

Triumph.



FR-S:
Fun Reigns Supreme.
The heart of a pure
sports car beats anew.

by Joe Sage

There are two reasons the new Scion FR-S makes us say "Triumph." One is that Toyota and Subaru have delivered exactly what they set out to deliver—a fun and capable sports machine at a price point we haven't seen in some time. And the other is that it reminds us, within a couple of quick degrees of separation, of the cars that bore that badge.

The introduction of the Scion FR-S (along with its sibling machine, the Subaru BRZ) evokes the arrival of several high-profile, lower-budget, high-fun cars from years past: notably the Mazda MX-5 Miata, introduced 23 years ago, and the Datsun 240Z, brought to the US some 42 years ago. Those in turn had harkened back to a simpler time, when a Triumph TR6, MG-B or Fiat Spider was anybody's clear idea of a sports car. No 500-horsepower millionaire's car. Just a low-frills, high-punch fun machine.

FR-S connotes "F" for front engine, "R" for rear-wheel drive and "S" for sport. (In the Subaru iteration, BRZ stands for both the cars' boxer engine, rear-wheel drive and Z for, well, zenith, as in basically maxing out.)

Sheet metal and badging vary between the Scion and Subaru, but overall, the two cars are the same.

THE FORMULA. The Scion FR-S is clearly conceived to deliver performance at a price—a reasonable price. The amount of performance is not unlimited, but it is balanced. And while the price is reasonable—under \$25,000 with a manual transmission (or barely over with an automatic), this is no stripper: the FR-S includes a full complement of dynamic handling electronics and creature comforts, not to mention the airbags and other safety features that a Triumph or 240Z never dreamed of.

"Pure Balance" is, in fact, a guiding principle of the car's development. A way this was literally achieved is through the use of the world's only flat boxer engine—a benefit of Subaru's involvement—in a front-engine, rear-wheel-drive configuration. The compact, flat format of the boxer allows its placement farther back than usual, for a 53/47 front-to-rear weight ratio and a center of gravity as low as some supercars.

Electronics in the Scion Star Safety System include Vehicle Stability Control (VSC), Traction Control (TRAC), Anti-lock Brake System (ABS), Electronic Brake-force Distribution (EBD), Brake Assist (BA) and Smart Stop Technology (SST). Airbags include driver and front passenger frontal and seat-mounted side airbags, plus front and rear side curtain airbags.

The interior is also tech-heavy, from an 8-speaker 300-watt Pioneer AM/FM/CD/HD audio system with USB and iPod links, to Bluetooth™ phone and music streaming, plus power door locks, auto power windows, leather-trimmed tilt-telescope steering wheel, bolstered sport seats with red accents, a digital/analog speedometer, programmable analog tach, a multi-information display and more. We've often noted, only half tongue-in-cheek, that a 15-cent chip can deliver almost anything a manufacturer can think of—usually cleverly applied to justify more expense for more features at the higher end. In the case of the Scion FR-S, you get this impressive array of electronics in a well-performing car for under \$25k. Add to this aluminum sport pedals and scuff

plates, A/C of course, and a rear window defogger, plus a no-fuss one-piece folding rear seatback. The car even delivers with a full tank of gas.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS. We understood the concept before laying eyes on the machine: this would be a sports car you can buy not because you're so wealthy, but because it's so much fun—a formula that was tried and true decades ago, but which had been lost somewhere between horsepower wars and fuel economy battles. Scion has figured out anew that tempering both goals can deliver more than either does alone.

It's a great-looking little ride from every angle, with sharp details all around. We know it's affordable, and it was refreshing to hop in and fire it up. We had the feeling right away that this is the pure and fundamental machine everybody has been saying it is. We were glad to not see a big display screen in the center stack, just a simple knob and four arrows that bode for quick orientation, climate control with three simple knobs, and clear instruments overall. Others could take cues from this. We felt as though we were in a Datsun 240Z forty years ago, which is of course a very good thing to feel.

Our car arrived with the rear seat folded flat. This exposes goods in the trunk to the interior, of course, but gives a nice flat stowage area. It's very likely a good way to leave the car for the long haul, giving the FR-S a spacious feel inside, and ignoring the game about having a back seat at all, since few will use it.

