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The Urban Driver: Top 10 Vehicles for the Urban Grind

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[Top 10 Vehicles for the Urban Grind](#)

Last week, Autos.ca contributor Justin Pritchard presented us with a list and short brief notes about the [best winter highway cars](#). Justin knows what he's talking about – he spends over 2,000 kilometres weekly in different cars, driving from Sudbury, Ontario to the periphery of the GTA and back. That sort of distance in woolly weather demands some specific traits in a car.

I on the other hand, spend what feels like over 2,000 minutes in glacial gridlock within the actual GTA every week, also in a different car from week to week. That sort of white-knuckle competition has its own list of needs too: size, style and power.

Small is good for parking, squeezing between boneheads and escaping construction tie-ups. If you can't go small, economy of size is still vital.

Style is important too. Not to imply that folks north of the 407 don't have or love style but, in the city, where space is at a premium, your car becomes like jewellery or furniture in a condo. Just a few carefully chosen pieces say plenty about you.

Finally, power matters. You want to be able to leap on sudden opportunities. Without much, it takes longer to execute, say, a lane change and someone has probably already taken the opportunity from you.

With these criteria in mind, here are ten recommended city rides I've enjoyed over the past year, divided into five categories. Within each category I offer an affordable and more expensive alternative.

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Top 10 Vehicles for the Urban Grind. Click image to enlarge

Category 1: Cute For You!

This is the young urban driver who wants in-your-face style without blowing the bank. Though they're what drunken packs of suburban jocks pick up and dump in pools after being unleashed from clubs in the wee hours, these two cars are still worthy of consideration... Just consider a safe place to store them, too.

Scion iQ

Some call it making a statement; others a question mark. But, like light beer and yoga, people who favour these tiny pods with their carnival ride–container shape favour them a lot. An obvious poke in the eye of the Smart car, iQ does several important things better. Its upshifts are far less noticeable. It seats four, not two — and albeit not all comfortably — unless you want trunk space. Then you must eject the rear passengers and flatten the back seats. (Milking that extra seating space, the iQ's marketing says it's bigger than you think. It's not.) Finally it's also cheaper than the Smart, although if price is paramount, Toyota, Mazda, Mitsubishi, Kia, GM, Ford and Hyundai all offer cheaper subcompacts that don't make the statement.

Fiat 500 Abarth

From the outset the reintroduced 500 (it was around for decades then disappeared long enough for most of us to forget its previous generations' shortcomings) garnered loads of attention. With such bold design, like the iQ, it's hard not to have a strong opinion about it. Initially gearheads tended to, how you say, hate it. Then last year came the sporty Abarth and that changed many opinions. The turbocharged 1.4L engine launches this wheeled can like a pinball. A tiny turning circle and narrow body ensure no small space is left unexploited. With its wheels in the four corners of the car, it's as stable as a table in corners. So you can push and push it. Fun. Inside, the bold Italian design, featuring all that wicked black leather, makes each ride a smile-in-progress. Unless you're tall and in the back: then every bump is a potential ABI [Acquired Brain Injury, for those of us not following the latest in sports medicine news. —Ed.].

Category 2: Granola Boxes

People ask what's greenest: electric, hybrid or diesel? The answer is, 'depends'. Electric cars have been around for a century. They just haven't been practical off the golf course — but urban infrastructure is increasing viability. Many huge SUVs and trucks are coming in hybrid editions, which leaves you wondering whether they really read the green memo closely. I love clean diesels but have yet to try the latest offerings, so can't recommend the 2013s yet.

Frankly the 'greenest' cars belong to drivers who are light-footed, regularly check tire pressure, maintain their vehicles and keep them years longer, rather than scuttling them for two fresh tonnes of recyclable material every other year.



Top 10 Vehicles for the Urban Grind. Click image to enlarge

Mitsubishi i-MiEV

In regular driving mode, D, it's responsive and fun. The marketers should use the headline, "Charge!" (Get it?) Configured similarly to a lot of tiny cars mentioned here, wheels at the corners, it's a physics experiment trying to tip it in corners. In Eco regenerative braking modes, it's positively meditative and only advisable for the most patient of green warriors. For its size, you'd expect a smaller price tag, so milk any government green incentives. But with the wheelbase almost matching car length it seats four with surprising comfort — that is, during a city commute — so carpool to get some of that cash back.

