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2009 Toyota Yaris Our top choice for affordable transportation.

Overview

The Toyota Yaris is the lowest priced Toyota and the model that best represents the value of good, basic transportation. But, the Yaris is better than just good. It boasts handsome looks, pleasant road manners, perky performance, and a well-tailored interior.

For 2009, the biggest change is the addition of a five-door Liftback model to the lineup, which includes the three-door Liftback and the four-door Sedan. This makes the Yaris the only vehicle in its category to offer buyers three distinct body styles.

All 2009 Yaris models now come standard with anti-lock brakes, front seat-mounted side airbags and front and rear side-curtain airbags. Cruise control is available on 2009 Liftback models and audio systems are satellite-capable.

All Yaris models combine an inexpensive sticker price, outstanding fuel mileage and the solid integrity that underlies every Toyota. While some of the hybrid-powered vehicles offer superior fuel economy, they're significantly more expensive than the Yaris, so it would require many miles at very high fuel prices to balance that equation. When viewed in terms of total ownership costs, the Yaris is one of the least expensive new cars available today.

We've found the Yaris practical and enjoyable to drive. The cabin is roomy, the seats are comfortable and the interior fabrics are quite nice. relative to the price point and the seats are comfortable. Around town, the Yaris excels as a runabout, dashing about wherever you need to go, with agile handling and the sort of responsive performance useful in heavy traffic. It keeps up with freeway traffic well and makes for a superb commuter car.

The 2009 Toyota Yaris comes in three-door Liftback, five-door Liftback, and four-door Sedan body styles. All Yaris models are powered through the front wheels by a 1.5-liter engine with an output of 106 horsepower. A five-speed manual transmission is standard with the three-door Liftback and Sedan, but not available with the five-door Liftback, while a four-speed automatic is standard with the five-door Liftback and optional for the three-door Liftback and four-door Sedan. Each body style is available in base and S trim levels.

Model Lineup

The Yaris three-door Liftback (\$12,205), five-door Liftback (\$13,305), and four-door Sedan (\$12,965) come standard with air conditioning, power steering, tilt steering wheel, intermittent wipers, rear center headrest, driver and passenger vanity mirrors, front and rear cupholders, digital clock, UV glass and a map light. Base Yaris models are pre-wired for a radio, but the



sound system itself is an option. The Liftback's front seats are adjustable four ways, while the Sedan's are adjustable six ways. The radio antenna is roof-mounted on the Liftback and is placed in the rear window glass of the Sedan. The Liftback's rear seat folds down while the Sedan's rear seat is fixed.

The Yaris Liftback S three-door (\$14,025) and five-door (\$15,125) upgrade with sport seat fabric, leather-wrapped steering wheel and shift knob, AM/FM/CD audio with MP3/WMA and universal mini-jack, an amber-illuminated tachometer, rear window wiper and defroster, color-keyed front and rear under-bumper spoilers, special badging, and P185/60 tires on 15-inch steel wheels with full covers. The Yaris Sedan S (\$15,080) is similarly equipped, but skips the leather wrappings for a 60/40 split fold-down rear seat.

Options include the automatic transmission (\$800). A Convenience Package for Liftback (\$680) and Sedan (\$840) models adds the radio, 15-inch wheels and tires, rear defroster, and 60/40 split/fold-down rear seats for the Sedan and a rear wiper for the Liftback. There are a variety of Power Packages that add power door locks, windows, cruise control, upgraded trim, an LCD screen for audio, and mirrors and features such as a 60/40 split rear seat that slides, reclines, and folds completely flat. Other options: fog lights (\$110) and remote keyless entry (\$230).

Safety features that come standard include dual-stage driver and front passenger airbags, front seat-mounted side airbags, front and rear side-curtain airbags, front seatbelt pretensioners, plus three-point seatbelts and head restraints for all five seating positions. Always wear seat belts as they are your first line of defense in a crash. Anti-lock brakes with Electronic Brake-force Distribution (EBD) comes standard.

