

Smarter

And as much fun as a day at the beach.

by Joe Sage



The Scion iQ is obviously no ordinary car. Then again, it is nowhere near as out of the ordinary as it would have been just a couple of years ago. Small is big now, people are open to more possibilities, and, after all, many years of smart cars should help with the whole concept. We got a huge kick out of the Scion iQ when it first showed up on the auto show circuit. It was as small—at least by look and feel—as the smart fortwo, itself a very clever concept but getting a little long in the tooth and still not selling as anticipated. But it was a lot cuter, a mix of whimsy and conventional form.

It's easy to think of the smart car when you see the Scion iQ. But the little iQ has one huge distinction—it is the world's smallest four-seater, just ten feet long.

STYLING AND FORMAT. Paradoxically, the Scion iQ is just conventional enough to leave you room to realize it's unusual. And, though unusual, it is still reasonably conventional. This stands in contrast to its obvious microcar competitor, the smart.

We like the iQ's styling from the front a great deal—more than from the back, where a variety of compound angles and curves almost disagree with one another and the taillights almost seem to hang downhill a little; we would redraw that. But it is solid and bumper car cute.

We like the relatively large wheels and tires. We also like the wheel covers, though it's unfortunate they're plastic; we'd wait till they broke and look for something comparable but more durable.

The iQ is probably not a huge babe magnet, by most standards, but it is certainly a conversation piece. For a babe, it might be a great guy magnet.

It was "hysterical, really," per our logbook notes, to exit the driver's door and walk around to the passenger's door to unload packages, finding you're there immediately. It's startling, but fun.

Basically if you could take just a nice roomy small-to-midsize front cabin and put it on the road, this is it.

If you don't like tailgaters, you're going to find them very close to you in this car; their proximity to the rear of your car (or your seat) can be a little disquieting.

DRIVING AND HANDLING. The thing is a hoot to drive, right from the get-go, noted as soon as we first back out of the driveway. On our first day, we gave the iQ a really good workout—freeway, surface streets, crowded commercial areas, rough spots, a lot of rain troughs including some that would brutalize some vehicles—and noted that it did great on all of them, presenting us with a nice solid ride.

The Scion iQ does well on speed bumps and knocks 'em dead on drainage troughs. There seems to be something about this wheelbase. It provides a rebound that even on brutal speedbumps works more sympathetically than any normal length. And on a trough, you can just dive right through it. One factor that contributes to all of the iQ's handling is its broad track: the car has an overall width (not counting mirrors) of 66.1 inches.

We note that it's fairly squirrely going fast around a cul-de-sac, or even on a straightaway, because of its extremely short wheelbase. You might think that makes

it extremely maneuverable, and it surely does, but it also removes some stability. We like it, though. Physics ensures that it will always feel a little squirrely, but all in all, you get used to this being shorter than you're used to, as quickly as you get used to a new haircut.

Not everything we hit is completely smooth: on abrupt changes, say from concrete to asphalt, you will want to grip the wheel tight. But you can't say that is unexpected for what the car is: small, inexpensive, lightweight and with a very short wheelbase. On the plus side, if you want to feel connected with the road and with the world around you, this car will do it.

The iQ's turning circle is every bit as wild as you would think, maybe moreso. It feels (we speculate) like pole dancing. Our logbook said it doesn't even matter what the number is—you just have to try it. The number is a good one, though: 25.8 feet. Compare this with a MINI at 35.1 feet, a Fiat 500 at 30.6 feet, or even the original teeny car, the smart fortwo, at 28.7 feet. On a divided four-lane boulevard, a U-turn can be accomplished from inside-lane-to-inside-lane.

POWER. The Scion iQ has an EFI 1.3-liter 16-valve 4-cylinder engine with aluminum alloy block and head. Running on regular 87-octane gasoline, it puts out 94 hp and 89 lb-ft of torque. Whatever the Scion iQ lacks in oomph, it makes up for in maneuverability. Encounter two cars on a boulevard doing a slowpoke roadblock, and you only need the slightest gap to break through.