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Electric cars have the undeserved reputation of being gutless. But without gears, they deliver instant full torque, like toddlers who awake from naptime and instantly take off — only much quieter. What an opportunity! The Leaf gives the driver the balanced steering and sporty handling to control that sudden surge into bends and hills. Many people fear they'll run out of electricity without an electric filling station or 2 km extension cord nearby. The Leaf's charge lasts a relief-inducing 175 km, compared to the Chevrolet Volt's 77.

Category 3: The Performance Sedan

Why go flashy, oversized or undersized, when a sporty sedan coolly offers the spirited driver all the excitement you'd want? If you're the type who leaves an hour before sunrise to beat traffic and actually enjoy the physical pleasure of driving, here are two genuine contenders.

Infiniti G37x AWD Sedan

Okay, so there's not really a cheaper alternative here. And if I could, I'd list three or four others. Unlike some Driver Sport modes that claim to adjust to your driving style and shift gears accordingly, this G37's truly did. Possibly because it had just 205 km total on it when I picked it up. Infiniti loaned it to me to fly to Montreal and back in spring, on either side of the Grand Prix. They're partners with the typically winning F1 Red Bull team. Its 3.7L six-cylinder engine led the charge down the 401 like a homing pigeon late for a meal.

Cadillac ATS

Do I win a prize if I'm the ten thousandth writer to say 'This ain't yer grandpa's Cadillac'? Last summer, I took one for a bucket-list-shortening drive down California's Highway 1 to Big Sur. Not exactly the city, admittedly, but I also got to do that last autumn. It's precisely tuned, exactly built with the lightest possible materials, and forgiving when you make a mistake. Warning: watch out for option creep. Be wary when they start asking if you want fries with that.



Top 10 Vehicles for the Urban Grind. Click image to enlarge

Category 4: OK, OK, the Compact SUV

It doesn't take a rocket surgeon to detect that I'm not keen on crossovers. Honestly, how often do you need all-wheel drive in the city? AWD is the bridesmaid's dress of the road: everyone's got them on hand but never uses them. My biggest issue with them was being so high up, you lose the sensation of the road and they drink like cops at a Robbie Burns supper. But some are shrinking, aping the dynamics of cars and offering fuel-efficient engines.

Subaru XV Crosstrek

When you're paddling to shift gears, the XV's nothing short of a thrill. Recently it came first in our [Mini-Crossovers Comparison Test](#), where it was much admired for its ride and very impressive with its fuel economy. I had no complaints about the handling and the steering was sportier than any compact SUV I drove this past year, except for...



Volvo XC60 T6 AWD R-Design

Proving once and for all you can be a badass and still be safe, the XC60 is laden with industry-leading safety features. Its 3.2L six-cylinder engine is turbocharged, the biggest in its class, and blessed with a Polestar performance software upgrade. The result? It wrings extra oomph out of the engine without hurting the fuel economy. The Polestar upgrade brings you 325 ponies at 5,400 rpm and 354 lb-ft torque at 3,000 rpm! So you get g-force lift off. It's easy to forget that it's a crossover. It drives like Volvo's sleek S60 sedan within the snowsuit awkwardness of an SUV.



Top 10 Vehicles for the Urban Grind. Click image to enlarge

Category 5: Mid-life Crisis

In his seminal work, *The Human Zoo*, zoologist Desmond Morris compares the shiny red rump of an aggressive alpha male baboon to a fifty-something businessman ensconced in his bright red two-seater roadster. If I could have either of the following when my fifties arrive, I say bring on the crisis already!



Mini Coupé

It's everything you love about driving a Mini without having to take more than one passenger. There's that diminutive turning radius of 10.7 metres over a wheelbase of just under 2.5. Its four-cylinder is turbocharged and its curb weight is just 1,215 kilograms (add another 15 if you choose an automatic transmission). Meaning? You become a slingshot, secured down by three-point seat belts. Such precise steering reminds you you're in a go-kart made by BMW engineers.



Porsche Boxster

It's flawlessly balanced. The steering, a haptic revelation, lets you practically feel the road without messing your manicure. The transition of 0 to 100 kph, 5.1 seconds, is akin to Han Solo's leap to light speed. Yes, it's utterly impractical on city streets with the roof up but if that really mattered you'd be on public transportation.

Top 10 Vehicles for the Urban Grind. Click image to enlarge

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By Steven Bochenek

About StevenBochenek

Despite being a member of the Automobile Journalists Association of Canada and a member of its house band, the Troubadours, Steven is a veteran marketing writer who came to writing about cars almost by, umm, accident.

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