Walkaround

The Toyota Yaris has an appealing look to it, especially the Liftback. All were designed around themes of simplicity, design elegance that avoids unnecessary decoration. It's interesting to note that the sedan and three-door Liftback were penned by different designers.



The three-door Liftback was designed around the theme of powerful simplicity. It has character, with its wedgy profile, large front halogen headlamp clusters, creased hood lines and T-grille. Almost every exterior element is body-colored, but it avoids looking like a featureless blob due to strategic placement of black trim around the base of the A-pillar, on the B-pillar, on the two strips that run the length of the roof, the front grilles and foglamp surrounds, and at the base of the windshield. We think it's cute.

It's also practical. The Liftback's rear hatch opens down to the bumper line and raises just high enough to allow a six-foot-tall person to stand under it. Like everything else about the Yaris, the hatch's function feels just right. Opening of the hatch is well damped by two struts, and closing it takes no more than a gentle downward push.

The Sedan is significantly longer than the Liftback, by 3.5 inches in wheelbase and nearly 19 inches overall. Its long, stretched cabin, arched beltline and short overhangs give it sporty proportions, and the multi-reflector halogen headlights lend it a premium look.

Despite their distinctive styling, both the Sedan and Liftback share a 0.29 coefficient of drag, an excellent number that helps quiet the ride and increase fuel economy at cruising speeds.

Standard running gear consists of P175/65R14 radial tires on 14-inch steel wheels, and the brakes are front ventilated discs and rear drums. The suspension is independent in front, with a semi-independent torsion beam in the rear.

Interior Features

The Yaris is a marvel of space efficiency with clever cockpit packaging. Its relatively long wheelbase makes the Yaris cockpit feel quite spacious, especially in the Liftback with its tall, extended roofline. Legroom isn't quite as generous as headroom, though six-footers can occupy every seat except the center rear without complaint.

The standard fabric upholstery is classy looking, durable and provides good grip in the corners. The black upholstery studded with blue dots that came in one of our test cars was especially handsome. The front seats have supportive, deeply dished backs; but the bottom cushions are flat and short, so long-legged drivers may not enjoy optimum comfort and lower-body support. The seating position is nicely upright and allows excellent forward sightlines, but it feels awkward relative to the steering wheel. The wheel adjusts for rake but not for reach, so it's necessary to pull the seat fairly far forward to assume the proper 10 and 2 o'clock hand placement, and this results in a position that's more like sitting in a chair at the dining table, legs bent at 90 degrees, than the other extreme, laying down in a sports racing car. The Sedan's front seats do feature a height adjustment, which helps the driver find a more comfortable position. And the Sedan's longer wheelbase provides about another two inches of legroom front and rear.

Access to the Liftback's rear seat is provided by a walk-in lever in the shoulder area of the front passenger seat. There is no such lever on the driver's side. The rear seats in the Sedan and Liftback are adequate to the task of hauling passengers over short distances, but the Liftback offers the advantage of a recline feature that increases the seatback angle from 10 degrees to 28 degrees. A 60/40 split seat with 5.9 inches of fore and aft adjustability is also available, greatly increasing the Liftback's comfort and practicality. Levers on the shoulders of the seatbacks make the operation a snap. The Sedan's rear seating can also be ordered in a 60/40 split configuration, but there is no recline feature.

Cargo space in the Liftback with the seats upright is 9.5 cubic feet, or 25.7 cubic feet with the seats folded down. The Sedan's cargo volume is 12.9 cubic feet with the standard rear seat and 13.7 behind the 60/40 folding seats. Folding the Sedan's seats adds volume. The wide rear openings, which extend down to bumper level, make the task of loading and unloading the Yaris easier.

Just as the two Yaris models differ in exterior styling, the instrument panels for the Liftback and Sedan are distinctive. Each features a center-mounted gauge cluster and an overall simplicity of design. The Sedan's dash looks a bit more upscale with its dual-toned trim and Optitron illuminated gauge cluster, which includes a 120-mph speedometer, fuel gauge, odometer/trip meter and various warning graphics. Manual-shift Sedans, S-model Liftbacks, and automatic Sedans with the Power Package add a tachometer. Outboard cupholders are standard on all models.

