



Pros

- More stable and safer than an autorickshaw
- Protection against weather
- Convenience of parking and manoeuvring
- High claimed mileage
- Low running cost

Cons

- Barebone interiors
- Pricing differential to competition
- Lack of airconditioning
- Safety in terms of disc brakes, ABS, airbags
- High NVH levels

Gem of an idea...but!

It was in 2012 that I first saw the 'Bajaj car' at the Auto Expo. Bajaj Auto was at pains to explain then (and is even now) that it wasn't getting into the car market, but launching a 'quadricycle'. The questions don't stop coming its way though, and Bajaj is engaging with people as it hopes for a slice of the burgeoning passenger vehicle market in India. Codenamed "RE 60" back in those days when the concept was first showcased, the 'Bajaj car', now christened 'Qute', got the SC approval to be sold widely in late-2018. In the half decade that has passed since the sighting of the concept to now, Bajaj Auto has battled multiple court cases filed by NGOs and competition, has presented its case to the government and think-tanks, and has been educating stakeholders. It has eventually emerged victorious from these bruising battles. The order to launch Qute as a commercial vehicle came just a in September 2018, and was followed by approval for usage as a personal carrier. Bajaj Auto launched the Qute in Kerala in Oct-Nov 2018. Last week (April 18, 2019) was the national launch at a price point (ex showroom) of Rs2.48 lakh for the petrol variant and Rs2.78 lakh for the CNG variant.

What is the Qute or [quadricycle](#)? Is it a car? Is it a glorified 3-wheeler or autorickshaw? Is it the panacea to last mile connectivity in congested areas? Or is it going to be another vehicle to clog up the already congested roads in India? Many questions swirl around in our heads and we are searching for answers to them. In an attempt at getting some answers to these multiple questions, we worked our way to the Chakan (near Pune) plant of Bajaj Auto to get a feel of the Qute and its dynamics around the test track there. Members of the marketing and R&D teams of Bajaj Auto provided us with data, updated us on plans, spoke to us passionately about what they feel about the product and what it would do to the market, etc. While we got some of the answers, there are a few thoughts and questions that need to be explained – maybe only Father Time will be able to tell us.

Quirky looks – not really Qute!

It is a very basic design that has been consistent ever since the first look in 2012, with only slight modifications. This isn't exactly a cute looking vehicle although it isn't an ugly duckling either – even if one may not like the design/looks, this may well be a design that will grow on you over time. Suffice to say that it will not win any beauty contest in a hurry, but will surely turn heads even on crowded Streets, at least at the outset. Quadricycle norms restrict a vehicle to 3000 mm in length, 1500 mm in width, and 2500 mm in height. The Qute meets these norms well within the dimensions with a 2750 mm length complimenting a 1312 mm width and a height of 1652 mm. This means it is just about the size of an average 3-wheeler, and occupies ~30% less space than the Maruti Alto 800, although it would be lesser versus the Tata Nano. The smaller footprint also means lower carbon emission and easier manoeuvrability. The tall boy stance, narrow body, and 12-inch alloys (wow!) make it seem a caricature, but I can assure you that is a fully functional vehicle.



Bajaj Qute – competition comparables

	Bajaj Qute	Tata Nano	Maruti Alto 800	Bajaj RE Compact 4S	Tata Magic Iris
Dimensions					
Length (mm)	2752	3164	3430	2635	2960
Width (mm)	1312	1750	1515	1300	1512
Height (mm)	1652	1652	1475	1700	1800
Wheelbase (mm)	1925	2230	2360	2000	1650
Ground Clearance (mm)	158	180	165	160	160
Turning Radius (m)	3.5	4.0	4.6	2.9	3.5
Boot Space (ltr)	77	80-110	177	25	100
Fuel Tank (ltr)	8/35	24	35	8/20/20	10
Seating	2+3	2+3	2+3	1+3	2+3
Kerb Weight (kg)	452/502	695-765/745	695-727/810	337/385/368	720
Tyres	R12	R12	R12	R10	R12
Engine & other technical specs					
Fuel	Petrol/CNG	Petrol/CNG	Petrol/CNG	Petrol/CNG/LPG	Diesel
Transmission	MT/MT	MT, AMT/MT	MT/MT	MT/MT/MT	MT
Engine Size (cc)	216.6	624	796	199	611
Power (hp or ps)	13.2/11	38/33	47.3/40.4	9/7.5/8.5	10.84
Torque (Nm)	18.9/16.1	51/45	69/60	16.7/13.6/15.2	31
Max speed (kmph)	70	110#	180#	50	55
Fuel Efficiency (km/l, km/kg)*	35/43	23.9, 21.9/36	24.7/33.44	25.75/33.8/28.9	20.8
Price (Rs Lakh, ex-showroom)					
	2.48-2.78	2.36-3.35	2.71-3.93	1.7-2	2.7-3.4

