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ADVICE

Which car-sharing service is right for you?

Well, that depends on what you need your car for exactly. We look at what Toronto's top three fleets have to offer.

BY: KIM HUGHES

Nothing exemplifies 21st-century urban life better than car-sharing. As more of us move into the city, the idea of actually owning a car—with all the spiralling costs, not to mention the hefty add-on parking spot in that shiny new condo—is increasingly beyond reach or unjustifiable. Yet cars are sometimes essential. TTC might scoot you uptown in a flash, but it's no way to transport kitty litter or bags of mulch. So which of Toronto's three marquee car-sharing services—AutoShare, Car2Go, or Zipcar—is the best choice? We tallied the similarities and differences just in time for those springtime pilgrimages to IKEA and Costco.

Name: AutoShare

Quick overview: Founded in Toronto in 1998 by environmentally minded entrepreneur Kevin McLaughlin; sold this spring to Enterprise Rent-A-Car Canada. McLaughlin remains as advisor/spokesperson.

Fleet size and locations: Roughly 300 cars in 175 locations. "We follow the transit system, so we are up to Finch and east to Scarborough Town Centre, from High Park to the Beach, and Eglinton southwards," McLaughlin confirms. "Plus, we have three vehicles in Mississauga."

Membership: About 12,000.

Costs: One-time \$29 membership fee. When you apply, you can have two options to reduce the standard deductible from \$750 to \$0 (using a selected gold credit card and signing AutoShare's waiver, or paying a \$65/year fee). Hourly or daily rates apply thereafter—basic hourly rates from \$9.25/hour up to \$81 for weekend daily rates. Insurance and gas are included.

Small print: Cars must be returned to the pick-up point. Child-seat anchors are installed in all cars (though it's BYO baby seat). Pets must be transported in a carrier and members will be charged for

Fido-made messes. Twenty per cent of the fleet is designated pet-free.

Pluses: All manner of makes and models— from hybrids to electrics, cargo vans to convertibles— are available. AutoShare has vehicles parked in over 60 condos and apartments across the GTA. Adds McLaughlin, “We think we have the best rates. We were also pioneers with the zero-dollar deductible. We also boast more cars per members—something like 45 to 50 people per car, which delivers better service.” A credit card is not required. However, without one, you’ll need to make a \$500 deposit and use AutoShare’s Pay-As-You-Drive system.

Minuses: Must be 21 or older. Wireless handsets available, but not guaranteed. Autosshare is cheaper than renting a car for periods less than 24 hours, “but,” their site states, “AutoShare is NOT designed to be the cheapest rental car agency in town.” In other words, plan your trips judiciously.

Weirdest lost-and-found item: A complete archive of *Calvin and Hobbes* comics. “And people often forget the very things they went on the trip to get, like an expensive case of cat food from the vet. That got picked up pretty quick,” McLaughlin laughs.



Name: Car2Go

Quick overview: The new kid on the block and owned by German multinational Daimler, this self-described “on demand” service launched in 2008 and today provides car sharing in 28 cities around the world, including Toronto since June 2012.

Fleet size and locations: Some 422 vehicles, all of which are Smart Fortwos, parked within a 110 sq. kilometre “home area” bound by Jane Street to the west, Victoria Park to the east, Eglinton to the north, and Lakeshore to the south.

Membership: Stated as 28,000.

Costs: With the exception of the \$35 one-time sign-up fee, there is no monthly or annual membership fee. Members are billed to the minute, taxi-like, at \$14.99/hour and \$0.41/minute (plus tax of course) or \$84.99 per day. The first 200 kilometers are free, it’s 45 cents/km thereafter.

Small print: A lost key will set you back \$400. And vehicles are not especially child-friendly, owing to manufacturer-installed airbags (though these can be deactivated for very young passengers).

Pluses: Plenty. Members pay only for the time they use the car which is available 24/7, no reservations required. Cars are centrally located: “Our main contract is with the Toronto Parking Authority, so we are in about 150 Green P lots, plus lots with some other companies,” says Car2Go location manager Mark Latchford, pegging the total spots at 180. “Also, shopping plazas and two Mercedes dealerships: midtown south of Eglinton, and River and Dundas,”

There is no time or location commitment—keep the car long as you need it and drop off at any approved parking space within the home area. Rentals are open to anyone with three years' driving experience, so you have to be at least age 19 and up in Ontario. And starting this month, Car2Go is launching regional access, so Toronto members can use cars in 13 other North American cities (three in Canada and 10 stateside).

