

Road beat: A minivan worth consideration



The Toyota Sienna is a mini van that has style, room and power. Photos/Larry Weitzman

By Larry Weitzman

Let's get something straight right from the start, minivans may be the most practical vehicles ever designed and with the new Toyota Sienna it gives away very little to other kinds of vehicles in performance and handling. But it has more utility than any other kind of vehicle. Sure, you're not going to take it racing at a local track, but not so fast. As a support vehicle or even a tow vehicle it would be second to none with its 3,500 pound tow capacity.

Minivans are a simple upright two box design. But clean lines

and a slick upslope nose give them a bit of style. The Sienna is at the top in that category with an excellent window line and no unnecessary add-ons. In fact, its cleanliness is reflected in an extremely slick coefficient of drag of 0.308.



Specifications

Price \$30,000 to about \$47,000

Engine

3.5L DOHC 24 valve with VVT-i V-6 266 hp @ 6,600 rpm
245lbs.-ft. of torque @ 4,700 rpm

Transmission

Six speed electronically controlled automatic

Configuration

transverse mounted front engine/front wheel drive/all wheel drive

Dimensions

Wheelbase 119.3 inches

Length 200.2 inches

Width 78.1 inches

Height 68.9 inches

Weight 4,375 to 4,705 XLE AWD

Track (f/r) 67.7/67.7 inches

Ground clearance 6.6 inches
Turning circle 37.4 feet
Steering lock to lock 3.44
turns
Fuel capacity 20 gallons
Wheels 17X6.5 inch
standard/18X7/19X7 inch
optional
Tow capacity 3,500 pounds
Coefficient of drag 0.308
Cargo capacity 150.0 cubic
feet (behind first row)

Performance

0-60 7.44 seconds
50-70 3.94 seconds
50-70 uphill 6.03 seconds
Top Speed Faster than a
speeding freight train
Fuel economy 18/25/21 mpg
city/highway/combined (6
cyl, FWD), 16/23/19 mpg
city/highway/combined (V-6,
AWD. Expect 20-22 mpg in
rural country driving and 28
mpg at constant legal speeds
on the highway.

As a full-size minivan its dimensions are standard with a long wheelbase of 119 inches, a length of 200 inches, width of 78 inches and a height of 71 inches. Those are almost identical numbers of your standard full size SUV. While it may be dwarfed by a full size trucked based van, minivans are anything but small. That's why they hold eight people in comfort with almost 40 cubic feet behind the third row. And this mini is no lightweight, tipping the scales at a portly 4,700 pounds for this AWD model. An FWD version saves you about 200 pounds.

So Toyota wisely makes its 3.5L DOHC 24 valve workhorse standard in all models, knocking down 266 hp at 6,200 rpm and 245 pounds of twist. The engine is also producing 220 hp at 4,700 rpm where peak torque is developed. Power is sent to the front wheels via a six speed auto cog swapper, except in this AWD version all wells are driven.

Sienna moves out quite smartly conquering the 0-60 mph acceleration benchmark is a short 7.44 seconds. That's rockin' for a 4,700 pound minivan and probably quicker than most V-8 full sized vans. And that performance run is backed up with surprisingly good 50-70 mph passing times of 3.94 and 6.03 seconds on a level highway and up a 6 percent grade. My advice is not to get into a traffic light drag race with Sienna or you might get embarrassed.

But here is the Sienna minivan bonus great full economy. The EPA says you should expect in the AWD model 16/23/19 mpg city/highway/combined, but my test vehicle did much better, even better than the 18/25/21 mpg that the FWD model should achieve. I averaged 21 mpg in mixed rural driving with some moderate traffic and with the cruise control set at 70 mph, the trip computer average 28 mpg on a two way run with only me on board.

Sienna is suspended with a set of MacPherson struts up front and a twisting torsion beam in the rear with antiroll bars at both ends. Coils are at all four corners. Enhancing its cornering ability is a track of 68 inches front and rear. It doesn't get much wider and makes for a stable platform. The electric steering rack is a bit slow at 3.44 turns lock to lock and in high speed twisties it needs a bit more driver attention (than a sporty sedan) to point the vehicle correctly as it otherwise has surprisingly good cornering power. In the tight twisties, the Sienna could handle the change in direction at much higher speeds than expected, however because of the softer suspension and a bit of float you had to guide the Sienna with a bit more attention and steering input. Body

roll was nicely controlled. Sienna turning circle is a tight 37 feet and it does ride on large 18 x 7 inch wheels. One very minor complaint never before found in a Toyota, the steering wheel was off center by about 3 to 4 degrees to the left.

Ride quality was compliant and smooth helped by its long wheelbase. Road noise was a bit higher than expected on coarse roads, perhaps hurt by the stiffer sidewalls of its run-flat tires. But on most other roads the Sienna is quiet with no noise coming from the engine room as it spins a low 2,000 rpm at 70 mph.



A mini van with comfort in mind.

Braking is by four-wheel discs (vented up front) with a strong pedal stopping the Sienna in a good 45 feet under perfect control from 40 mph. Sienna has all the safety acronyms, plus more than half a dozen airbags, Safety Connect emergency assistance and collision notification, rear view camera, blind spot monitoring, rear cross traffic alert and rear parking sonar in case you forget there is a rear backup camera. Sienna has so many anti-collision devices you would think you would have to work at having an accident.

Now for the real reason why everyone should own a minivan, the interior. There is no other vehicle that packs so much volume and utility in such a relatively small package. Passenger volume is 165 cubic feet or about 60 percent more than your

average midsize or full size sedan. And on top of that there are almost 40 cubic feet of cargo capacity behind the third row of seats. Shoulder room in each of its three rows is over 5 feet and about 5½ feet in the first two rows. Legroom is in limousine proportions and President Abraham Lincoln could sit in any seat with his top hat on. And this is all packed into a 200-inch vehicle and this one has all wheel drive. Where do you get more utility than that?

Oh, and that interior was done in quality leather and all the appropriate appointments were of Toyota's top quality materials. Of course it had a full instrumentation package (tach and speedo), trip computer and a sound/entertainment system second to none.



Plenty of room for families,
lots of friends or an entire
team.

Pricing for my fully loaded tester was \$41,710, plus \$860 for the truck from its Princeton, Ind., manufacturing plant. In addition it had the Limited Premium Package (\$4,105), a Limited Convenience Package (\$890) which included excellent HID lighting. Unfortunately they want \$330 for floor mats, but there is a lot of flooring to cover. But in the final analysis, Sienna offers the most practical vehicle one can buy. What vehicle can do more, offer decent fuel economy combined with sporty performance and with AWD not be hampered by poor driving conditions? Only the minivan, the Sienna

minivan.

Larry Weitzman has been into cars since he was 5 years old. At 8 he could recite from memory the hp of every car made in the U.S. He has put in thousands of laps on racetracks all over the Western United States.