Source: IIFL Research, companies, portals

*claimed

#as seen in the odometer



A prime objective of such a vehicle would be a lighter body weight without compromising on safety issues. Bajaj Auto’s engineers have used high tensile steel in the construction of this monocoque body, and have given a ribbed roof – not just for added structural strength, but also for additional support when the customer decides to add a roof rail/carrier for loading luggage. A roof-mounted carrier that can carry upto 40kg of additional load is available at an extra cost – I am fairly sure that this accessory will definitely be a lot in demand. The steel lends the desired rigidity and strength, even though it is expensive. At the same time, Bajaj Auto has used plastic panels on the doors and bonnet to keep weight down and also to help in easier repairs and replacements (if at all). After all this, the Qute weighs in at 452kg for the petrol variant and 504kg for the CNG variant.

Among car manufacturers, the major grouse against the quadricycle was the fact that crash norms are different, and so too are emission standards. While it is true that the new crash test norms for cars (for sale in India) don’t apply to the Qute, the vehicle has been cleared for full frontal impact at a speed of 35kmph. The top speed is limited to 70kmph (autorickshaws are limited to a top speed of 50kmph), which is also one of the norms for quadricycles. While these are the safety issues that seem to be the core for Bajaj Auto, I would disagree, and we will deal with it later on – elsewhere in this review. On the issue of emissions, Bajaj Auto says that Qute meets all current emission norms. They are working on meeting BS-VI emission norms, and will be ready on D-Day.

Even though overall form is caricaturish (and looks even more so in profile), the construction is quite functional; that is an area that should not worry buyers. While the Qute will come in some bright colours, a large black coloured bumper dominates the front above which is the bonnet line with ‘Qute’ logo at the centre. There are multiple small vents just above the bumper to direct air inside the cabin to improve airflow within (more on this later). A large pentagonal headlamp unit with a single bulb sits on either side with a large turn indicator nestling below. Since the Qute is a rear-engined vehicle (like the Tata Nano), here too the bonnet opens towards the front (like in the cars of yore) and reveals a small storage area (77 litres) that is good for provisions from the neighbourhood grocery store or supermarket. Ensure that the weight is limited to 20kg though.

The glass area is large all-round – large front windscreen (with a humongous fixed quarter glass), large windows, and a decent sized rear windscreen. A single large wiper does duty upfront, while there is no wiper at the rear (that’s a “miss” in my books). The wheel arches are squarish and large – the smart alloys fill the wheel well nicely. The wheel arches also jut out a little and add another quirky element to the already quirky looks of the Qute. Bajaj Auto has tried to improve the looks by giving the sides a prominent slash lower down, while the shoulder line gets a mild crease. The shoulder line also gives an impression of rising towards the tail, but while the metal portion has been given an angle, there is a black plastic just above to straighten out the shoulder line. The black door handles are the ‘grab’ variety, and are nestling into a groove just below the shoulder line. There are a few angular vents in black cladding at the C-pillar to provide some ventilation within, while the large wing mirrors are mounted on the edge of the A-pillar.



The large windows, the short length, and the tall stance make for a comical look – the A- and B-pillars are slim, and the doors are large (reminiscent of the Mahindra e2o+). At the rear, there is a hint of the Tata Magic Iris. The fairly large rear windscreen (sans a wiper) is ensconced in black plastic with a little overhang at the top. The rear end with the 'Qute' logo in the middle gets a slight crease to break the monotony, while the tail-lamp cluster has been cut into four sections to add visual relief – the design is simple and yet unique. Once again a large black bumper dominates the rear. There is no tailgate to be opened here, but there is a small keyhole to help you access the engine bay. A 'Qcar' legend sits just between the right tail-lamp and the bumper. Overall, the design is quirky; definitely not cute.