Minuses: There's no guarantee a car will be where you need it when you need it, and no variation in available models. Then again, you always know what kind of car you're getting. Says Latchford: "We want to add another piece to the city's transportation puzzle, to allow people to travel freely locally, and explore neighbourhoods. You might not use Car2Go to help a friend move, but you might use Car2Go to access another car-sharing service with a van four neighbourhoods over."

Weirdest lost-and-found item: "Nothing springs to mind," Latchford says.



Name: Zipcar

Quick overview: Founded in Massachusetts in 2000 and billed as "the world's leading car sharing network" with operations throughout the U.S., Canada, the U.K., Spain and Austria. Bought by Avis Budget Group, Inc. in 2013.

Fleet size and locations: Fluctuates seasonally, but approximately 500 vehicles at over 200 locations across the GTA, plus Hamilton and Mississauga (including multiple college and university campuses).

Membership: They won't disclose exact numbers. "I can tell you we have over 850,000 members globally and we are one of the larger global markets for sure," offers Toronto general manager Christian Demers.

Costs: Three plan options: No monthly commitment for occasional drivers (from \$9.25/hour and \$79/day) with a \$65 annual fee; \$6/month for monthly drivers (same hourly and daily rates) but with no annual fee; and an extra-value plan starting at \$50/month for frequent users that offers pre-paid driving at discounted rates (\$8.33/hour or \$71.10/day) also with no annual fee.

"But that \$50/month isn't a fee," Demers says. "That money goes right back to you in driving credits. It's a minimum-required use, which we take in advance. So in the end, if you drive the minimum, you get that back." Each plan carries a \$30 one-time application fee to cover driver background checks. Included with every plan: gas, insurance and up to 200 free kilometres per day.

Small print: Cars must be returned to the pick-up point, though this could change in future. A pilot program enabling members to take point-to-point trips within cities, and to and from select airport locations, is currently being rolled out in the U.S.

Pluses: Drivers can be as young as age 18 with some restrictions. Members can reserve Zipcars in

other cities like Chicago, London, or Barcelona. “We’re not at the Bluetooth-ready level yet, but lots of our cars have that ability,” Demers says. “We’re also very locally run. We are at airports, which is a benefit of being with Avis, plus we’re at 350 universities across North America. And in Toronto, we have more cars than anyone else.”

Minuses: Not many unless you smoke. (All the car-sharing services discussed in this article strictly prohibit lighting up in the vehicles.) And technophobes will be charged \$3.50 per call to have a Zipcar rep make a reservation for you.

Weirdest lost-and-found Item: “A bow-and-arrow kit with plunger arrows,” laughs Demers. “But you rarely hear about things being stolen. It’s a community of members and found stuff is usually reported.”


THE BOTTOM LINE

AutoShare, Car2Go and Zipcar are great for short-period or short-distance journeys and are more-or-less comparable rate-wise. If you require a range of vehicles (cargo vans mixed with hatchbacks, for instance) and are often travelling with small children, then Car2Go won’t cut it. But the instant, autonomous access Car2Go offers—simply spot a blue-and-white Smart Fortwo in a ’hood and grab it—means your impulse purchase at a garage sale is home in a snap.

For travellers, network access in the U.S. (Car2Go and Zipcar) and Europe (Zipcar) is pretty darn cool. Bluetooth-readiness is an area that could be boosted across the board. And because it’s a shared service, what constitutes “returned clean” in your world might be wildly different than in mine. Still, for downtowners, all three represent an excellent complement to TTC, cycling, and hoofing it. If our government was smart, it would offer tax credits on car-sharing similar to those accessed by annual Metropass users. Is anyone out there listening?

TAGS *Autoshare, Car2Go, Commuting, Parking, Zipcar*

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We live downtown TO and currently own a 10yr old car with 210K km. It’s been well-maintained and is in good shape, however, repairs and replacement parts are adding up. After estimating total of ownership for these 10 years, the results were staggering. It’s time to seriously consider alternatives. Thanks to this article by Kim Hughes, our own research efforts have gotten a great, head start.

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