



Behind the Wheel:
2012
Scion iQ

Is America ready for a 3+1 city car that fits within the wheelbase of a full-size SUV? After a week in Scion's new iQ microcar, Richard Truesdell has the answer.

Other than the repeated queries of my neighbors – “Where’s the rest of your car, Richard?” – I admit I really enjoyed my week behind the wheel of the Scion iQ. Sold throughout the rest of the world as the Toyota iQ (and available as a super-lux-trimmed, \$50,000 U.K. version known as the Aston Martin Cygnet), the Scion iQ is the antidote for city dwellers who usually think all cars are painted yellow.

The Scion iQ’s most obvious competitor is the smart ForTwo. Yet with a starting price of just under \$16,000, the Scion iQ competes against larger and, in some cases, less expensive cars such as the Nissan Versa, the Honda Fit, the Fiat 500, and the Ford Fiesta. And since Scion is positioning the car as a premium micro-subcompact, it could also be said to target those MINI buyers actually in the market for a car about the size of the original MINI.

Probably the biggest point of departure from the smart ForTwo is the iQ’s 3+1 seating configuration, in which Scion provides a legroom-challenged rear fold-down bench seat. (The 3+1 configuration denotes additional space for the passenger-side rear seat, with the passenger-side instrument panel designed to allow the seat to be moved forward comfortably.)





The other major difference between the two vehicles is that the iQ is equipped with a CVT transmission, and the ForTwo is equipped with a herky-jerky automated manual transmission.

While CVT transmissions come in for much-deserved criticism from the auto journalist community, the CVT makes sense for its intended market – city dwellers (many of whom probably can't shift for themselves). In the iQ, it selects the proper ratio seamlessly and is well-matched to the car's willing 94-horsepower, 1.3-liter, four-cylinder engine.

In urban environments, one is unlikely to be impacted by a zero-to-60

time in excess of 11 seconds. The steering is both light (naturally) and responsive with satisfactory road feel, important when you're dodging potholes that are almost as big as the iQ. Combined with its overall length of just 10 feet, the iQ's 25.8-foot turning circle gives drivers the opportunity to fit into parking spaces lengthwise in the best European tradition.

Inside, the iQ feels neither small nor cheap. The materials and fit and finish are class leading, with one exception: The high-gloss housing for the radio looks like an afterthought, seemingly glued to the top of the instrument panel. Contributing to the



sense of space is the fact that the iQ is wide for such a diminutive car, 66.1 inches to be exact. From the driver's seat at least, you have the illusion of being in a much larger vehicle.

Durable fabric covers the front bucket seats, which are shaped in

such a way that even fat-bottomed drivers will feel comfortable. The controls are logically placed, but searching for a conventional glove box will leave you frustrated. Thanks to the design of the instrument panel on the passenger side, the glove

box, such as it is, is a sliding tray underneath the passenger seat.

Sold in just a single trim level, the 2012 iQ is equipped with air conditioning, an AM/FM/CD radio with integrated Bluetooth connectivity, and power windows and door locks as standard.

Part of the standard operating procedure for all four Scion models is an extensive dealer-installed accessory program. This includes exterior and interior appearance upgrades, wheels, and several audio options, most notably the outstanding OEM Audio



Plus amplifier, speaker, and subwoofer upgrade (see [sidebar](#)).

Although you might think the iQ is out of its element on the freeway, such was not the case. The iQ is rock solid at 80 miles per hour, staying well planted in the wake of 18-wheelers. This feeling is partly due to the illusion you're driving a car far larger than its modest exterior dimensions.

Aiding that are 16-inch wheels combined with P175/60R16 Goodyear

Assurance Fuel Max tires – generous choices for such a small car. The tires are biased towards all-season fuel efficiency, which brings us to the iQ's biggest disappointment.

The EPA says the 2012 Scion iQ gets 36 m.p.g. in the city, 37 m.p.g. on the highway, and 37 m.p.g. combined.

Given the car's small size, such numbers border on unimpressive, especially given the slew of far larger cars, such as the Chevy Cruze Eco, that deliver in excess of 40 m.p.g.

During the 500-plus miles of mixed California city (30 percent) and highway (70 percent) driving I spent behind its wheel, the 2012 iQ returned 37 miles per gallon.

