

Toyota Starlet 1.4L XR MT: Low-slung and *planted*

 By [Alan Duggan](#)

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In case you missed it, Toyota's Starlet is more or less the same car as Suzuki's Baleno, albeit with differences in pricing, warranties and service plan offerings. Oh, and the grille. If you like one, you'll probably like the other. I won't go into the gruesome details, but as always, you should check out the various options before committing your money, taking into account dealer networks and other factors.



Image credit: Alan Duggan

At the risk of stating the obvious, people are weird. Motorists who spend 95% of their driving time in the urban commute will often choose a new and thoroughly unsuitable vehicle based entirely on its looks, with nary a thought for practicality, reliability or the cost of services and repairs. Beguiled by aggressive grilles, body panels from the Schwarzenegger School of Automotive Design and the debatable street cred of a 4x4 or GTi badge, they ignore such practical considerations as fuel economy, ease of parking, bank loan repayments, the price and availability of spare parts - you know, the stuff that comes later.

Take my wife's French runabout, a car that was clearly designed by a committee of drunk people with a cruel sense of humour. Pieces break off with reckless abandon, the aircon and electric windows stopped working years ago for no discernible reason, much of the bodywork has to be removed to access anything, and I hate it more than I hate *Achy Breaky Heart*.

To make things worse, a mechanic at a local repair shop listened to my rant last week about French imports, then announced that he thought it was a "brilliant little car" - about 15 seconds before telling me it would cost the equivalent of South Africa's GDP to fix the latest ailment. Okay, back to the Starlet.

Getting up versus getting out

Having spent most of the past 20 years driving SUVs both large and compact on my daily commute, I must admit to a penchant for a higher seating position and better view of the minibuses cutting in front of me with no warning. Against that, I

need to keep reminding myself - and this after driving literally hundreds of cars over the years - that it's not just about me, and that I need to try and understand the interests and desires of the target market.

I quickly discovered that exiting the Starlet meant getting up rather than getting out. In other words, it's quite a low-slung car. This means that you'll feel reassuringly planted - I can't think of a better word, unless it's stable - on the road while you enjoy the intuitive feel of the steering, the forgiving suspension (it ironed out the bumps on a very dodgy farm road) and rather good handling on the twisties.

Whereas the engine proved adequate - let's face it, 68kW is not exactly the stuff of legends - in town and on the highway, the modest torque became evident on steeper hills. But hey, that's why they invented gearboxes. Among the features I liked were the generous rear-seat legroom, the quiet engine, the leather-trimmed steering with satellite controls and the surprising amount of luggage space, which easily absorbed a trio of surfboards laid diagonally with the rear seatback folded down.



Image credit: Alan Duggan

You get a fairly high spec for your money: park distance control with rearview camera, brake assist, ABS, EBD (electronic brake force distribution), vehicle stability control, park distance control with rearview camera, an infotainment system featuring Android Auto and Apple CarPlay, cruise control, hands-free telephony, daytime running lights, alloy wheels and automatic climate control.



Image credit: Alan Duggan

If the XR is a little rich for your blood, you can buy the entry-level Starlet 1.4L Xi MT for R217,500 or the up-specced Starlet 1.4L Xs MT for R228,400 (you'll pay an extra R20,000 for the auto version).

Do I like the Starlet? Yes, I do.

Toyota Starlet 1.4L XR MT: Just the facts

- Price: R274,400
- Engine: 1.4l petrol
- Transmission: Five-speed manual
- Fuel consumption: 5.1ls/100km (combined cycle, claimed)
- Power: 68kW at 6,000r/min
- Max torque: 130Nm at 3,200r/min
- Performance: Top speed 180km/h, 0 to 100km/h in 10.9 seconds
- Safety: Side, curtain, driver and front-passenger airbags, alarm/immobiliser
- Warranty: Three years/100,000km
- Service plan: Three services/45,000 km

ABOUT ALAN DUGGAN

Alan Duggan was the founding editor of *Popular Mechanics* in South Africa and is a former motoring correspondent for the *Sunday Times* and other publications.

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