



Toyota Picnic



At a glance

- Three-row, six-seater "midi"-sized MPV
- 126bhp two-litre petrol engine, turbo-diesel soon
- Five-speed manual or four-speed automatic
- Three trim levels, air conditioning on top two
- Spacious interior, 17 seating combinations
- Three-year/60,000-mile warranty

TOYOTA CLAIMS THAT THE PICNIC ISN'T just another MPV (it already has the eight-seater Previa to fit that bill); neither is it a mini-MPV like the Renault Scenic. Instead it sees the Picnic filling a niche above estate cars but below MPVs.

Standing about 8 inches taller than a typical upper-medium saloon, but with a similar kerbside "footprint", the Picnic is initially powered by Toyota's familiar two-litre 16-valve engine – already acclaimed from its showing in the RAV4. In this case it's been tweaked for lower friction and fuel consumption, as well as reduced noise and vibration. Its 126bhp peaks relatively early (at 5400rpm), but although maximum torque is reached only 1000 revs sooner, mid-range flexibility is pretty effective, with over 90 per cent of it available from just below 2000rpm to over 5000rpm. Power is transmitted to the front wheels through a five-speed manual gear box or an electronically controlled

four-speed automatic, complete with US-style steering column gear selector. A turbo-diesel engine will join the line-up later in 1997.

Despite its ample proportions, the Picnic – unladen and in automatic form, at least – feels no less lively than its 4 x 4 stablemate, with the willing motor nicely complemented by the automatic's obligingly responsive part-throttle downshifts. Indeed, the throttle can feel almost *too* responsive when moving off, leading to an abrupt step-off in response to heavy-footed treatment.

The Picnic's fun, frisky nature is reflected in Toyota's claimed performance figures: top speed is 109mph for both the manual and auto, while acceleration is equally brisk, with the manual sprinting to 62mph in 11.2sec; the auto takes just half a second longer. Fuel economy looks reasonably encouraging, too; both deliver about 30mpg on the "combined" European test, but we'd guess the low twenties will be nearer the mark around town.

Four big hinged doors provide access for passengers, along with a similarly generous tailgate for the cargo at the back. Climbing aboard is easier than in many full-grown MPVs, but the seats are a shade higher than in a conventional family saloon, making it still a bit of a struggle for the aged or infirm to take their places.

The seats are arranged in three rows of two, with a useful centre aisle between them simplifying mid-

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FACTS AND FIGURES* – TOYOTA PICNIC 2.0 GS/GL/GX

ENGINE

Layout	front-mounted, transverse, four-cylinder petrol
Size	86 x 86mm = 1998cc
Valve gear	16-valve DOHC
Fuel system	electronic multi-point; 60-litre fuel tank
Ignition system	distributorless direct two-coil
Power	126bhp at 5400rpm
Torque	131 lb ft at 4400rpm

TRANSMISSION

Type	front-wheel drive; five-speed manual (GS/GL) or four-speed automa
(GL/GX)	
Mph per 1000rpm	21.4/17.1 (5th/4th) – manual; 24.5/16.8 (4th/3rd) – automatic
Rpm at 70mph	3265 (manual); 2860 (automatic)

CHASSIS

Suspension – front	MacPherson strut, coil springs
– rear	torsion beam, coil springs
Steering	power-assisted rack and pinion; 11.0m turning circle, 3.2 turns from lock to lock
Wheels/tyres	GS/GL: 14 x 6JJ steel; GX: 14 x 6JJ alloy with 195/65R14 tyres
Brakes	ventilated discs front, leading-trailing drums rear GL/GX: four-sensor, four-channel ABS

PERFORMANCE

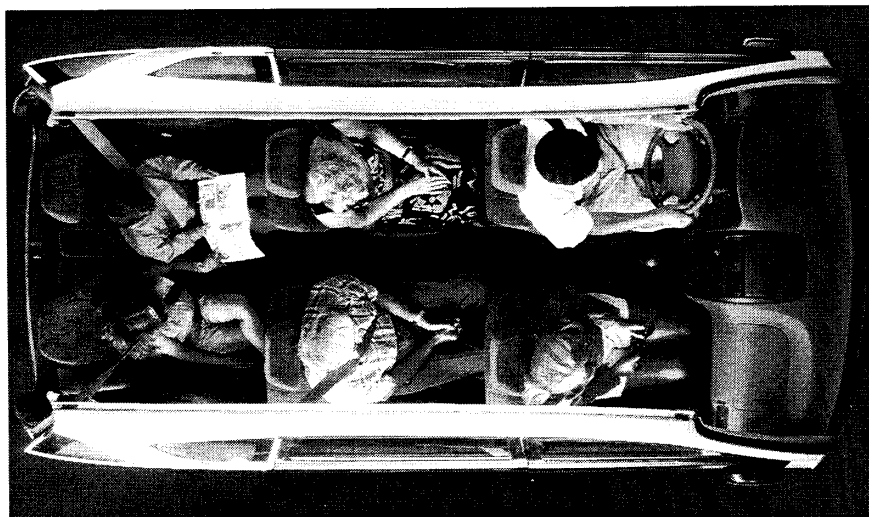
Maximum speed	109mph (manual and auto)
0–62mph	11.2sec (manual); 11.7sec (automatic)

