

LONG-TERM TEST SUZUKI FORENZA EX WAGON

Reliable and inexpensive, but plain as tapioca pudding.

BY ANDRÉ IDZIKOWSKI

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID DEWHURST

It usually takes us 10 to 12 months to put 40,000 miles on cars in our long-term test fleet. But after 15 months, our Suzuki Forenza wagon was still 6000 miles short of that goal. Egads! Suzuki wanted its car back! Indeed, the company's minions had called a few times to inquire if it was still in our possession, so we stuffed long-suffering road warrior Jared Gall (this would be his third long-distance trek in the Forenza) and his buddy Dan Klos into the wagon for a 13-day odyssey to rack up mileage sufficient to complete our test.

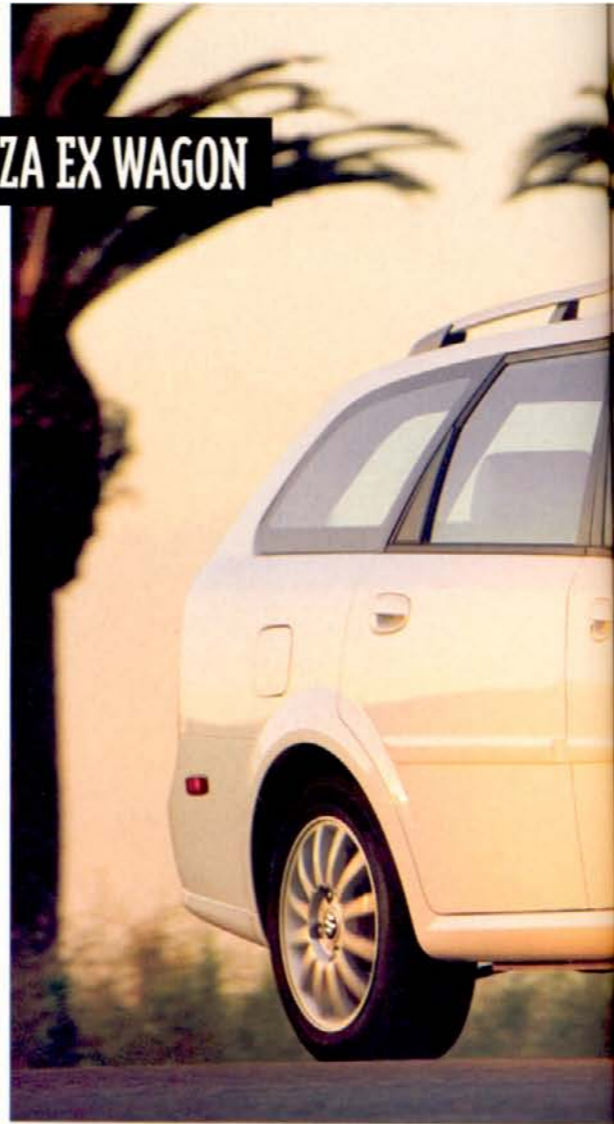
So there they were, late on a Saturday night on a desolate stretch of Highway 14 in loneliest northern Wyoming, with Dan at the wheel, cresting a small rise, when the Forenza center-punched a terrier-sized porcupine. The impact was explosively loud and startling. Jared and Dan made a U-turn but were unable to offer mouth-to-mouth to their spiny victim, who was, sad to say, beyond mortal help. They did notice its quills had pierced the radiator and the Forenza was bleeding coolant.

The closest town, Greybull, was 30 miles away, so our two fine examples of American youth poured a half-liter of vintage Evian into the radiator and decided to try to limp into town. They made it 20 miles before the rising engine temperature forced them to stop. They had no sooner turned on the hazard flashers when the first car they had seen in miles pulled over to help. The occupants were locals, and they generously offered a gallon of coolant. They were also very interested in the whereabouts of the recently deceased porcupine. Jared and Dan pointed

them 20 miles back up the road and were a little disappointed that they weren't invited to share in the road-kill barbecue.

Our guys made it to Greybull, but of course all the local garages and auto-parts stores were closed. Dan suggested they try asking about the NAPA auto-supply store's hours at the Smokehouse saloon. Sure enough, within 20 seconds of walking in, a young lady surmised, "Hey, you're not local!" and soon after had our pair of adventurers making friends with four middle-aged fellows who let them know that a bottle of Bar's Leaks Stop Leak would do the trick and could be acquired at the NAPA store the following morning. The locals (jokingly) threatened to string Dan up from the only stoplight in town for killing the state animal, which is in fact the bison. The next morning, the suggested remedy cured the Forenza's bleeding and our unlucky pair soldiered on another 5300 miles to finish the test.

The porcupine saga turned out to be the most exciting thing that happened with our Forenza over the course of its stay. Our Absolute White (read "appliance white") Forenza ended up being a reliable if pretty much uninteresting tool to get us from point A to point B. There's certainly no complaint about the price of our little wagon, which was a top-of-the-line EX model. It included fog lights, 15-inch alloy wheels, remote keyless entry, power sunroof, leather seats, leather-wrapped steering wheel and shift knob, and cruise control. Equipped with the only available option, ABS with electronic brake distribution, the Forenza totaled \$18,494. A less-fancy base Forenza wagon can be had for \$15,039.





RANTS AND RAVES

K.C. COLWELL

I produce more horsepower buttering my toast than the Forenza's four-banger does. Driving it through the mountains is a chore. Hesitate with the gas, and—boom—you're going 55 mph.

PATTI MAKI

A nice little wagon, but nothing an enthusiast would ever consider.

