

USED CAR SURVEY

Toyota Carina E



If you're thinking of buying a used Carina E, we can help. We've delved into our breakdown, warranty and vehicle inspection service statistics covering the last few years and have come up with what you need to know if you're planning to become the second owner.

THE CARINA GOES WAY BACK TO 1984 in the UK and was (and still is) the best-selling Toyota over here. But for this report we're focusing on the now British-built Carina E (the E stands for Europe), which was introduced in May 1992. At nearly 15ft long, the current version is larger than its predecessor and interior space, particularly legroom, reflects this; the Carina E is one of the roomiest upper-medium family cars around.

It was originally available with a choice of four engines: a pair of two-litre petrols (130 and 153bhp), a two-litre non-turbocharged diesel (72bhp) and, most interestingly, a clever but complex "lean-burn" 1.6-litre (106bhp) unit that couldn't be touched for its combination of economy, performance and environmental friendliness. Three years later a torquey

1.8-litre (103bhp) engine muscled in underbonnet, at which time the 1.6 lost 12bhp in bettering ever-stricter exhaust emission regulations. In fact, the bigger engine proved even "cleaner" and more frugal than the 1.6.

The Carina E is available as a saloon, Liftback (ie hatchback) and a load-lugging estate, and over the years has been offered in nine levels of trim, from the original Xi lead-in model to the lavishly equipped CDX. There are also half a dozen limited editions to swell the ranks. If you can afford it, a later model offers more for your money.

The main points to look for...

Engine and cooling system

The 1.8-litre engine gives no better overtaking acceleration than the earlier 106bhp version of the 1.6, but it pulls a lot more eagerly in the gears, thanks to greater torque and a revised set of gear ratios. Fuel consumption, at a remarkable 42mpg, is a little better, too. The diesel's performance is respectable, but its biggest handicaps are its lack of refinement and the fact that the petrol alternatives are so good – they get to within 6-4mpg of its overall consumption of 46mpg and are much livelier with it.

According to our survey, these engines have an excellent reliability record, with no really major black

spots. We've noted a few instances where the fuel system plays up (make sure that the engine starts, runs and idles reliably), and it's worth examining the water pump and radiator for tell-tale signs of coolant seepages. We've also had occasional reports of faulty head gaskets. Other than these, it's a case of looking for oil leaks (including around the oil filter) and listening for untoward noises from the valve gear. Also listen for "blows" from the exhaust system, and if you hear a resonance from down under when the engine is revved, it could be from a loose exhaust heat shield. On older, high-mileage models, try to establish whether or not the cam belt has been renewed (a new one is called for every 60,000 miles).

Transmission

Gearboxes are mainly five-speed manual, although four-speed automatic transmission was either standard or available as an optional extra on certain 1.6 and two-litre models.

You can expect the cable-operated gearchange to feel clunky and the clutch to be fairly heavy. Make sure the drive takes up smoothly, though, with no signs of slip under load. Ensure that there are no complaints from the driveshafts when turning on full lock, and inspect the constant velocity joint gaiters for oil leaks.

Suspension, steering and brakes

The Carina E has a smooth ride (particularly the weightier diesel model), but its steering is a little slower and heavier into bends than you might expect from a powered set-up.

Several of the cars we've met have pulled to the left and shown signs of uneven front tyre wear. Watch for these, because they suggest that the previous owner was a kerb-clouter and has knocked the steering geometry out of alignment. Front wheel bearings are occasionally troublesome, so listen for growls, and also give the dampers the once-over for oil leaks.

The brakes don't give much bother, but inspect the front discs for worn or scored surfaces and make sure the handbrake works quietly and doesn't have excessive lever travel.

Electrics and instruments

The Carina E's electrics and instruments are the epitome of reliability. Our research reveals that, while electric windows are the biggest cause of Carina electrical hiccups, the actual numbers are well below average. Similarly, the starter motor just occasionally plays up. Make sure that the central locking system operates as it should, and also that the heater controls work smoothly. As with any used car, check all the lights, switches and accessories. Don't forget the wipers – and their blades. Finally, on diesel models, take a look at the wiring to the fuse-box near the battery; if it's too short it can chafe on the box and blow a 30amp fuse.

Bodywork

Are Carina owners bad drivers or are they just unlucky? A significant number of the cars we've inspected have shown signs of bodywork repairs, so keep an eye out for poor reinstatement work. Generally speaking, though, bodywork faults are rare, with only the sunroof giving rise to a few complaints – if it's out of alignment it can vibrate or stick. Give it a try. Otherwise the body is pretty near bulletproof, thanks to immaculate build quality and excellent corrosion protection, supported by a six-year anti-perforation warranty plus a three-year paintwork and surface rust indemnity. There has been one recall, to fit improved clamps to the roof rack on 1996 models – only 50 cars were involved.

Costs and servicing

Carina motoring could hardly be less onerous, thanks to mpg figures that match a Metro's, an enviable reputation for reliability and a three-year/60,000-mile mechanical warranty – the remainder of which you can take advantage of if you buy a late model. With increasing model availability, Carina prices are now looking reasonable, but be warned, spare parts are very expensive – although you shouldn't need them often. Servicing is due every 6000 or 9000 miles depending on model year, and the complex engine set-up means that access to one of Toyota's 250 dealers is important. Most of them operate an Auto Assured used-car scheme. Insurance groups range from 9 for the 1.6 to 15 for the 2.0GT.

So to sum up...

The Carina E proves that Toyota has mastered the art of achieving both quality and quantity. Though non-sporting, it's civilised and discreet, and the clever thing is that it combines both performance *and* economy in its lean-burn engines; so much so that they make the slower, noisier diesel almost redundant. If you're looking for space and comfort, low costs and the ultimate in reliability, the Carina E won't disappoint. Highly recommended.

We can't tell you which model to choose, but once you've found a car you like, we can provide reassurance by arranging a comprehensive check anywhere in the country by one of our Vehicle Inspection Engineers. Call 0345 500 610 for details of fees or to arrange an inspection. For longer term peace of mind we can also offer mechanical breakdown insurance. For further information, call AA Warranty Services on 0800 269 798.