ECONOMY

Urban conditions	23.3mpg (man)/21.7mpg (auto)
Extra urban	38.7mpg (man)/36.2mpg (auto)
Combined	31.4mpg (man)/29.1mpg (auto)

DIMENSIONS

Overall length	453cm (178.3in)
Overall width	169.5cm (66.7in) – excl. mirrors
Overall height	162cm (63.8in); 166cm (65.4in) inc. roof rails
Wheelbase	273.5cm (107.7in)
Kerb weight	1340kg (min)
Luggage capacity (6/4/2-seat mode)	182 litres (6.4cu ft)/ 1177 litres (41.6cu ft)/1841 litres (65.0cu ft)



flight seat swaps. All six seats have a three-point seatbelt and a head restraint, although rearrangement options aren't as comprehensive as in many other MPVs. The front pair lack a swivel facility for in-car conferences or picnicking, while the middle pair's fixed runners means that they can't be removed. Despite these restrictions, Toyota claims that this still leaves 17 different seating plans; we didn't quite get round to sampling them all.

There are map pockets on the backs of the front seats, the middle duo fold to form tables (complete with requisite cup holders, of course), while the rearmost pair can be either folded or removed altogether. The middle pair have almost 30cm (12in) of fore and aft travel, greatly easing kneeroom for third row occupants. They also slide forward automatically when the backrest is tipped, significantly aiding access to the rearmost seats. Unhelpfully, though, they don't remember their previously set position.

The hindmost seats unship fairly easily when more space is needed. As with most MPVs, though, there's the perennial problem of where to put the luggage when all six are occupied. Soft, squashy bags are accommodated with reasonable ease, but a well-stocked hamper for a day-tripping sextet would present more difficulty. Thanks to space-saving torsion beam rear suspension and minimal wheelarch intrusion, the Picnic's flat, low cargo deck provides ample space when some (or all) of the passengers can be left at home, with around 41½cu ft of space in four-seater mode, rising to 65cu ft with the middle row folded down.

The Picnic comes in three flavours (GS, GL and GX), all generously garnished to reflect the needs of the modern family. Items such as remote central locking, electric windows, heated power door mirrors, a rev counter and twin trip meters are standard across the line-up, along with dual airbags, a transponder engine immobiliser and alarm system, cargo area tonneau cover and supplementary high-level brake light. The four-speaker Sony sound system will score Brownie points with the youngsters, while an

additional power outlet in the rear caters for a portable fridge, personal stereos and the like.

Mid-level GL trim adds roof rails, ABS, integral front foglamps and air conditioning, as well as a handy steering column-mounted joystick for the audio system. Twin sunroofs (manual tilting at the front, electric sliding at the rear), an enhanced audio system and alloy wheels complete the top-of-the-range, three-course Picnic, the GX.

An all-too-brief test drive was still sufficient to confirm the Picnic's easy, car-like handling, good refinement and commanding all-round vision, but we need more time before we can elaborate on what it's like to live with. We also appreciated the light, responsive power steering and compact turning circles on the narrow rural test route we drove on, while the wipers' intermittent settings (the rear one, especially) came in particularly handy in the drizzly, murky weather we experienced.

Build quality and fit-and-finish conform to the usual exemplary Japanese standards and, like all Toyotas, the Picnic is backed by a generous three-year/60,000-mile warranty. There's also a year's membership of Club Toyota which includes breakdown assistance, though given Toyota's unrivalled reliability record, this probably won't be called on too often.

VERDICT

The Picnic is spacious, practical and easy to drive. It's more versatile than an estate car, too, thanks to its sixth seat, yet it proves more agile and less expensive than existing MPVs. It looks the part, as well, but there's precious little space for the suitcases with a full load on board and it lacks a little in musical chairs adaptability. It's an appealing, compact alternative to larger, more expensive MPVs, nevertheless. Like those, the Picnic is virtually guaranteed to score with its most frequent occupiers – the kids. There will be those that poke fun at the name, of course, but that and its highish asking price apart, Toyota could be on to a winner, here – at least until some of the other mid-sized MPVs coming our way hit the showrooms.