We could really have our way with traffic in this car, whether making a corner, picking a lane or snaking through crowds. We felt sort of like a little wrestler who can wiggle his way out of a huge pile of sumos.

We did generally do better when we would drop it from the Eco mode in D, into S. The transmission is a CVT, but felt as though it had shift points.

At one red light, we were the only one in two lanes, at first. Everybody who came along after us lined up in the other lane. Clearly, they assumed this little thing would be too slow. We smoked 'em all when the light turned green. Whatever the iQ may lack in power, it can make up for in the element of surprise.

In the age-old debate between higher-but-insulated versus lower-but-thrilling speed, we say we prefer feeling the speed to feeling so much comfort that you don't enjoy how fast you're going. It's no sports car, but you can feel the speed in the iQ, dashing down the freeway. It may be because it's so lightweight, or because you feel exposed, with no visible hood in front of you. Or it may be how other people react to the car, as a lot of them seem to want to race this. We sort of feel like we're driving an armchair a mile a minute through thin air, which of course we sort of are, but with airbags and brakes, a cabin and radio, and air conditioning.

PARKING. The first time we pulled up to park in a lot, we pulled up past a space, went to back into it, and found that the car is so short that if you allow for anything remotely normal, you will end up about 2/3 of a space short of where you thought you were headed. Also surprising, as short as it is, is that it's hard to get it into a space straight—we found ourselves with about a five degree tilt. It's as much reflex as physics, and of course you will adapt.

THE EXPERIENCE. We've established that the iQ is bumper car cute, but does it drive like one? We were asked exactly that, when we posted this car on social media. Hmm. With that in mind, we headed into neighborhood streets and gave the steering wheel a wiggle, to check whether it feels squirrely or torquey—and, actually, we noted, it indeed felt pretty directly squirrely and torquey. It's just straight input, but behavior is vulnerable to the short wheelbase. But we concluded that, to whatever degree it may feel like that bumper car, you basically have to remind yourself of this, because your immediate environment in the cabin presents a fairly normal experience. You don't see the hood, but that's not unique to this car. Looking over your shoulder is not as different as you might expect. Driveways, curbs and speed bumps provide a noticeably different rhythm. You will generally find equal measures of remembering and forgetting that you are in a somewhat unusual car. Did we feel vulnerable in it? Not really. You know that you somewhat are, but for whatever degree you may feel vulnerable, you feel nimble, even moreso.

We had this car for a week in early June and found ourselves driving around with the windows down, on a 100-degree day. Why? We guessed it was just so much fun, we felt like we were going to the beach. Upon later reflection, we thought, yes, it was like a day at the beach. We had a lot of fun. A day at the beach can of course bring you sand in your sandwich, and a sunburn, but you still had fun and you still want to do it again.

INTERIOR AND CONTROLS. The door sills are illuminated as you enter, reading "Scion," which the carpets augment with an embroidered "iQ." Overall, the biggest news about the interior is that it is quite normal. The smallness of the car's overall package does not cost



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you comfort or space in the front seats, and the controls are complete for its budget range.

As soon as we sat down, we noted a little control pod to the right forward of the shift lever, so a passenger can easily use it, too—tucked away, fully functional but not interfering with driver tasks.

It's great to have "a main radio button." However, that radio button is very sensitive: when you just reach to change the volume, you may accidentally turn the unit off probably four times out of five. There are also significant delays in tuning any HD radio station. Controls aside, we thought the sound system—a \$479 Pioneer Premium option—was decent. Don't expect a \$15k audio setup in a \$15k car, but you can set this one easily and then pretty well just rock out.

The interior could benefit from more of a center console. A half-a-console includes sort of an office caddy, good for tolls and maybe a credit card; remove that for a sort of cupholder space. But storage for a pair or two of glasses and a smartphone is what the car needs.