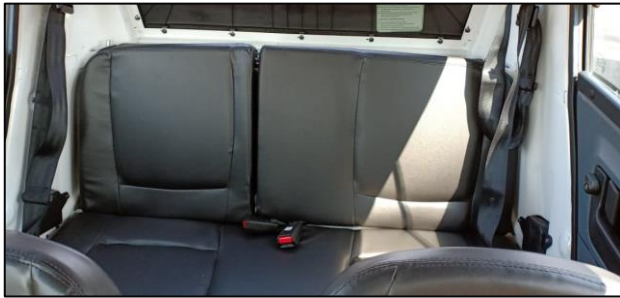
Barebones within

If the exterior was quirky, the innards of the Qute are anything, but. This is a very basic interior that Bajaj Auto has put out to keep costs low – there is no luxury inside, but a very no-frills cabin. While those used to travel in autorickshaws will feel the difference in standards, car owners will be left disappointed. But what Bajaj Auto is intending to do is to target a customer that sits somewhere in between. Entry and exit from the Qute is pretty easy thanks to the low floor and the large doors. The driver gets to sit at a nice height, and gets a good view upfront (and also of surroundings) thanks to the large glasshouse and the large wing mirrors. Instead of the standard handlebar that adorns an autorickshaw, the Qute comes equipped with a proper steering with the 'Qute' logo in the middle on the horn, while the rugged-looking gear lever is mounted on the dash/centre console, and is easy to reach. The handbrake has been given to the right of the driver's seat, while the engine comes to life via the key just aft of the steering (car-like) – stalks on the steering column take care of lighting, turn indicators, and the wiper. The door handles are small.



Atop the gear lever sits an analog-digital instrument cluster with a functional speedo, fuel gauge, tripmeter, et al. There is no tacho, but a nice digital gear indicator. Below the gear lever is a small audio system, with USB/Aux/SD card functions for your music. You also get a FM player with two speakers, and the audio quality is decent at idle. There is a 12V socket to help charge the phone – one can easily hook up the phone on a bracket, and use it as a display for GPS. On either side of the centre console are two lockable storage recesses, just like one gets in an autorickshaw – they are deep enough to stack papers, chargers, etc. There is no provision for AC vents or blowers (and we will delve into that later on) anywhere, and in stifling conditions, that will be a sore point for those inside. The windows can be slid open to let in air (there used to be canvas roll-downs in the concept vehicle); I would have preferred to be able to open the quarter glass (harking back to cars of a bygone era) – people will surely hook up a fan(s) to help in battling the heat. There is a roof liner provided to give better heat insulation inside the cabin. To ensure that there is air circulation, Bajaj Auto has provided for vents along the window length. Also, there are vents on the A-pillar – these can be used to direct airflow from outside either on to the person or turn it around towards the windscreen to help in defogging during monsoons.





There is a passenger seat next to the driver, under both of which are storage places too. In the CNG variant, that storage compartment is taken over by the 35-litre CNG tank (this will be true for the Auto LPG variant too when it is launched). The ABC pedals are extremely rudimentary (just like in an autorickshaw), while the spare wheel is locked just below the passenger-side 'glovebox'. Given how the Qute drives smoothly (more on that later), I suggested a dead pedal to rest that idle left foot, and Bajaj Auto personnel felt that it can be considered. The front seats come equipped with proper 3-point retractable seat belts, and are comfortable to sit. You will not get contouring for your back or much of under-thigh support, and there is no reclining facility either. But you do get a little bit of fore-and-aft movement (no vertical movement) for the best seating position. Sadly, the front seats don't get any headrest, and that is another 'miss' in my books – the cost would have been marginal, but it would surely protect the person from a whiplash in the event of a collision or panic braking. The dinky IRVM is functional, but the large ORVMs compensate adequately. Aggressive cost cutting can also be seen by the bare floor sans any carpeting, and also by the single flimsy sun visor on the driver's side. There is no sun visor on the passenger side – wonder why a vehicle with an audio system can't be equipped with decent quality sun visor on both sides!

