

SIZE MATTERS



by Joe Sage

When the Scion brand was first introduced at auto shows in 2002 and 2003, and released for the 2004 model year, it sought to bring a new market niche to Toyota, offering a product lineup that was less expensive, simply configured, more youth-oriented, a bit quirkier and a bit edgier. The vehicles were also notably small and low on power. Scion was intended to stretch the Toyota brand in basically exactly the opposite direction from what Lexus had, previously. The first two vehicles were the xA and the xB, carlike and boxlike little econovehicles, respectively. The boxlike xB was in some ways the more innovative of the two, at least for the US market—small urban boxmobiles having been popular for some time in Japan. It drew comparisons to the contemporaneous Honda Element, both being boxy and new, but the Scion xB was basically a quite different vehicle—considerably smaller, lighter, less powerful and with no offroad utility—a repackaging of the Japan-market bB city car. Very short on horsepower and not a lot better at braking, it was basically a counter-statement on wheels.

Three key things have happened since then: [a] smaller and smaller vehicles are grabbing more and more attention, [b] other vehicles have entered the boxy little niche and [c] the xB has evolved into a completely new generation.

The Scion xB was completely redone on a new platform for the 2008 model year, offering a noticeably larger vehicle, much curvier, with larger wheels, more power, better brakes, more amenities—all in all, a more

mainstream vehicle. (The xA was comprehensively redesigned, also, but—inconsistent with the xB—Toyota chose to give it a new name: the xD. But the xB name [for “box”?] is now in play for two quite different vehicles.)

The replacement is different enough that we find ourselves starting to think of the xB in exactly that mainstream way when inventing the various boxmobiles.

Kia has been a roll for the last few years and has continued to expand its product lineup (and its concept show-vehicle offerings). The Kia Soul concept appeared at the 2006 North American International Auto Show in Detroit, the production version was unveiled at the 2008 Paris Motor Show—and it then quite quickly comes to market this summer, largely unchanged from the concept vehicle.

Another is the Nissan Cube, aptly named and directly derived from its cousins indigenous to the streets and nightlife of Tokyo since 1998, with updates in 2002 and 2008, which is the model now available here.

If they had all arrived at one point in time, including both versions of the Scion xB, we'd be comparing the new xB with the Kia Soul, the original xB with the Nissan Cube, and the Honda Element still really as a third option with different characteristics (see sidebar).

With elongated wraparound headlamps and pronounced fenders, the new xB is more aggressive than the original. The xB's iconic boxy shape is basically retained, but with softer angles and a high beltline. A 2.4-liter dual-overhead-cam 4-cylinder engine—the same as the tC coupe's—with Variable Valve Timing with intelligence (VVT-i) produces 158 hp, a

whopping 55 hp (or 53%) more than the original. Choose a five-speed manual or four-speed automatic transmission with sequential shifting. EPA estimated fuel economy ratings are 22 city/28 highway for both transmissions, and the vehicle is rated California Level II Ultra Low Emission Vehicle (ULEV-II).

The xB has MacPherson strut front and rear torsion beam suspension and 16-inch steel wheels, with a choice of three standard wheel covers (shared with the xD). The xB features 10.83-inch ventilated discs in the front and 10.98-inch disc brakes in the rear, so stopping power is as dramatically enhanced as go-power. The xB is available only in front-wheel drive (add awd, and the range of possibilities would be ideal).

The interior offers 21.7 cubic feet behind the rear seats. 60/40-split fold-flat rear seats, a flat cargo floor and fully-reclining front seats add additional volume. The xB includes a driver's convenience tray, a glove box, a console box, front door storage and a fixed tray beneath the rear seats for hidden storage.

Metal-tone trim accents the shifter and instrument panel. Centered on the dash are the speedometer and multi-information display, with a deep orange readout for the clock, outside temperature, instantaneous MPG, average MPG, distance to empty, or average speed.

Scion offers an optional Pioneer premium audio system which adds several features to the standard head unit, including the ability to download “skins” for the organic electroluminescent (OEL) screen. You can download images, four-second video clips and eight-sec-



Our test xB in Scion's new Stingray Metallic paint.

