

USED CARS

2003-08 TOYOTA PRIUS

Seen to be green

Toyota's Prius is slowly coming into its own, writes
GRAHAM SMITH

WHEN Toyota released the Prius hybrid, the green debate was in its infancy and climate-change sceptics poured scorn on the radical newcomer.

That debate is now driving our choice in cars, and the just-replaced second-generation Prius has become an option for environmentally aware used-car buyers.

The rationale behind the Prius is to reduce reliance on the petrol engine and therefore the amount of fuel burnt and CO₂ emitted by combining it with an electric motor.

MODEL WATCH

TOYOTA launched the first-generation Prius hybrid here in 2001 with claims it would cut fuel use by 50 per cent and tailpipe emissions by 80 per cent.

In 2003 the second-generation model arrived amid claims it could better those numbers.

Driving a Prius was a new experience, one that was mostly silent. The front-wheel-drive Prius five-door hatch used a combination of a small 1.5-litre four-cylinder petrol engine and electric motor for motivation, and, depending on the driving circumstances, one or both could be in use.

When at rest at, say, traffic lights, there's an eerie silence when neither motor runs. When the Prius moves off, the electric motor does the work. Only when more acceleration is called for does the petrol motor start.

Once cruise speed is reached the petrol motor does most of the work, because it is at its most efficient at steady speed. At that time the electric motor becomes a generator and feeds the system's batteries.

The Prius drives smoothly and changeover between petrol and electric motivation is seamless.

The Prius was good to drive, quiet and smooth with decent performance in traffic and on the highway. When



Horses for courses: the amount of fuel you save in a Prius depends very much on the type of driving you do.

pitted against the clock it would match a Corolla for acceleration.

If the focus was on the hybrid drive system there were also all the features you could want in your daily driver. It came standard with climate-controlled airconditioning, cruise, remote central locking, immobiliser, power windows and mirrors, and six-speaker CD sound.

The I-Tech model also had a six-stack CD, leather trim, nine-speaker sound system, reversing camera and sat-nav.

ON THE LOT

THE Prius might appeal to those buyers who have a green conscience or want to be seen to be green, but it is still viewed with suspicion by most motorists.

For those reasons its appeal is limited, and that can affect resale.

Pay \$15,000-\$25,000 for a regular Prius, or \$20,000-\$30,000 for a better specced I-Tech.

IN THE SHOP

DRIVING a Prius effectively links you to a Toyota dealer, because as

yet only they have the knowledge and tools to service and repair it.

There is some concern about the life of the batteries used in the Prius, and for good reason: they are expensive, about \$4000.

That said, Toyota says they will last the life of the car, and — better still — the company says it has sold only a handful through its spare-parts service in the eight years the Prius has been on the market here.

Because of the complexity of the Prius it is best to be cautious when thinking of buying one secondhand. Have it checked by a Toyota dealer.

Apart from checking the operation of the hybrid system, make the usual checks for crash repairs and regular servicing.

IN A CRASH

THE Prius was crammed with all safety features — dual front airbags and seat belt pre-tensioners as standard; head airbags and side front airbags in the I-Tech.

Active safety came from anti-skid brakes, brake-force distribution, emergency brake assist and traction control. But if you stepped up to the

I-Tech you also had electronic stability control.

AT THE PUMP

THE Prius is primarily about reducing greenhouse gas emission, but owners are keen to point out its fuel-saving virtues as well.

But the amount of fuel you save in a Prius depends very much on the type of driving you do.

The more stop-start city driving you do the more fuel you will save. Savings on the highway, where the petrol engine is used more, are much less.

Tests of a Prius by *carsGuide* in 2005 showed the hybrid would use 4.1 litres for 100km around town, whereas out on the highway it would run in the high fives and was no more economical than a small four-cylinder petrol or diesel car.

THE BOTTOM LINE

IT'S not a gimmick, the driving future is here. But it isn't cheap and is yet to be proven in the long term.

80/100

ALL ANGLES

LOOK FOR

- Deafening silence
- Smooth driving
- Low fuel bills
- Comfortable and roomy

SHOP IT AGAINST

Honda Civic Hybrid (2004-07)

Honda hasn't made much of a fuss of its Civic hybrid, and it hasn't had much of an impact. If the Toyota is still a relative unknown in the field, the Civic is more so.

Pay \$16,000-\$25,000.



Honda Jazz (2002-07)

A small but practical car that's well built and performs well. It is also economical for those who aren't sure about the reliability of the complex hybrid drive systems.

Pay \$8000-\$21,000.



Toyota Corolla (2001-07)

The small-car benchmark is a known quantity, but questions about hybrids will remain until they're proven in the field.

Pay \$9000-\$22,000.



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COMING UP

Do you own a 2003-07 Subaru Liberty/Outback? If so, tell us what you think. Send your comments to Graham Smith at *CarsGuide*, or email grah.smith@bigpond.com

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