Accessing the second row is not an onerous task, although not as smooth as climbing into an autorickshaw. The rear bench folds down to reveal storage space at the back (good for small bags), and it also is split 60:40, and can be folded down to hold more luggage (400 litres of cargo). With the engine being directly below that area, be very careful while stacking perishable goods or electronics or anything that can melt directly over the area. A fire extinguisher is also kept behind the rear seat in the CNG variant, alongwith the tool kit. The latching mechanism that holds the rear seats in an upright position is pretty rudimentary. The rear bench can ideally seat two, but can take in three passengers in a squeeze (and more, if all are kids). Bajaj Auto has positioned the Qute as a 2+2 carrier (and hence passengers will get more space), and legroom is adequate, as is headroom and kneeroom – the 1925 mm wheelbase takes care of that. Rear passengers get non-retractable 3-point seat belts, but no head rests.

There is no dearth of storage spaces strewn across the cabin. Rear door pockets offer storage (as do the large pockets on the front doors), but despite the width and depth of these pockets, things will keep moving about since there are no compartments. There is also a small storage space near the driver's door handle to keep his phone, as is a small area between the two seats where the remote (I like this bit) for the audio system is kept. The air vents continue below the window line. Unlike traditional autorickshaws, there is no way that passengers can be stuffed into this vehicle. The comfort levels are so much better, and in the event of rains and cold weather, people inside will definitely appreciate the doors and windows provided. All in all, this is a pretty functional interior – so it will all boil down to the pricing.



Powered by DTS-i

The Qute comes powered by a DTS-i engine from Bajaj Auto’s stables, but it has been re-engineered for the quadricycle. The 216.6cc, four-stroke, single-cylinder, twin-spark, liquid-cooled DTS-i engine is what drives the rear wheels of the Qute. The engine outputs 13.2bhp of peak power @ 5500 rpm and 18.9Nm of peak torque @ 4000 rpm in the petrol avatar. In the CNG avatar, the figures drop down to 11bhp @ 5500 rpm and 16.1Nm @ 4000 rpm, respectively. Both the variants use a 5-speed sequential gearbox, with a reverse gear. You have to push up for an upshift, pull down for the downshift, after which the gearstick comes into the neutral position. The reverse gear is a simple pull down below the neutral. Obviously, with these figures, one wouldn’t expect the Qute to be burning up the tracks or to win any drag race. But it has adequate power to take off the line with a full load sans any protest; and the engine redlines very quickly and makes you upshift. Also, if one was expecting performance from the bullock cart ages for the Qute, perish the thought. But yes, this is the slowest that I have ever driven any car...ahem, a 4-wheeler!

The short gearing ensures that power is made available quickly, and in stop-go traffic or when the lights turn green, you will not be left behind badly. By the time the Qute gets to the 30kmph mark, I was able to get it into the second or third cog, which is pretty decent. Where it showed its lack of punch was when you put it into that long stretch to really see what it is capable of, and that is where the lack of power and limitations of speed kick in. On the smooth test tracks of Bajaj Auto at Chakan, the Qute effortlessly built speeds, and behaved itself when pushed into corners, and also on the sharp banked part of the circuit. While I didn’t really want to push the Qute or myself to do anything silly, I did take the banked corner at a speed of 50-55kmph, and the Qute hugged the ground admirably well. Suffice to say that, this vehicle will not be pushed in that manner by any sane person. Bajaj Auto claims that the Qute can deliver 35km for every litre of petrol that it drinks, while the CNG tank can be stretched to deliver 45km/kg. These are impressive figures, and will be the biggest USP for the Qute – obviously, we will need to see it in real life conditions near our office area in Lower Parel, when evening peak hour traffic can drive motorists mad.

Rides well; handles nicely

I had requested for a 3-wheeler for a drive to acclimatise myself with driving the Qute – not really knowing what to expect with the quadricycle, I wasn’t really prepared to take chances. Officials of Bajaj Auto who were at hand to help me understand the concept and answer my queries had kept a RE handy for the purpose. I took a ride around the track in a RE to properly acclimatise myself with the 5-km test track, and to understand the areas where I needed to be cautious, where I could test the brakes, etc. After a few rounds of the test track in the RE, it felt very much like second nature, and also helped me appreciate the deft handling that autorickshaws are expected to do in city traffic, and also how much of a risk it is. Also, while we see these 3-wheelers whizzing past on a daily basis, the speed really doesn’t feel as much when behind the handlebar! But the lack of stability on three wheels is a major issue.