Our car came with the 6-speed manual transmission, which we of course consider a win-win, at \$1100 less than the available paddle-shift automatic, but for those who prefer the auto, going F1-style at this price is irresistible. We enjoyed the basics of the car, and the simplicity of the HVAC interface, but did wish we had an "auto" setting for the A/C on an Arizona summer day.

Pulling away from the curb, we find a tight drivetrain delivering nice, solid shifts. Our logbook notes that we were "loving it straight away." Our FR-S had 3500 miles on it, and it was as tight as a drum.

At 200 horsepower, of course it could use a hair more, and that wouldn't have to destroy the reasonable balance of the car as presented. We're sure, in fact, that something will come along—whether a turbo or other boost, or perhaps all third-party. (We anticipate seeing a huge presence for this car at SEMA this year.)

But, as is, it feels every bit as powerful as that old Triumph, Z car or equivalent, but with highly modernized fit and finish, solid suspension, shifts and steering—a rock solid feel overall. G-forces are light, but you do get that sporting feel. And gearing is well executed, as—despite torque of just 151 lb-ft—we find ourselves with plenty of punch even on a surface street at 2500 revs and 45 mph. We found ourselves using 5th gear routinely and could even use 6th on surface streets, whereas in a 500-hp car, you could drive all day in 2nd gear, basically. Tight shifting in tight situations was better than average for a 6-speed manual, with gears easy to find.

FINDING ITS NICHE. Our mind drifted to our recent time with the Nissan GT-R, a stellar high-horsepower machine in the \$100k range, which begged the question: which would you rather have: four of these, or one of those? Though largely a rhetorical question, of



course, we can easily imagine people for whom it would be an actual practical decision.

One colleague proclaimed on our social media that the FR-S was "more show than go, but the show is sooooo good." We suppose you could say that, but is it any less "go" than expected? We would say not. It's a tight little package that brings back the spirit of a car from the '70s with the quality and appointments of a car from the new millennium, and we're sure there's a market for this.

Imagining a world in the near future populated by electric cars and hybrids—and a handful of sporty little combustion-powered options like this—we suspect the sportiness of this car in that world will make for a lot of fun, for years to come. This line of thought casts a little perspective on the current world of 500- and 600-hp supercars in excess, by the numbers. This could actually become a better world, in ways, for the enthusiast.

The Scion FR-S is definitely one of those cars that returns the joy of driving—one of those where you realize as you're running errands, you're kind of glad if a

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE.....2.0L DOHC 4-cylinder 16v boxer
 Horsepower/Torque200 hp / 151 lb-ft
TRANSMISSION.....6-speed manual
DRIVETRAIN..Front-engine, rear-wheel-drive
INCLUDED: 17-inch alloy wheels, 215/45R17 tires, electric power steering, F/R ventilated disc brakes, double wishbone rear suspension, Torsen limited slip diff, VSC, TRAC, ABS, EBD, BA, SST, chrome-tipped dual exhaust, color-keyed mirrors, halogen headlights, LED taillights, DRLs, Pioneer 300W 8-speaker audio, keyless entry, much more.

BASE PRICE\$24,200
OPTIONS: Wheel locks67
DESTINATION CHARGE730
TOTAL PRICE.....\$24,997

Base price with six-speed automatic transmission including paddle shifters and rev-match technology\$25,300

KEEP RIGHT >>



We recognize much commonality between the new Scion FR-S and earlier accessible sports cars, from '50s and '60s Brits, to the Datsun 240Z, to the Mazda Miata. Not to be forgotten is this car's half-blood kin, the Toyota 2000GT (the new FR-S is half Subaru; the 2000GT was half Yamaha). The Brits, Z cars and Miatas all sold by the boatload in the US, while the GT2000 (1967-70) was more of a trivia question on our shores. But the Z car may have never happened without the 2000GT (shown below with the Scion FR-S). A 2000GT can now be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars at auction.

store is closed and you're going to have to run back again, because you could run around all day long. We also find that the FR-S is a head-turner and a magnet for parking lot fans.

The sports cars this evokes—the Italians and Brits of yore—were built for fun on the open road. Make no mistake, those got taken to the track and these will get taken to the track, but they will be raced among like-minded, like-powered people. Nobody is trying to beat a Shelby in this. (The only downside may be that it looks like it just might be ready to try. But if that's really a downside, give us more downsides.)