UTILITY. We started loading the passenger compartment of the iQ—two large jugs of water, a palette of bottles of water, bags of groceries—then opened up the rear hatch to see how much room there is. There's absolutely none. The seats are right at the back window. But push a button to drop the seat backs (which requires pushing another button and removing the headrests first—which, in turn, have a handy little tray for stowage), and you now have pretty good storage space.

It is a four-seater, yes, though as with many small four-seaters, it's doesn't really have much of a back seat anyway; we would probably leave the car set up for cargo instead of passengers all the time. (And we would add a cargo net, to keep things from crashing immediately into the back of the driver's seat.)

ECONOMY. The Scion iQ has a fuel economy rating of 37 mpg combined (and 36/37 city/highway). Purchase price currently starts at a base of \$15,995. Our earlier test car stickered at a base of \$15,265 and had a whole list of options, ten in all, ranging from a \$99 shift knob

to \$599 for an illuminated door sill package. In between were TRD performance springs and rear sway bar, two items which together added \$744. Premium audio and XM Satellite, also two items, added \$928. Fog lights, carpets and spoiler were also add-ons. Out the door, including \$730 destination, our car stickered at \$19,135. We'd probably stick with every one of those options, although there's an emotional difference, if nothing else, between paying about \$15k versus more like \$20k. In all, the Scion iQ has very good fuel mileage, though not utterly tops, and a very good price, though not utterly bottom. But it delivers a lot, at these numbers.

A SPOT IN YOUR GARAGE? We had one colleague ripping this car apart online before we ever touched it, but it put a smile on our face every time we walked out to it, and it's one of those where you turn around and look again as you walk away. It drew plenty of positive attention wherever we went.

A pessimist might say you're missing half a car. An optimist might say it *is* half a car, or in fact a whole car, and a pretty cool, fun one. (An optometrist might say you need a better pair of glasses to remember where you parked the li'l thang.) We're with the optimists.

The whole idea of driving a small car had rubbed some people the wrong way for many years. Small cars of earlier decades made them feel cheezy, poverty-stricken or generally embarrassed. But the game has changed, in terms of both demand and supply. People are looking for small cars, and there is much on offer.

The idea of driving something *this* small is a whole different game. You're driving this for a reason. It's a conversation piece, it's fun, and it obviously has a sense of purpose about it. It's not just a small car; it's what you

get if you *really* want, need and seek a small car. And it could be all some people need in a car, in general.

It's small and may feel vulnerable, but you can say that about any two-seat roadster—and you wouldn't say no to one of those. It's a four-seater whose back seat is of limited full-time usage, but you can say that about an expensive sports coupe like a 911—and you wouldn't say no to one of those, either. Just don't expect it to handle like that roadster or that 911 (or even a MINI Cooper). It is what it is.

The same day we took delivery of the Scion iQ, we had a conversation with another colleague who had driven it. How did they like it? They hesitated, so we said, for what it is. Now their face lit up: oh, sure, for what it is! They liked it a whole lot more. Our impressions are sometimes colored by what we stepped out of moments before, which can vary tremendously. So there's a relativity factor, but even more than that, we would point to expectations. Our expectations had actually been kind of high, but when we think about it, they were kind of high for what it is, so we were not disappointed. We really liked it for what it is. Not everybody will.

The Scion iQ by its very presence never ceases to surprise and delight. This is a little tiny car, and kind of different—and isn't that what Scion is rooted in? The xA, xB and xD are very small, distinctive and have been very popular. If you want small and different, the new Scion iQ delivers best-ever levels of both.

When the time came, we sort of hated to give this car up. But would we really want to own it all the time? It depends upon who we are. It's not necessarily what we would want to have as our only car, but "compared to what" is the real question. We would love to always have it in the garage with whatever else we have, as one element in our bag of tricks.

Take most of what most people really use their car for, and the little Scion iQ does it quite well. For most people, we suspect it would be a semi-playful, semi-purposeful extra car. That may sound like a small niche, but we are in an era with quite a few quirky, fun and very popular little vehicles. This car fits its niche and fits it well. ■