Cut to the chase now, and I slide behind the steering wheel of the Qute, strap myself in, crank the ignition to bring the DTS-i engine to life, release the hand brake, push the gear lever forward to put the Qute into first gear, lift off the clutch, and depress the throttle. The engine explodes into life, and it is a dull throb that fills the cabin – the fact that you have the doors and windows closed amplifies the noise, and you have to strain your vocal chords to make yourself heard. Also, in this cacophony, the volume of the audio system will have to be increased to near maximum to hear anything. While the FM station played its music, I went around the test drive track and kept up an incessant chatter with the patient youngster from the marketing team who had been given the unenviable job of being a passenger to me and answer my multiple queries. But it was also his advice that helped me get my bearing right in terms of the speeds to carry into some of the sharper corners, and also figure out where the braking zone was. The petrol variant feels a tad more responsive and peppy compared to the CNG variant.

I nearly pulled off a crazy attempt at doing a 60kmph run into the banked area – the Qute was willing to go along, but I wasn't too sure, and eased off just to ensure a safe exit. At the place where I could change tracks to see how the Qute would behave when made to suddenly change lanes at high speeds or whether the body would roll excessively on slalom runs, the Qute behaved itself very well, although I could feel that one wheel was lifting off the ground on those sudden crazy lane changing exercises. But it never felt as if the Qute would give up and turn turtle. Yes, the fear was there from our side on what may happen, but the Qute acquitted itself nicely. The anti-roll bar at the front does a great job. The Qute feels planted on those 135/70 R12 MRF ZEC tubeless radials, and absorbs bumps very well. The suspension is way better than what we get in autorickshaws.

After having driven the RE first before taking the wheel of the Qute, the fundamental difference with the addition of the fourth wheel immediately comes through. The Qute feels so much more stable and planted, and there is nary any drama, even as the RE had to be handled carefully on the very same corners. Handling of sudden lane departures also tells a story – the Qute has a huge advantage over the autorickshaw, and there is a 'car' somewhere within its soul. While I wasn't allowed to take the Qute on the 'torture test' track section, on request, I was allowed to take the Qute out of the factory premises onto the roads of Chakan industrial area. On some of these roads, we encountered bad bumps, speed breakers, and roads with low grip or bad surface layer – the Qute absorbed undulations very well, and rear seat passengers didn't have much of a complaint, unlike how they would have had if they had been taken over the very same surfaces at those speeds in a RE. The ground clearance of 158mm helps in tackling potholes and speed-breakers – very close to what most cars clear.

While there are five forward gears in the Qute, low-end torque is more than adequate to tide over most situations. There was a point where I dropped the speed to ~30kmph while staying in the fifth cog, and the Qute didn't protest. That is an immense capability to have in stop-go traffic situations in the urban jungle – hence my suggestion for a dead pedal to rest the left foot. With low-end torque



being so good, the use of the light clutch is very minimal, and I felt as if I was driving an automatic. The only time that the Qute has a bit of an issue is when it starts on a gradient. But otherwise power comes nicely, and it can keep up with flowing traffic, and it is good enough for nifty overtaking. The light steering wheel and the nimble body movements of the Qute are a boon in city traffic, as is its ability to manoeuvre itself into tight parking spots and come out of them, and also turn around quickly – the turning radius is a mere 3.5 metre.

At a speed of 70kmph, the Qute reacted sharply to panic braking – from 50kmph, braking is surer, and stoppage is good. The Qute comes equipped with drum brakes all around, but there is no ABS. So while braking is pretty sure, it remains to be seen what would happen in real life conditions, as there is lack of feedback, and tyres have a tendency to lock up (especially on slippery surfaces). The Qute does meet all standards as laid down by the law – top speed limited to 70kmph, certified for full frontal impact at 35kmph, etc. The crash test was done at 50kmph by Euro NCAP, which awarded a single star. It does have seat belts too. But no ABS, airbags, disc brakes? Bajaj Auto reckons that at the low speeds that one would get to drive in the city, drum brakes are more than adequate. On the ABS and airbags front, the story may pan out very differently – with India moving towards cars being made to mandatorily have these (and bikes also being equipped with ABS), what will happen to the Qute and its pricing?