The center console differs in style between the two models, but the stereo and air conditioning functions are, in typical Toyota fashion, equally easy to view and use. Turn signals and lights are operated by the left-side steering column-mounted stalk; the right stalk is for the front wipers (plus a rear wiper on the Liftback). Storage bins abound, on either side of the center stack and along the doors, although liftbacks have three gloveboxes to the sedan's one. For those cars equipped with the MP3 stereo, the center console includes an auxiliary input.

Overall, the interior is comfy, the trim and upholstery appear classy, and the controls are intuitive. There would be no shame in taking the boss out to lunch or your mother-in-law to the opera in a Yaris.

Driving Impressions

The Toyota Yaris excels as around-town transportation, price considered or not. Forget the entry-level label. The Yaris feels and performs much better than its MSRP would suggest.

The economical 1.5-liter engine has more than enough power to keep up with the pack, the supple ride smoothes out most bumps and dips, the handling is almost sporty when the road opens up, the steering feels much better than what you might expect in an entry-level car, and the brakes haul the 2,300-pound Yaris to a halt with confidence. Pedal feel is direct, and even though the rear brakes are drums and not discs, stopping power is more than sufficient. Pedal feel is especially good (something we can't say about some of the upscale electronic braking systems on the market).



Still, you know this isn't a Lexus, or even a Camry, from the clearly heard engine and some road noise. These are constant reminders of the car's small size and light weight, but there's little else about its road manners to complain about. The reason for that is its extremely rigid structure. Various braces and crossmembers were designed to offset vibration and several types of undercoatings and damping materials were applied to reduce noise, and the results are impressive. Rough roads, railroad tracks and potholes are certainly felt but are pleasantly muted by the solid integrity of the chassis.

The Yaris has no problem keeping up with traffic and is especially usable for in-town duty. The engine revs freely and smoothly and will tolerate near-redline rpm without squawking. On the highway, fifth gear is definitely just for cruising, but a quick downshift to fourth delivers

comfortable passing power. The 1.5-liter four-cylinder engine features variable valve timing, direct ignition and an electronic throttle.

The five-speed manual transmission is a joy to operate, both around town and in the wide-open spaces. The shifts are creamy smooth and the gear ratios are well spaced, especially for the cut-and-thrust of city life. First gear delivers good throttle response, while second and third are flexible enough that it's easy to keep the engine's power flowing smoothly without having to constantly shift gears. Fourth gear is good for passing at highway speeds, while fifth allows comfortable cruising up to about 80 mph.

The four-speed automatic works well, too. Some acceleration power is compromised, but the smooth upshifts and crisp downshifts make it a commuter's best friend. The automatic features a gated shifter, and the shift lever is well placed and a cinch to operate.

The 14-inch tires that come standard prefer city work to excursions through the canyons. The optional 15-inch running gear sharpens handling and steering and makes the car an agreeable companion through the corners. There's still some body roll when the corners get tight, but it comes and goes with no surprises or awkward weight transitions. The front independent suspension is newly developed. The torsion beam rear suspension features anti-lift geometry for more stable braking, and has been engineered for enhanced straight line stability.

The electric power steering rack adds to the confidence-inspiring road manners. Not only does it help fuel mileage by eliminating a power-sapping hydraulic pump, it can be tuned for a specific feel, and Toyota's engineers did a marvelous job making this one feel just right, with crisp response to driver input and plenty of on-center feel.

Fuel economy for the 2009 Yaris is an EPA-estimated 29/36 mpg City/Highway (35 mpg Highway with the automatic).

Summary

The Toyota Yaris proves that inexpensive should not be confused with cheap. From their well sculptured exterior lines to the tailored, upscale look of their interiors, little about the Yaris liftback or sedan suggests the cutting of corners. The Yaris is practical and convenient. Agile and zippy, the Yaris excels around town and works well for commuting.



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