So where does the iQ fit into the sub-mini matrix? If you buy cars like prime rib (by the pound), the Scion comes up short, pun intended.

But if space efficiency, being easy to drive and especially park, and Toyota's well-earned reputation for refined powertrains (the CVT

notwithstanding) are important, the iQ is a compelling car.

With gas prices in a holding pattern between \$3.50 and \$4.00 a gallon, the Scion iQ's appeal is decidedly limited. If we see another gas price spike, though, urban dwellers and those who wave their green credentials under a "small on the outside, big on the inside" banner are certain to give the iQ more than just a passing glance. **AT**



VITAL STATISTICS

Wheelbase: 78.7 inches

Length: 120.1 inches

Width: 66.1 inches

Height: 59.1 inches

Curb weight: 2,150 pounds

Engine: I4, 1,329 c.c. DOHC

16-valve normally aspirated

Horsepower: 94 @ 6,000 r.p.m.

Torque: 89 lb.-ft. @ 4,400 r.p.m.

Transmission: continuously variable automatic (CVT)

EPA estimated m.p.g. city/highway: 36/37

Base price: \$15,995

As-tested price: \$15,995, including \$730 destination

Also consider: Fiat 500, Ford Fiesta, Hyundai Accent, MINI Coupe, Nissan Versa, smart ForTwo



The Scion iQ's Necessary Accessory: OEM Audio Plus 300CF Sound System

I've spent the past 35 years involved with the mobile electronics industry as an installer, retailer (Kartunes Mobile Electronics), and journalist (editor of Car Audio and Electronics) and so feel particularly qualified to evaluate this system. I can say without equivocation that, except for some factory-installed systems costing more than five times as much (the B&O system installed in the Audi A8, for example), the OEM Audio Plus packages as installed in the Scion vehicles are among the most musical and dynamic car audio systems I've ever auditioned.

Automotive sound systems have come a long way over the years. Historically, the aftermarket powered innovation and factory-installed systems followed. Over the last decade, however, the OEM systems have taken the lead, especially as audio, video, navigation, and communications became increasingly integrated into our mobile lifestyles.

Scion is taking a different approach, combining the best elements of both

factory-installed and aftermarket audio systems as part of its Optimize program of dealer-installed accessories. While the company offers basic and navigation-equipped head units, it has turned to outside suppliers to offer audio personalization options that are seamlessly installed by dealers to provide a high-end listening experience.

One such option is an impressive system from [OEM Audio Plus](#). It provides any Scion iQ owner an auto-audiophile sound experience unrivaled by competitive systems costing two or three times its modest \$1,000 price tag (plus a charge for dealer installation).

The heart of the system is an eight-channel, 32-bit digital amplifier combined with proprietary equalization tailored and matched specifically for the replacement speakers and subwoofer installed in the iQ's cabin.

The speakers are installed in the existing factory locations. The subwoofer enclosure is mounted behind the rear seat replacing the storage bin – a worthwhile trade-off if great sound is at the top of your agenda.

The speakers sport carbon-fiber cones, and the one-inch soft-dome tweeters are twice the diameter of the



factory units they replace.

In a two-hour listening session at

Scion headquarters (like my test iQ, the OEM Audio Plus system was a prototype, production-spec unit), I auditioned a wide variety of program material. As many Scion owners will be accessing their music collections from iPods and smartphones, I confined my source material to high-quality MP3 files purchased from Amazon.

The results astounded me. The system reproduced challenging program material with a sense of definition that belied its modest cost,

amplifier power, and just seven speakers. (The existing factory-installed rear speakers receive their own custom equalization courtesy of the new digital amplifier, which means they match the voicing of the OEM Audio Plus replacement speakers.)

hallmarks of an outstanding listening experience. This achievement is due in part to the design of the digital amplifier. It has been perfectly matched and tuned to the full-range speakers working in harmony with the subwoofer.



When listening to tracks with which I'm intimately familiar, I even noticed instruments and background vocals I'd never heard before.

Even more remarkable was the system's ability to play loud without distortion or strain, one of the

The OEM Audio Plus tagline is "Clean, Crisp, Clear." I couldn't agree more. If you're purchasing a Scion iQ, tC, or xB, you *must* tick off the box on the accessory list for this system. You won't be disappointed.

— Richard Truesdell

The Road: London to Maranello The Ride: Dodge Viper & Ford GT

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