Pricey...and confusing to the buyer

We go back to the existential question: What is the Qute? It has four wheels and yet is not a car. It is similar in size to the ubiquitous autorickshaw, but this is definitely not one of those. To answer the basic question: the Qute is a quadricycle, India’s first, and is placed somewhere between a car and a 3-wheeler in the vehicle food chain. It is a category that has been created and notified especially with the Qute, and is the result of an idea that germinated in the board room of Bajaj Auto, got conceived in the R&D lab, and has been delivered now. Bajaj Auto is hoping that Qute will turn out to be the new Viking from their stables. While it drives on four wheels, the Qute isn’t a car in the sense we understand that category just now – simply because of different regulations formed for the quadricycle.

Bajaj Auto insists that it is neither looking at the Qute to replace its best-selling 3-wheelers, nor is it pitchforking the Qute against cars; it maintains that the quadricycle is a different category and that the Qute will create its own niche. While the Boardroom and the marketing team may be clear about this positioning, one wonders if the target audience will understand this. Also, with a starting price (ex showroom) of Rs2.48 lakh for the petrol variant and Rs2.78 lakh for the CNG variant, which is a cool Rs1 lakh (almost) more than Bajaj Auto's very own RE, we suspect the Qute has priced itself too high to harbour hopes of making a dent on either its own 3-wheeler market or take a slice off the car market. Bajaj Auto says it is targeting autorickshaw drivers to upgrade, 2-wheeler owners to come into safer environs, and for cab/taxi drivers to take pride of ownership in this new set of four wheels.



The company also talks about decongesting cities and pitching this vehicle for intra-city drives, lowering the carbon footprint, giving cheaper last mile connectivity, helping carry larger loads, etc. Everyone would agree that the Bajaj Qute offers better weather protection from weather and pollution, is frugal to run and maintain, and is extremely convenient to drive/manoeuvre/park/use in congested and crowded streets – these qualities go hugely in its favour. But would people be willing to pay a substantial premium for this "upgrade", especially when Bajaj Auto continues to offer the Bajaj RE alongside the Bajaj Qute? Intuitively, it would seem not!

Bajaj Auto has an annual capacity to produce 60,000 units of the Qute – this can be further ramped up by using the existing production facilities for 3-wheelers. Bajaj Auto has been exporting the Qute to a few countries in Latin America, Africa, and Europe since 2015. Last week was the national launch of the Qute. What started off as a small incision in Kerala, and later extending on to the North East of India, has now progressed to a full-blooded national launch – states and local RTOs would be primed to allow the registration of the quadricycle as a separate category, and allow sales to happen. While the intentions are noble, the causes of failure of the Tata Nano should be considered very carefully. Maybe, saying that “the Qute is an autorickshaw with a fourth wheel” will be a better option in the minds of some, but Bajaj Auto is quietly confident of succeeding with this product, despite the plethora of naysayers.



The Bajaj Qute makes a very strong case for itself, in terms of stability, savings (operating and maintenance), practicality, performance, and lower pollution. But on the flip side are basic features, high NVH levels, and barebone interiors, not to mention the high sticker price. The Qute has already cleared the mandatory safety tests before the launch as a passenger vehicle. In 2016, Euro NCAP had awarded the Bajaj Qute two stars based on a separate set of parameters as compared to conventional cars. Bajaj Auto says that there is no “safety” issue surrounding the Qute. And we agree: Safety is largely a toss of the coin in India. Eventually, success will hinge a lot on the right pricing and if Bajaj Auto offers the right perception and messaging for the Bajaj Qute, in terms of positioning.

While the Bajaj Qute is being launched in petrol and CNG variants, Bajaj Auto is working on an Auto LPG-enabled variant. The government has also given approvals to launch electric and hybrid quadricycles. As of now, Bajaj Auto is tightlipped on when it would be ready with its eQute, but “soon” is an oft-repeated word from the team. Bajaj Auto says that this (Qute or quadricycle) is “an idea whose time has come”. A few lines from ‘**Stopping by the Woods**’ from the pen of Robert Frost come to mind: *The woods are lovely, dark and deep; but I have promises to keep; And miles to go before I sleep; and miles to go before I sleep!*

Our earlier Car reviews

Please click on the below **pictures** to refer to our earlier **car reviews**:



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Add - Stock expected to give a return of 0-10% over the hurdle rate, i.e. a positive return of 10%+.

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