

City Drive: 2009 Toyota Matrix S

Written by Frank S. Washington
Monday, 19 January 2009 16:22

DETROIT, MI -- Sometimes when test driving a car you get caught in real world conditions and you find out how good a vehicle really is on a day-to-day basis. That's what happened with the 2009 Toyota Matrix S.

I think I had the car for a couple of days when it snowed a good foot and then the fluffy stuff was topped off by brutally cold weather. Temperatures never got north of 20 degrees and at night they were in the single digits.

The Matrix S was a compact five door sedan (read hatchback) but most importantly, it had front-wheel-drive. In my opinion, front-wheel-drive is the second best drive train other than putting power to all four wheels when it comes to snow.

Not once did the Matrix get stuck or even come close to needing a push. The trick to driving in snow is weight and motion. Even when driving a small car, use its weight to improve traction and sometimes let the car go where it wants. This is particularly effective when literally sliding (slowly) through turns.

That equation worked well when it came to the Matrix S. In snowy conditions power is not necessarily your friend. The Matrix S was equipped with a 2.4-liter four cylinder engine that made 158 horsepower and 162 pounds feet of torque. This was more than enough oomph given the conditions.

The car was parked outside for the week. I was impressed that the Matrix S started smartly every time I turned the key. And its cloth seats were a pleasant change from leather, pleather or some other animal skin. In other words, cloth does not get anywhere near as cold as leather in frigid weather.

When it's frigid, key pieces of equipment in any vehicle are the heater and the windshield wipers. The Matrix S warmed up a little slower that I would have liked. But then again it was four degrees. However, the wind shield wipers cleared the snow away and kept the windshield snow free with no problem. And the rear wiper created enough clear space for a reasonably clear view of what was behind me.

My test vehicle had a four-speed automatic. It's the only transmission available in the S model. Other Matrix models can be equipped with either a five-speed manual or a five speed automatic transmission. All-wheel-drive is also available.

City Drive: 2009 Toyota Matrix S

Written by Frank S. Washington
Monday, 19 January 2009 16:22

It was a waste of time trying to get a grip on ride and handling. I was just happy the car started and didn't get stuck once I got going. But the Matrix S was relatively easy to drive even in lousy conditions.

Expressway traffic was nowhere near normal. But the Matrix S accelerated well, changed lanes as quick as conditions would allow and the brakes worked pretty well on the slippery, slushy, snowy streets.

The car was "wired" for satellite radio (it wasn't fully connected), it had an in-dash six disc CD player with WMA/MPA capability, and it had some steering wheel controls for the audio system, which wasn't bad for a compact car.

Gas mileage, a concern even with the low price of petrol, was 21/29 mpg in city/hwy driving. Toyota said the expected range was more like 17/25 mpg. I opted to put some gas in the car the night before it was to be returned. Most fuel gauges will let you know that you're in the reserve tank. But not this one and that was my only real complaint.

The needle was a smidgen from E and there was no warning light, nothing. So I chose caution and put some gasoline in the Matrix S. The last thing I wanted to do was run out of gasoline while it was 10 degrees.

Anyway, the base price of the 2009 Toyota Matrix S was \$19,550. Add on extras and shipping and the total price of my test vehicle was \$21,539. These days, the Matrix is shaping up to have broad appeal, especially when the price of gasoline goes up.