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THE ORIGINAL CAR WEEKLY

TOYOTA GT 86

Driven Toyota's £26k Porsche

How new rear-drive, lightweight coupé challenges Cayman



'So much fun it'll make your face ache'



NO-FRILLS THRILLS

The Toyota GT 86 goes back to basics, just like the Mazda MX-5 did two decades ago. And driving enthusiasts will love it, says **Hidemitsu Hoshiga**

PHOTOGRAPHY HIDENORI HANAMURA

A turn of the steering wheel, a quick lift off the accelerator mid-corner and then a slide from the tail, caught and then held with a flick of the wrists and a touch more power. Oh, and then a big grin. A very, very big grin. When Autocar first tested a prototype of Toyota's all-new rear-wheel-drive coupé last month, we speculated that it might be the best car in a decade. With every mile behind the wheel, that suspicion is growing into a deep-rooted belief.

Officially set to be called the GT 86 in Europe, the car hitherto known as the FT-86 has undergone a long gestation from concept to production. Launched at the 2009 Tokyo motor show as the spiritual successor to the iconic, early 1980s AE86 Corolla GT coupé, it was commissioned by then company chairman Katsuaki Watanabe to lure young, fun-loving drivers back to a Toyota brand that has become dominated by big-selling but ultimately bland models. The front-engined, rear-drive 2+2 has been refined and adapted to suit styling tastes and crash regulations in the ensuing two years, but it has lost none of its original purpose.

The project has also included a close collaboration with Subaru, in which Toyota owns a 16.5 per cent share. With all of Toyota's own research and development engineers working flat out on alternative powertrain projects, Subaru was asked to handle development, testing and production of the car. Toyota has taken the lead on project planning and design, and the collaboration will spawn three mechanically identical but differently styled cars: the GT 86, the Subaru BRZ and, for the American market, the Scion FR-S.

All three will be powered by the same 197bhp, 151lb ft flat four engine, whose resin cover under the bonnet is etched with the names of both Subaru and Toyota. Based on the Subaru FB20 block but fitted with a Toyota-designed head, the 2.0-litre engine has been reworked with a shorter stroke and wider bores, allowing it to rev higher. Maximum power →



'This car was commissioned to lure young, fun-loving drivers to a brand that's become dominated by bland models'

← arrives at 7000rpm, while peak torque is at 6600rpm. It has also allowed Toyota to follow its tradition of giving its sportiest cars a square ratio of bore to stroke. In the GT 86 it is, in no way coincidentally, 86 x 86mm.

The platform is also new, and already speculation is rife as to how many variants will be spun off it in order to make the investment in its creation pay off. A convertible is likely, as are harder, faster models and even other related vehicles. Tuners – both those linked officially to the manufacturers involved and unofficial ones – are also said to be lining up to offer

every imaginable type of modification. In total, a massive 91 per cent of parts are bespoke to the GT 86 or its counterparts. Toyota says it has concentrated on keeping manufacturing costs down (the absence of sharp creases on the car's bodywork are reported to be just one upshot of this wish, because they are expensive to develop and continually press to the correct tolerances) but there's also no doubting that the GT 86 has been conceived, set up and priced to pull in new customers and bring some much-needed sparkle to the entire Toyota range.