Exactly how much power the car has isn't even the point. That you drive it like a sports car is—and you will. Nonetheless, it didn't take long for us to find ourselves at a red light next to a Corvette. You know this could be a scenario for feelings of inadequacy, although if the car didn't look as though it had a bit more to it than it does—you wouldn't. (Envy, though, could be another issue.) But still, this is a \$25,000 car, which brings us back to that GT-R question, or now: would you rather have two of these, or one Corvette? Hmm. Different strokes. This is a game that never ends, for the gearhead.

It can be a little disappointing when you find yourself next to a powerful luxury sedan that's going to just smoke you at the light. However it's that same concept: if you imagine 50 or so years ago what it would have been like to be in that little Fiat or Triumph, next to that big Cadillac or Lincoln sedan, and yes they had all sorts of power, and they could roar off down the boulevard when the light turned green. But you were just having a lot more fun.

The FR-S looks to some degree kind of like a kid's car—but what a kid's car. We conclude that the Scion FR-S is fundamentally the real deal, though a hair showier than its performance might dictate—20 percent boy racer, but 80 percent SCCA.

A FEW DETAILS. The red stitching on the interior upholstery is a nice touch, often played up as a big deal on vehicles that cost two to three times as much as the FR-S does. The headrests angle forward dramatically, angled just right, crowning very comfortable and effectively bolstered sport seats.

The speedometer is at the left, its visibility fairly poor, while in the center is a tach, and visibility on that is very high, featuring a white face with black numbers

plus a digital speed reading, all you need overall.

There's a huge difference in the climate control's noise level from the fan at its #4 versus its #3 speed setting. If you're driving on a 117-degree week like we were, you're certainly going to start out at #4, and since the system is not automatic, you're going to want to remember to turn it down sooner than later, because there's a big noise relief when you do.

The car's audio system is not too bad. We did consult the manual at first, to figure some of its deeper-down settings, but having done that, it's easy to set and forget, or to reset later. Sometimes there is good punch in the bass, but much of the time the low end makes the installation rattle—quite a bit. It reminded us of times we used to, without batting an eye, spend more on a custom audio system than we had on the car itself, and that could happen here. But we're wondering whether it might be a challenge to put a custom audio system in here and counter the buzzes and rattles.

The third brakelight (CHMSL) is an odd design that sits on a few spindles, and every time we look over our shoulder, it basically looks like there's a vehicle in our blind spot. If we owned this car, we would somehow modify this. Ditto if we were its engineers.

It's kind of cool at first, to get a little chirp out of the rubber (on purpose or otherwise), but we soon found we were getting it almost every time, for instance when at a stop light or stop sign and then turning right. It's not the kind of thing you want to do every time, ready or not, for instance if there's a police cruiser next to you. Checking the tires to see whether they were low on air, unevenly worn, especially hard or soft, they checked out just fine. We concluded the chirping was a benefit or demerit of the rear suspension, mostly likely, and we continued to note that we were getting it too often. We did love the suspension overall, and on rough spots, rain troughs and speed bumps—solid and firm.

A front-engine rear-drive layout is a great place to start, but it's not in itself a guarantee of performance. But it works for the FR-S, which is superbly sure-footed as we carve through turns.

LASTING IMPRESSIONS. We always come back to the same thing: discovering the Scion FR-S is like getting your hands on a classic sports car, and for everybody who would think, man, I wish I could buy something like a Triumph in this day and age, but all up-to-date and reliable, that's exactly what Scion has delivered here. It only took Datsun a few years to deliver that in the first place, with the 240Z, though it was a breakthrough then. It's taken another 40 years, but Scion has delivered the same with this. (And yes, in between there was the Miata—same mission, same success.)

Toyota is definitely a clever company, but if you think they're so clever they're delivering a 911 for 25 grand, nobody's that clever. No, they're so clever they're delivering what they can for 25 grand, and by a long shot. That is their triumph. It is affordable, but more than the sum of its parts. Give it a drive; it will not disappoint.

The Scion FR-S would be a great first or second car for anybody with a fun streak. This car prompted what were surely the most times since we were 16 years old that we've thought of this many reasons to run back out and do another errand, over and over. ■

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