The interior offers an impressive array of utility, tech, storage and safety features. The arrangement of the instrument panel, gauges and steering wheel, though, struck us as fairly odd, overall.

ond movies from Pioneer's website, or burn your own images and movies onto a CD and upload them. The faceplate light also changes from deep orange to blue at the touch of a button. This system has rear head unit outputs for external amps to boost power to additional speakers and subwoofers, with all head unit features unchanged. A 160-watt Scion AV/navigation unit with seven-inch LCD touch screen is also available.

Like all Scion vehicles, the xB is mono spec, making purchase extremely simple. Customers only need to choose exterior color and transmission. Standard features include power steering, windows, door locks and mirrors; remote keyless entry; a/c; four-wheel ABS with Electronic Brake Distribution and Brake Assist; driver and front passenger dual-stage airbags; front seat-mounted side airbags; front and rear side curtain airbags; Vehicle Stability Control with Traction Control; tilt steering wheel with audio controls; and even a first aid kit. Factory-recommended maintenance services at the first 5,000 mile and 10,000 mile intervals are included.

Our test vehicle was in the one new exterior color, Stingray Metallic, which replaced Nautical Blue Metallic in the lineup. Five other paints are Super White, Classic Silver Metallic, Black Sand Pearl, Blackberry Crush Metallic and Hypnotic Teal Mica. All xBs fea-

ture high-quality dark charcoal interior fabric.

The xB is a great blank slate for customizers and has been a hit at SEMA. Scion's Release Series (RS) models are for buyers who want “custom” style but with accessories all up to the brand's standards in fit and finish. Limited-production RS offerings have an array of cool touches inside and out and are designated by number within the series. For a small bump on the bottom line, RS Scions deliver a one-off color with combinations of interior and exterior treatments. The xB RS 1.0 in Hot Lava debuted at the 2004 Los Angeles Auto Show. The latest is the xB RS 6.0 in Absolutely Red.

The ultimate question is: has the xB changed into something else? and if so, does it matter? is it, in fact, better? If your gut response is that it never should have changed, then [a] you might want to give it a test drive, anyway, and you might be really pleasantly surprised; and/or [b] you may be a prospect for a used first-generation xB; and/or [c] you may find yourself looking at the Nissan Cube (though, having looked, you may or may not appreciate the reasons Scion has beefed up a bit). The new-gen xB has moved forward by a lightyear.

Once a niche vehicle targeted toward a limited demographic, the Scion xB has now entered the mainstream—all the moreso when and if gas prices again broaden the mainstream with a return to last year's levels. Though it may have left a small segment of its original niche behind, this time around the Scion xB may seem a right-sized and useful choice for just about anyone. ■



NICHE ODDITIES (PROUDLY)

NISSAN CUBE



Engine	122 hp	Price	\$ 13,990-19,370
Overall length	156.7"	Wheelbase	99.6"
Overall width	66.7"	Overall height	65.0"
Weight	2762-2864 lb	EPA	30

SCION xB (ORIG)



Engine	103-108 hp	Price	\$ 14,165-19,000
Overall length	155.3"	Wheelbase	98.4"
Overall width	66.5"	Overall height	64.6"
Weight	2395 lb	EPA ...[old system]	31-35

MOVING MORE MAINSTREAM

SCION xB (NEW)



Engine	158 hp	Price	\$ 15,750-18,343
Overall length	167.3"	Wheelbase	102.4"
Overall width	69.3"	Overall height	64.7"
Weight	3020 lb	EPA	22/28

KIA SOUL



Engine	122-142 hp	Price	\$ 13,995-17,645
Overall length	161.6"	Wheelbase	100.4"
Overall width	70.3"	Overall height	63.4"
Weight	2800 lb	EPA	24/30

STILL A BIT OF EACH / NEITHER

HONDA ELEMENT



Engine	166 hp	Price	\$ 20,275-25,285
Overall length	±170"	Wheelbase	101.4"
Overall width	71.6"	Overall height	±70"
Weight	3515-3624 lb	EPA	comb 20-22