

SMALL CAR, BIG MILEAGE

Surprisingly spacious
2012 Toyota Prius c
offers hybrid benefits
for a lower price

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Since hybrids came on the market, car buyers have faced a cold, hard fact: To get great mileage, they have to pay more for a hybrid than they would for a traditional gas-powered car.

Even Toyota's best-selling Prius costs thousands more than a Toyota Yaris or Corolla, two cars that go from point A to point B while carrying five people. The 2012 Toyota Prius c obliterates the hybrid price penalty with a \$19,000 starting price and a segment-leading 50 mpg combined.

Hybrid performance

Like the familiar Prius liftback, the Prius c features Toyota's Synergy hybrid system, which has been refined to the point where we've observed its 50 mpg estimate over hundreds of real-world miles since the liftback's 2009 debut.

The Prius c teams a smaller four-cylinder gasoline engine – 1.5 liters and 73 horsepower – with an electric motor, for a combined 99-hp rating. The battery pack features fewer battery cells – 120 versus 168 – so it can fit tightly underneath the rear seats instead of under the cargo area, where it is in the traditional Prius. Other fuel-saving elements have also been downsized, like a smaller electric power steering system, to aid efficiency.

Mileage ratings are 53/46 mpg city/highway, and 50 mpg combined. The regular Prius gets an EPA-estimated 51/48 mpg and the same combined rating.

A hybrid isn't a magical car. The Prius c's tiny engine strained going up steep hills, as do many subcompacts, and



mileage dropped significantly. The Prius c Four handled better than the rest of the lineup without giving up what is a remarkably comfortable ride. Steering was less sharp in the other Prius c models, with much more play in the steering wheel. The standard low-rolling-resistance tires offered decent grip and didn't add excessive road noise. Overall, road noise was better than average for the subcompact class. The Prius c's braking was typical of hybrids with regenerative brakes. They feel spongy as the hybrid system engages to recapture energy for the battery.

Interior

When you think of a \$19,000 subcompact car with an advanced hybrid system – and a backseat – you expect the interior to be low-rent. That's not the case here. While the base Prius c One is equipped with seating materials that could have been on a 1982 Corolla, the rest of the cabin materials are on par with other competitors.

At 5-foot-10, I was perfectly comfortable in the

driver and front passenger seats over hours of driving. That included the Prius c One's low-grade fabric seats as well as the Four's SofTex seats. Standard on that trim level, SofTex is a synthetic leather that's purportedly ecologically friendly.

Each seat type featured nice bolsters and a fair amount of thigh support considering the generally upright seating position.

Spread around the cabin for both the driver and passengers were numerous cubbies, all of which were large enough for smartphones or larger items.

The cargo area is rated 17.1 cubic feet, but it appeared much smaller than that. An average family's grocery trip would likely overwhelm the space, as would taking a couple of friends to the airport. However, the backseat does fold down, either in one piece – in the Prius c One – or in a 60/40 split in the other trim levels. Most likely, that utility will be enough for buyers of a vehicle this size.

Features

The car's features can be broken down by trim level. Very few options are available.

The Prius c One starts at \$18,950 (before a \$760 destination charge) and includes a USB port, Bluetooth phone and audio, hill start assist, 15-inch steel wheels, a tilt/telescoping steering wheel, a four-speaker stereo and steering-wheel-mounted audio, climate and phone controls.

The Prius c Two starts at \$19,900 and adds a six-speaker stereo, a six-way adjustable driver's seat, a 60/40-split folding backseat, cruise control and a center armrest.

The Prius c Three starts at \$21,635 and adds navigation and Toyota's Entune system, body-colored door handles, a Touch Tracer display, push-button start, and keyless entry and cargo area.

The Prius c Four starts at \$23,230 and adds 15-inch alloy wheels, heated SofTex front seats, fog lamps and body-colored mirrors with integrated turn signals.

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Fort Lauderdale, where Glenn retrieved his nifty little sports car.

While the rest of the automotive-buying public will have to wait until June 1 to get their hands on an FR-S, Glenn was able to pick up his car last week, thanks to the luck of draw.

A 23-year-old insurance agent who graduated from FSU last year, Glenn had been driving around South Florida in his dad's ancient Oldsmobile Cutlass, which had more than a decade and a half's worth of miles on the speedometer.

While looking at new cars online, he stumbled on stories about the FR-S concept car, being developed in conjunction with Subaru, which is unveiling its own version of the car, the BRZ, next month.

His interest piqued, Glenn signed up for Scion's "First 86" program, in which 86 prospective buyers would be chosen to get their car earlier than the general public.

Notified by email that he had been selected to be part of the early consumer outreach program – and an unofficial test driver – Glenn plunked down a deposit and waited to hear news about the car.

What came next was something of a surprise. Scion offered him and the other "First 86" new owners an all-expense paid trip to California for a tour



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of Toyota Motor Sports headquarters, a test drive and a reception with Scion's top brass..

Not surprisingly, many of the others who made the April trip along with Glenn were car enthusiasts, who had done a lot of homework.

Designed to be light and quick, the FR-S is a car that is nimble and handles well. It also packs a lot of power for a car of such compact size.

"You really get a feel for the road," says Glenn, who took his car on a test drive the day before he actually picked it up.

Equipped with a 2.0-liter horizontal engine, which gives the vehicle a low center of gravity, the FR-S come with 200 horsepower and 151 pound-feet of torque. It can go from 0 to 60 in about 6.6 seconds and does fairly well on fuel with EPA ratings of 25 miles per gallon city and 34 on the highway.

While you're not going to find many frills on the interior of the FR-S, you will find exceptional styling on the outside. Ad that's going to be enough to turn a few heads – at least until more of the cars make their way to South Florida.

Want to read more about what's going on in the automotive retail industry? Check out Rich Pollack's blog at www.southfloridiaroad.blogspot.com. On the South Florida Road is written by Rich Pollack, an independent writer for Delray Beach-based Pollack Communications.