PETE FERGUSON

Handled well in rain, felt safe. One day in snow was also good—no problems. Summary: If the vibrations were fixed, this car with a manual and without leather would be a good deal.

PATRICK BEDARD

Suzuki is keeping alive its rep for buzzy, bastard little boxes with this one. It wouldn't take much to make this a wonderful little car at the price, but vibes are so yesterday and the weak radio reception is so 40 years ago.

DAN WINTER

Not a bad little vehicle for trips to the Home Depot. I find myself driving in third rather than drive because of the way the shifter gate is set up.

SUE MATHEWS

Engine makes a lot of noise but doesn't go anywhere for a second or two when you are looking for get up and go.

JARED GALL

I don't know offhand how much the Forenza weighs, but the 126-hp hamster-wheel four is simply not up to the task of acceptable highway propulsion. Through the mountains of Utah and Colorado, I had to keep the throttle pinned just to maintain speed, and even then lost momentum going uphill.

JASON HAINES

Good headroom and legroom for the driver. Even with the sunroof my head doesn't touch the ceiling. For a six-foot-three-inch driver, this is often a problem in Japanese cars.



BILL PITTENGER

To its everlasting credit, the Forenza never broke down, never stranded us, never needed any unscheduled dealer visits for repairs. It did need maintenance every 7500 miles, according to Suzuki's schedule. Most of the service stops were simple oil and oil-filter changes with a tire rotation. The 30,000-mile service was a little more involved, requiring replacement of coolant, air filter, and spark plugs. The price of these services varied all over the map. The first service cost \$73 but included \$24 to dump what we think are unnecessary additives into the engine and fuel tank, so we subtracted \$24 from that stop. The next supposedly identical service at 15,000 miles ran us \$193. Turns out the dealer charged us for some uncalled-for fuel-injector cleaning, differential service, and throttle-body maintenance. We also subtracted that superfluous amount from the service total. The 22,500-mile service set us back \$35. At 30,000 miles the local Suzuki dealer failed to do the more extensive service properly; the mechanics simply changed the oil and oil filter and charged us \$20 but didn't send us the paperwork

for three months. By the time we found out about the error, the Forenza needed its 37,500-mile service, so we decided to try another dealer for a proper 30K service. That stop cost us \$255. All told, we spent \$501 on scheduled service for the Forenza. That's \$54 more than we spent on our long-term 2000 Ford Focus SE wagon.

The Forenza got paid a lot of backhanded compliments. Most staffers rated its exterior styling better than average and the quality of the interior materials as pretty good considering the low sticker price. It was viewed as a handy vehicle for running errands around town and for trips to Lowe's—the rear seats could be quickly folded down without having to remove the headrests.

But when it came to the Forenza's engine and transmission, the logbook was full of unkind words. With only 126 horsepower, the engine struggled to get to highway speeds and was annoyingly loud and vibrated in a coarse manner. The automatic transmission was knocked for the balky way it shifted and for how convoluted it was to move the shift lever from drive to

park; no one liked the wrestling that involved. One driver concisely summed up our experience: "This Suzuki is perfectly mediocre. A great appliance for people who have no interest in cars. The motor is buzzy, and the weird transmission mapping only seems to make the problem worse."

The Forenza's performance at the test track did improve with age. When we first tested it with 981 miles on the odometer, it loped to 60 mph in 11 seconds flat. After 40,000 miles, that time dropped to 10.2 seconds. The quarter-mile run improved by 0.4 second to 17.7, and trap speed was up 2 mph to 78 mph. Skidpad grip increased from 0.78 g to 0.80 g. We weren't at all impressed with the Forenza's gas mileage; we recorded a mediocre 25 mpg over the long haul. By way of comparison, that '00 Focus wagon averaged 30 mpg during its 40,000-mile adventure here.

In short, the Suzuki Forenza EX wagon turned out to be a well-equipped, low-priced reliable mode of transportation, but a more powerful and refined engine and drivetrain would go a long way to making it a bit more than just an appliance on wheels.



2005 SUZUKI FORENZA EX WAGON

Vehicle type: front-engine, front-wheel-drive, 5-passenger, 5-door wagon

Price as tested: \$18,494 (base price: \$17,994)

Engine type: DOHC 16-valve inline-4, iron block and aluminum head, port fuel injection

Displacement 122 cu in, 1998cc
Power (SAE net) 126 bhp @ 5600 rpm
Torque (SAE net) 131 lb-ft @ 4000 rpm
Transmission 4-speed automatic
Wheelbase 102.4 in
Length/width/height 179.7/67.9/59.1 in
Curb weight 3014 lb

Performance:

	new	40,000
Zero to 60 mph	11.0 sec	10.2 sec
Zero to 100 mph	35.9 sec	33.0 sec
Street start, 5–60 mph	11.3 sec	10.5 sec
Standing ¼-mile	18.1 sec @ 76 mph	17.7 sec @ 78 mph

Braking, 70–0 mph 177 ft
Roadholding, 300-ft-dia skidpad 0.78 g
Top speed (drag limited) 111 mph
EPA fuel economy, city driving 21 mpg
C/D-observed fuel economy 25 mpg
Unscheduled oil additions 0 q

Service and repair stops:

Scheduled
Unscheduled

Operating costs (for 40,000 miles):

Service \$50
Normal wear \$0
Repair \$0
Gasoline (@ \$2.45 per gallon) \$392
Life expectancies (estimated from 40,000-mile test):
Tires 45,000 miles
Front brake pads 75,000 miles
Rear brake pads 90,000 miles

