

# OVERDRIVE

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December 2010 Volume 13 Issue 4 ₹ 125

## TOYOTA ETIOS

*Swift & Dzire rival driven!*



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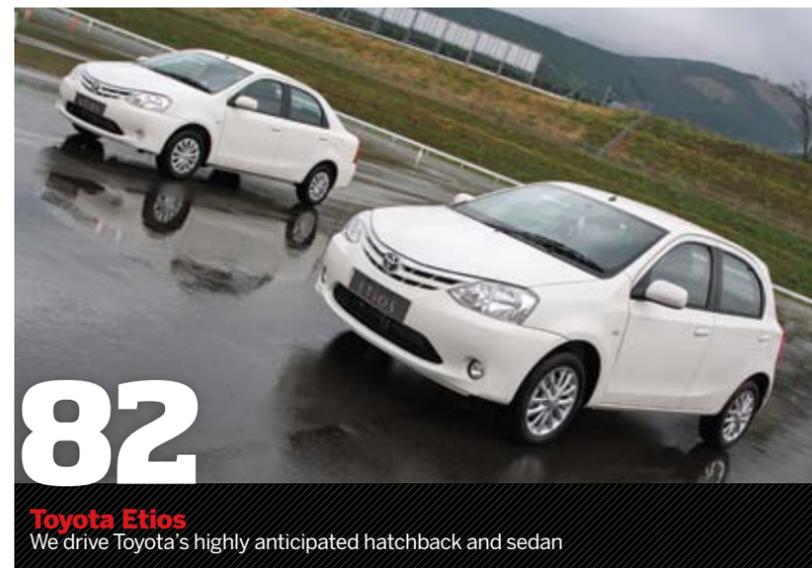
**ROAD TEST**  
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# Mass class

The Etios marks Toyota's entry into the volume segment in India

Words **Sirish Chandran**

It couldn't have escaped notice that despite being a relative minnow (how small? Maruti sells 16 times as many cars, and even Chevy and Ford outsell it!), Toyota commands incredibly good brand equity in India. For good reason too. We may not always be in sync with the 'Toyota Way' but fact is its slow, steady and research-and-more-research approach has ensured that not a single dud has gone on sale in a decade. Remember the bread-box-on-wheels that was the Qualis? Hand on my heart I still maintain that even ten years down the line a better alternative has yet to go on sale.

And so with expectations banging against the rev limiter we trooped off to Japan for our first driving impression of the Etios – the car that finally marks Toyota's entry into the volume segment in India, a segment it has inexplicably left untouched for a decade. Things didn't kick off on a strong note though. The day was miserable, cold, spitting with rain, grey as Michelle Obama's dress when she stepped off Air Force One. And the cars, no head-turners by any stretch of imagination, were in the worst possible colour for the conditions, a drab off white-ish hue that was splattered with grime and spray.

So let's get the styling out of the way first. Remember the Etios concept that was displayed at the Auto Expo? Remember the unfortunate comments linking it to another stylistically-challenged rival? Well, things haven't changed. Away from the strobes and flattering lighting of a motor show stand the car looks even more unimaginative if anything. Turns out the Etios concept wasn't a concept at all. By then the styling had been frozen and showcasing the Etios at the Expo followed by the massive round of Toyota Q World road shows was to get the Indian public acclimatised to it. No matter how hoarse we cried (and we did!) the styling wasn't going to change.

What we get then are plain conservative lines that, come to think of it, are typical of the way Toyota does things. Think back. Did

you ever stick a Toyota poster on your bedroom wall? No, its priorities lie elsewhere (which we will shortly come to) so on the outside you're stuck with a car that will blend in the background. The best part of the car is the nose with the chromed upper slat of the grille (called 'smile line' – don't ask!) and vertical ribs in the bonnet that extend into the grille to frame the Toyota logo. On the white car though this detail is all but lost – trust me, white is best left to the fleet operators, you want one in the darker colors. The car in these pictures also lacks the waistline rubbing strips which break the monotony of the flanks and the side sill extensions which visually lower the car and are part of the huge catalogue of accessories that Toyota hopes you will dip into generously.

Toyota claims the Etios was designed to be a sedan first and then a hatch so the boot doesn't look like a cut-paste afterthought. That you have to agree with. Unlike the Swift Dzire the boot is well integrated and the Etios has the proportions and stance of a proper sedan. In fact when you compare it with the intended competition – Dzire, Fiesta, Indigo, Logan – stylistically the Etios seems par for the course.

Step inside and it's not like things improve massively. The dashboard is again the same as what was shown at the Auto Expo save for the deletion of motor show trinkets and the retina-searing colours. And stylistically it is a rather plain affair, primarily rectangular in shape with the speedo sited in the middle on top of the central console (like the Indica Vista). Toyota's engineers claim this is better for visibility but I have never been a fan of an expanse of nothingness staring back at me from behind the steering wheel and the Etios does nothing to win me over. The speedo dials also look like a giant sticker and it's only in the night, when it is neatly back-lit, that it looks nice. Below it is an integrated stereo and the top end versions also get steering-wheel mounted audio controls.

