felt firmly planted and exhibited little body roll when driven briskly on access ramps.

The Matrix gets a new electrically assisted rack-and-pinion steering system for 2009, eliminating the power-robbing hydraulic box previously used. It provided enough feedback to let the driver feel what was happening up front, while the power assist made the Matrix a breeze to wheel in and out of tight spots.

The redesigned interior will handle up to five adults, but four is a more comfortable limit. The new front seats are quite comfortable and supportive, even on long runs, and their positioning allows for plenty of headroom, even for a six-footer. A handy standard feature is a tilt and telescopic steering column, ensuring most drivers will be able to find a safe, comfortable position behind the wheel.

Like other members of the Toyota clan, the Matrix does not offer heated seats, even as an option. The reasoning, so I'm told, is because no leather option is available. I'm not sure what that has to do with providing a heating element in the seat cushion. Other manufacturers, such as Subaru, have figured out how to offer heated, cloth-covered seats.

Overall, the '09 Matrix is a well-crafted vehicle that offers practical utility in a package that looks -- and drives -- with a sporty flair.

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The Specs

Type of vehicle: All-wheel drive, compact crossover

Engine: 2.4-L DOHC four-cylinder

Power: 158 h.p. at 6,000 r.p.m.; 162 ft.-lbs. of torque at 4,000 r.p.m.

Transmission: Four-speed automatic

Brakes: Four-wheel disc with ABS

Tires: P215/45R17 all-season (optional)

Price: base/as tested: \$22,330/\$27,995

Destination charge: \$1,140

Transport Canada fuel economy L/100 km: 10.3 city, 7.7 hwy.

Standard features: Tilt and telescopic steering column, air conditioning, AM/FM/CD audio system with MP3/WMA capability, four speakers and auxiliary input jack, dual-stage front and front side-impact airbags, front and rear side curtain airbags, active front headrests, reclining front bucket seats with driver's side manual height adjustment and passenger fold-down seatback, 60/40-split rear bench, power windows, power locks, Optitron gauges, roof rack, keyless entry, tire pressure monitoring system.

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