

Upgraded xB, new xD Scion are ho-hum additions to the edgy brand

by Jerry Garrett

Scion is replacing its two original models this fall, and although the new xB and xD are big improvements in nearly every way over the models they replaced, the greatest concern about them is, "Are they weird enough?"

SCION - The five-door Scion xD replaces the smaller xA. The redesigned xB is a foot longer and almost three inches wider than its predecessor. CNS Photo. When Toyota brought Scion into the automotive world in 2004, it was like the company had an interesting idea for a new-car company, but no cars for it. So the company tossed a couple of poorly disguised Toyota microcars from the Japanese domestic market into showrooms, re-badged as Scions, until - we were told - true Scions could be developed from the ground up.

The xA was the runt of the litter. It was so punchless that during our original test drive of it, we kept asking (like the nightclub comedian tapping his microphone after a joke flopped), "Is this thing on?" The nearly-as-gutless xB, on the other hand, was such a quirky little box; it became something of a cult hit.

The new xB is not nearly so scary, but is that a good thing? The "box" has grown. In fact, Toyota, or Scion, has made it so much bigger that it's now rated a compact - up from subcompact status. The xB's "edge" has been softened along with its edges, which are now curves instead of corners. It's much more vanlike, with more room for cargo and passengers. Scion claims there's room for five, although 4.5 is probably more like it.

The new xD is to Scion's lineup what niece Marilyn was to the Munster family.

For anyone not familiar with the 1964-66 black-and-white television show, the Munsters were a family of horror-movie caricatures who thought they were no different from a typical American family. Marilyn appeared, however, to be completely normal - just like the xD.

It is so distressingly normal, it is almost suspiciously so; in fact, essentially a glammed-up Yaris. This seems, to me, a needless duplication of the company's subcompact offerings.

The Scion line's mission is allegedly to entice the youth market with non-traditional automotive products. The xD, however, is as old-school as Grandpa Munster's pre-Transylvanian double-breasted suits. Grandpa portrayer Al Lewis, by the way, died just last year, having lived only slightly longer than has Toyota's Corolla - so far

The palette of available exterior color choices for the xD (and the xB, for that matter) is about as monochromatic as the old TV show. Black, white and shades of gray comprise four of the six choices. The only interior offering is Dark Charcoal cloth. Are these the edgy offerings that are likely to capture the short attention spans of a youth culture fixated on whether this week their iPods should be skinned in purple, pink, green or orange?

The liveliest aspect of either of these new Scions is to be found under their hoods. The xD gets a 1.8-liter, four-cylinder engine mated to either a five-speed manual or a four-speed automatic. You might think the engine's 128-horsepower output sounds unimpressive, but the xD is just a 2,650-pound vehicle. Our test drive found it to be almost zippy enough to exhibit some torque-steer.

The xB is 400 pounds porkier than its svelte stablemate, so it needed - and got - more horsepower. It is now endowed with 158 horsepower and 162 foot-pounds of torque from a 2.4-liter, four-cylinder engine. The xB's previous "powerplant" displaced 1.8 liters and its output barely registered in the triple digits.

On the highway, the xD hits an almost hybrid-like 33 miles per gallon, while the xB achieves a more modest 28. Expect low- to mid-20s around town. Each engine uses regular unleaded.

Although I generally prefer manually shifted vehicles, I would recommend the automatic for either car, since the manual shifter and the clutch are fussy to operate and quickly lose their novelty in city driving. However,

fuel mileage suffers slightly with the automatic.

The xD is unremarkably suspended by an independent MacPherson-strut front and a torsion-beam rear. The xB adds a front stabilizer bar, and slightly wider wheels and 16-inch tires.

Scion MSRPs have grown along with the sizes of these new offerings. The base xB, \$15,650 to \$16,600, includes a full complement of air bags (including curtain bags), traction and stability control, anti-lock brakes, tire-pressure monitoring, air conditioning, a wide array of power amenities and a stereo system with digital media connectivity.

It's possible to boost the price of the car easily beyond \$20,000 with electronic add-ons, such as DVD navigation and entertainment systems. Alloy wheels and a rear spoiler can also bump the drive-out price another additional \$1,200 or so.

The xD is generally about \$500 less, but it lacks stability control with traction control that comes standard on the xB.

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