The seats are one-piece units with integrated headrests (similar to the iio) but they





EVEN IN FIFTH GEAR AT AROUND 50KMPH THE ETIOS PULLED QUITE STRONGLY WHICH AUGURS WELL FOR THE DRIVING CYCLE IT WILL BE SUBJECT TO IN INDIA

are flat and featureless, only livened up by red fabric inserts on the top end variants. In fact the rear seat is an even flatter and featureless bench and it cries out for those red inserts to break the monotony.

So it may not be stylish but on practicality it scores tremendously. The air-con vents for instance - both the central vents are vertically stacked to the left of the stereo which looks odd, even like a cost-cutting measure, but it solves the problem of the steering wheel and driver's fist blocking cold air directed at the driver's face. Then there's the glove box which is ridiculously huge and can hold five half-litre water bottles. And that's not at the cost of a passenger side airbag. In fact Toyota has found place for an astonishing seven water bottles in the cabin.

But the absolute highlight is the steering wheel - a flat-bottomed sporty one with nice meaty grips in the 10-to-2 position (think Audi R8!). It's a surprising departure from the rest of the car which is determinedly non-sporty. You step inside a conservative sedan, slide behind the wheel, stare at the nothingness in front of you, then grip the wheel and quietly go 'wow'!

That's me though. For customers shopping for an entry-level sedan the highlight will be the rear seat. You might balk at the flat and featureless bench but what it does is liberate an amazing amount of room. The edges of the seat don't curl up and the doors don't curve inwards so every cubic inch of

space is usable. And it has been used to make this a very spacious car. Somehow I found myself sandwiched in the middle for two laps of the course and I was properly amazed at how comfortable the back seat is, even in the middle thanks to the flat floor (like the Civic). And it's not just shoulder room, there's a lot of knee room and headroom making it the best in class in this respect.

The passenger ride also threw up a disturbing issue. Since the Etios lacks a shroud inside the wheelarches a lot of road noise gets transferred to the cabin, particularly of water being kicked up by the tyres and slapping against the undercarriage. To keep costs in check the Etios also gets a single wiper (like the Nano) but the wiper doesn't reach the right extremity of the windshield leaving a big patch of glass unwiped. Toyota says this will be taken care of in production cars.

Our first driving impression was confined to the Mobilias safety education centre of the Toyota-owned Fuji Speedway (frustratingly we would have no speed-related activities while being assaulted by the soundtrack of Lambos and Porsches lapping the main circuit) and that's too controlled an environment to truly judge a car's dynamics. And it was wet. But punting it round the short handling course the Etios felt sure-footed with good mechanical grip. The top-end version gets 15-inch alloy rims with 185/60 tyres but the base versions run on 14-inch steel wheels with narrower (fuel efficiency) tyres and

While it may not be a very stylish car, the Etios does have the stance and proportions of a proper sedan and does not look like a hatch with a boot slapped on

won't offer as much grip. The steering, while light, is also quick and precise enough to complement the sporty design of the wheel. Of course most customers in this segment value ride quality over handling and consequently the suspension is soft which leads to a fair bit of body roll. We also drove the car over a simulated rough road and attacked the two speed-breakers on the course with gusto but while that's hardly an indication of how it will ride on Indian roads all signs point to a very comfy ride.

On those short laps the Etios also displayed a rather sprightly character. Power comes from a 1.5-litre four-cylinder DOHC petrol unit that makes 90PS of power, a relatively mild state of tune considering the 1.2-litre engine in the Etios hatch makes 80PS. But since the Etios's EFC platform (Emerging market Frontier Car - an all-new platform to meet Indian requirements while pruning costs viciously) weighs just 930kg (making it the lightest sedan in the country) that results in a competitive power-to-weight ratio.

H Noritake, chief engineer of the Etios said the focus has been on driveability and strong torque, particularly in the 2500-3000rpm band which is the range at which we operate our engines in India. Max torque of 132Nm comes in at 3000rpm and that gives it strong



Sporty flat-bottomed steering wheel on the top end VX variant; also gets audio controls. Speedo and tachometer located on top of central console. Glove box is massive, holds five half-litre bottles. Blacks and greys dominate the cabin while VX variant gets red inserts on seats. Rear seat is very spacious and the flat floor makes it comfortable for the third passenger

bottom end grunt. Even in fifth gear at around 50kmph the Etios pulled quite strongly which augurs well for the driving cycle it will be subject to in India. Of course fuel efficiency has been prioritised and it has an ARAI certified fuel efficiency of 17.6kmpl. The engine is mated to a slick five-speed gearbox and there's no automatic for now.

But that's just the start. The icing on the cake comes next year, in the form of the 1.4-litre D4-D diesel engine which presently does duty in the Corolla. It makes 85PS of power, which doesn't sound like much, but even in the Corolla (which is a much heavier car) the strong bottom end torque makes it feel adequate and then there's the refinement and fuel efficiency that are second to none.