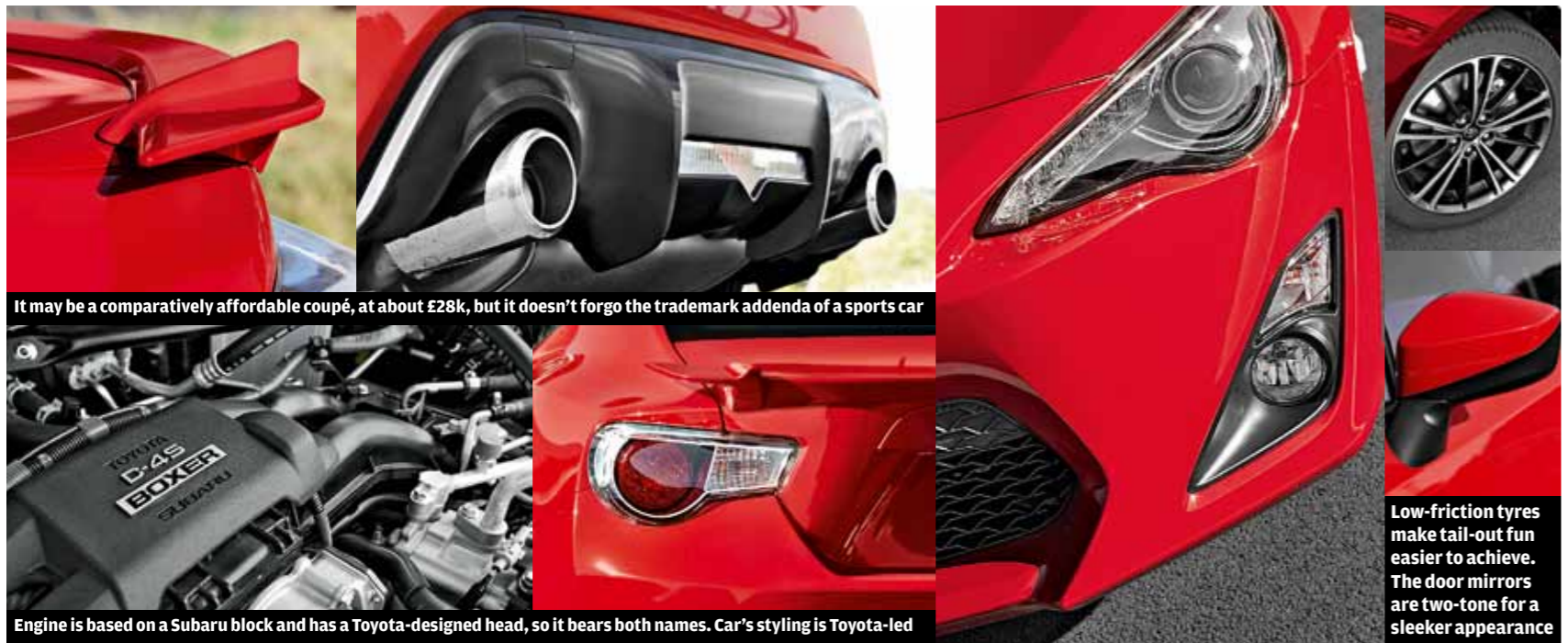
That it will achieve this aim is not

in doubt, on the basis of our test drive, although it's worth noting that it was conducted at a test track in Japan, where the silky smooth surface made any conclusions about the ride impossible to gauge accurately. Those impressions will have to wait until early next year, when we drive the car in Europe and the UK, ahead of full production models going on sale in the summer. So, too, will final comments on the car's interior; this is a pre-production car, set up to almost launch spec save for the fitment of details such as the audio system.

Sliding into the GT 86's bucket seats

– which are snug, grippy and positioned at a perfect, low-slung height – sets the tone. Toyota says they were positioned so that any driver could open the door and stub out a cigarette on the road without having to move from the seat. It's an odd theory on which to base a driving position, but there's no doubt that the end product works, imbuing the car with a sports car feel. With all the controls close to hand, the cockpit is as cossetting as a Porsche's, albeit not trimmed to the same standard.

At idle, the engine note is fairly subdued, but take it up to the 7500rpm redline and it sounds growly. In truth, despite the →



It may be a comparatively affordable coupé, at about £28k, but it doesn't forgo the trademark addenda of a sports car

Engine is based on a Subaru block and has a Toyota-designed head, so it bears both names. Car's styling is Toyota-led

Low-friction tyres make tail-out fun easier to achieve. The door mirrors are two-tone for a sleeker appearance

← relatively high torque peak, there's no need to venture that far up the rev band, but it does sound good when you do, delivering an aural soundtrack that nicely complements the driving thrills if you're pushing on through a sequence of corners.

And, in truth, this car is all about the corners. Its relatively low power means it's no sprint champion, and the 0-62mph time is estimated at a modest 7.0sec. But the key facets of an 1180kg kerb weight, rear-wheel drive, ESP that can be fully turned off, quick steering and a limited-slip differential make it a riot in the twisty stuff. The tyres are also a critical part of its make-up, although they look a bit weedy.

They are the same 17in low-resistance tyres as can be found on a Prius, all the better to make sure their grip can be overcome if the mood takes you.

Turn in to a corner and there is some roll, but it's well contained. On a constant throttle and steady steering, it understeers slightly, but lift mid-corner or trail the brakes – or just throw it in – and it'll either straighten its line or flick to oversteer as you choose. There's fun to be had in either state, as the car steers delicately on the throttle or swings the tail willingly. Long drifts require a delicate use of momentum, though, because there simply isn't enough power to maintain a massive slide. →



Adjustable chassis and quick steering: this car engages its driver



This is a pre-production cabin, but GT 86's will be plusher



You sit low in a cabin that cossets, like a Porsche's, and the controls are well positioned



FACTFILE

VITALS



TOYOTA GT 86

Price	£26,000 (est)
Top speed	143mph (est)
0-62mph	7.0sec (est)
Economy	40.9mpg (est, combined)
CO ₂	160g/km (est)
Kerb weight	1180kg
Engine	4 cyls horizontally opposed, 1998cc, petrol
Installation	Front, longitudinal, RWD
Power	197bhp at 7000rpm
Torque	151lb ft at 6600rpm
Gearbox	6-spd manual/Auto
Length	4240mm
Height	1285mm
Wheelbase	2570mm
Wheels	7x17in
Tyres	215/45 R17

← And although the GT 86 is oh so willing to slide if you provoke it, it never catches you out when it does start to slide because the steering is so nicely weighted and the chassis so responsive that they telegraph exactly what's happening at all times. At 2.5 turns lock to lock, the steering is quick without being hyperactive, and although it feels a touch light in everyday use, that has the benefit of making it easy to live with when you go on the attack.

There are disappointments, but they are minor. The six-speed manual gearbox is a touch notchy and not quite as precise as a Mazda MX-5's shift, while the optional six-speed automatic changes smoothly and quickly but lacks the sharpness of its dual-clutch rivals. When it's on, the stability control system also intervenes too harshly; the sound of it at work is so loud that you initially feel as if something has broken, and it cuts into the power delivery at an overly dramatic rate.

Despite this, at its best, the driving experience is a match for the likes of a Porsche Cayman, and accolades don't come much higher than that. That it can't reach those heights across as broad a range of conditions as the German-built car shouldn't detract from its overall success, because the fact that it can even get close is a minor miracle. It may not be a true sports car in every sense, but it is a quality car, thrilling not only for what it is but also because it is likely to start a trend that every eco-conscious manufacturer with an eye on driving fun will have to follow. **A**

'With a low kerb weight, rear-wheel drive, ESP that can be fully turned off, quick steering and a limited-slip diff, it's a riot in the twisty stuff'

For more information on Toyota
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