Of course all will finally hinge on pricing and Toyota is making no bones about the fact that the Swift Dzire is being firmly targeted - on spec, on equipment and on price. TKM have done their homework and the Etios will start with a localisation content of 70 per cent going up to 90 per cent and in two years an engine and transmission plant will also go on stream to match Maruti's incredible cost structure. And no matter how strong its brand equity there are no plans to charge a premium for the Toyota badge. That means a starting price of under ₹ 5.5 lakh for the base 'J' version going up to ₹ 6.5 lakh for the fully loaded 'VX' that gets twin front airbags, ABS, integrated stereo, alloys and two-tone upholstery. That's the last piece in the jigsaw and if our predictions are right TKM will have no problem shifting every single one of the 70,000 cars planned in the first year.

A bit player? No longer will you be able to call Toyota that. [Go](#)

#### SPECIFICATION

TYPE	4-cyl, 16-valve, 1496cc
Max power	90PS@5600rpm
Max torque	132Nm@3000rpm
LxWxH	4265x1695x1510mm
Wheelbase	2550mm
Price	₹ 5.5 lakh to ₹ 6.5 lakh, estimated
	+ Space, ride, refinement, quality
	- Conservative styling

# Crowded house

What are the Toyota Etios prospects in the hatchback segment?

Words **Sirish Chandran**



**P**ositioning the Etios straight at the Swift Dzire makes tremendous sense. Despite looking like a blatant cut-paste job, despite being in the market for over two years and despite not being very spacious the Dzire still sells over 10,000 units every month. By far and away it is still the segment benchmark and still commands a waiting period, proving there is huge demand for a sensible, well-priced and well-equipped C-segment sedan. But

the meat in the Indian car sandwich is still small cars – Maruti Suzuki alone sells over 77,000 hatchbacks every month. And that's the pie Toyota will be after when the Etios hatch is launched in March 2011.

Launching the sedan first is a smart move – it helps establish the Etios as a sedan (and thus as an upmarket car in the Indian psyche) and not a hatch on to which a boot was slapped on. Visually though there's no hiding the lineage as from the front they both look bang identical. Where the hatch scores is that

the treatment of the rear quarters isn't as drab as the sedan and in the right colour with the ride body kit (remember the hatch shown at the Auto Expo?) it can even look sporty. The only tweaks to the hatch, from the Auto Expo concept, is the addition of a chrome bar on the tailgate (which I don't particularly care for) and a small black sticker around the C-pillar which gives the impression of a larger and neater glass house.

Both the sedan and the hatch share the platform and MacPherson struts at the front



Hatch is considerably more stylish than the sedan, particularly in the treatment of the tailgate. Chrome strip across it might not be to everybody's tastes. The 1.2-litre 4-cyl engine closely related to the sedan's 1.5, makes 80PS of power. Cheaper trim variants get a normal round steering wheel, not the flat-bottomed one

and torsion beam at the rear (with different spring and damper rates to account for the weight difference) but the hatch has a shorter wheelbase - 2460mm to the sedan's 2550mm to fall within the four-metre excise-mandated definition of a small car. Proportionately there is a reduction in rear knee room though by no stretch can you call the Etios hatch cramped. In fact it is still quite spacious with shoulder room as generous as the sedan and apart from the Jazz it is the only hatch with a flat floor thus ensuring even passengers sitting on the central perch won't be uncomfortable.

The interiors of the hatch are identical to the sedan and there will be the same four trim levels with the top end VX version being completely kitted out with twin airbags, ABS, alloys and integrated stereo. It also gets the flat-bottomed steering wheel which actually suits the hatch better than the sedan. None of the variants get climate control like the Swift.

To qualify as a small car the engine is downsized to 1.2 litres but this hasn't been



done by lopping off one cylinder and making it a 3-cylinder (akin to what Maruti and VW are doing). Chief engineer Noritake reasoned that Toyota has tremendous experience with four-cylinder engines and it not only made sense to stick to what they know but a three-cylinder engine could never match the refinement of a four-pot. And refinement was a huge big priority while designing the Etios, as it is for every Toyota.

The 1.2-litre engine makes 80PS of power which neatly slots in the middle of the class, between the Polo's 75PS and the Swift's 85PS. Torque, again, will be one of the strong suits of the engine, making it effortless to pilot in city traffic. At 890kg the hatch is also the lightest in this segment which should bode well not just for performance but also for fuel efficiency which will eclipse that of the sedans 1.5-litre engine and challenge the best in the class.

The shorter wheelbase and more compact dimensions will also make the hatch more fun to drive than the sedan but taking the Swift on the enthusiast plank was never as much a priority as delivering a plush ride quality. As with all Toyotas the hatch will follow the middle road and strike a sensible balance for the Indian customer.

So does the Etios stand as good a chance of success in the hatchback segment, as it surely does in the entry-sedan segment? It's not going to be cakewalk, that's for sure, especially when you consider buyers are not only spoiled by a vast and excellent range of hatchbacks but next year there will be the completely revamped next-generation Swift and Honda's maiden (sensibly priced) hatchback. The Etios will have its work cut out. **OD**