

Road beat: 4Runner keeps improving with age



The Toyota 4Runner remains a workhorse. Photos/Larry Weitzman

By Larry Weitzman

Now in its fifth year of the fifth generation (the 4Runner started production in 1984), the 4Runner continues to be a solid, consistent seller for Toyota, averaging about 50,000 units a year, despite sales being stolen by its similarly sized CUV sibling the Highlander. They are totally different vehicles with no relationship between them and effectively no parts bin sharing.

While the Highlander is a Camry based light duty unibody chassis, the 4Runner remains a real truck based SUV, borrowing heavily from the stout Tacoma truck line with a true body on

frame design that is about as bulletproof as an M1A1 Abrams tank. The shape is rugged boxy with a higher belt line giving the 4Runner a chopped look. Squared off wheel wells with blisters and complex head and tail lights add to its statement that the 4Runner means serious business. Most people are impressed by its strong aggressive looks. It is muscular. Coefficient of drag is a relatively low 0.36.

While it may look big, it is a true midsize at 191-inches long riding on a wheelbase of 110 inches. However, it is wide at 76 inches and tall at 6 feet with the roof rack. But with that width comes a cabin with almost 5 feet of shoulder room and a track of over 63 inches, which pays dividends when doing the twisties.



Specifications

Price \$39,000 to about \$42,000 (Trail Premium)

Engine

4.0L DOHC 24 valve V-6 270 hp @ 5,600 rpm

278 lbs.-ft. of torque @ 4,400 rpm

Transmission

Five speed electronically controlled automatic (V-6)

Transfer case (switchable locking)

Part time shift on the fly

with low range (2.566 reduction), SR5 and Trail only

Full time single speed with locking center differential (Limited)

Configuration

Longitudinal mounted front engine/ rear wheel drive, all wheel drive

Dimensions

Wheelbase 109.8 inches

Length 190.7 inches

Width 75.8 inches

Height 71.5 inches (with roof rack)

Ground clearance (4X2/4X4) 9.0/9.6 inches

Weight 4,750 (4X4 Trail) pounds

GVWR (Trail) 6,300 pounds

Track (f/r) 63.2/63.2 inches

Steering lock to lock 2.7 turns

Turning circle 37.4 feet

Fuel capacity 23 gallons

Cargo capacity (second row up/folded/third row up)

47.2/89.7/9.0 cubic feet

Wheels 17X7.5 inches

Tires P265/70X17

Tow capacity 4,700 pounds

Coefficient of drag 0.36

Performance

0-60 7.78 seconds

50-70 3.98 seconds

50-70 uphill 5.78 seconds

Top speed Who cares? It will cruise effortlessly, quietly and smoothly well above all legal speed limits in the United States.

Fuel economy

EPA rated 17/21/18 mpg city/highway/combined.

Expect 18-19 mpg in rural country driving and 23.5 mpg on the highway at legal speeds.

Under the hood is the familiar 4.0L DOHC 24 valve V-6 making 270 hp at a low 5,600 rpm and a stout 278 pounds of twist at 4,400 rpm. It is the only choice, as the 2.7L inline four is no longer offered in a 4 x 2. Good move Toyota as the four banger didn't get any better fuel economy than the V-6 and it was saddled with a four-speed auto cog swapper. It gave up too much performance for essentially no better fuel economy. The V-6 sends its power to either the rear wheels or four wheels via a five-speed auto tranny. While not a six- or more speeder, the five-speed unit does a great job. A six-speeder wouldn't make much difference with this engine's broad torque curve, which is table top flat from 1,800-5,200 rpm.

Temperature during the road test was over 95 degrees, which may have some effect on diminishing performance, which is probably why this 4Runner Trail Premium performed differently than my road test of four years ago of the exact same model. Zero-60 mph times averaged 7.78 seconds. Passing performance was quick as well with a 50-70 run requiring just 3.98 seconds and the same run up a six percent grade slowing that time by almost two seconds to 5.78 seconds. Excellent times for a 4,750-pound vehicle, but slightly off the numbers from 2010 – 7.48, 3.65 and 5.22 seconds. While Temperature can make a difference, the difference in the numbers is insignificant.

However, fuel economy was about the same, if not slightly improved. EPA rates the 4Runner at 17/21/18 mpg city/highway/combined. But the 4Runner did a bit better with an overall average of about 18.5 mpg and at 70 mph on a level highway it returned 23.5 mpg (runs are done two ways to correct for winds and elevation changes). On a 150-mile roundtrip to South Lake Tahoe on Highway 50 with at least half a dozen full-throttle passing runs, the 4Runner averaged 21.4 mpg (17.8 from Rescue to SLT and 25.0 mpg on the return trip). Ten years ago those would be good numbers, but today they are only slightly above average. One saving grace is the 4Runner's huge 23-gallon fuel tank.

Suspension duties are handled by a stout fully independent double wishbone set up in front and a four link extremely well controlled live or solid axle in the rear. Gas shocks with coils are in all four corners. This Trail Premium had the optional Kinetic Dynamic Suspension System, which used larger stabilizer bars that can disconnect for more axle travel and greater articulation in difficult terrain and rock crawling.

Also helping off road control is the CRAWL system to match terrain with five speed levels which keeps off roading smooth and under total control. In addition it also has a Multi-Terrain system which adjusts wheel slip to match the terrain selected. Also helping is Downhill Assist Control and Hill Start Assist Control, both excellent additions to increase off road safety.

Handling, enhanced by very quick steering, 2.7 turns lock to lock, is very good. When pushed hard in the corners you can feel the wide 265/70 series tires working on the 7.5 x 17 inch alloys changing the direction of a 5,000 pound vehicle. Surprisingly, body roll is controlled. In my prior test I remarked how the VSC intervened too early. The good news is that it must have been recalibrated as it didn't intervene at all during this test. Thanks, Toyota.

During the Tahoe run I stayed behind a late model Corvette with no problem. He drove with sanity as our speeds rarely exceeded 60 mph.

Ride quality was extremely smooth on the interstate to a muted firm in more difficult road conditions. At no time was it jarring. Only when the engine was pushed hard did engine noise enter the cabin, but in normal driving it is very quiet, no wind, road or engine noise. The engine turns a slow 2,000 rpm at 70 mph. It is a comfortable ride.

Brakes are powerful with vented discs well over a foot in diameter in all four corners. Stops from 40 mph were accomplished in 42 feet under perfect control. All the acronyms are standard along with plenty of airbags including a roll sensing side curtain bag for all rows of seats.

With the Trail Premium upgrade, seats go from cloth to a very good synthetic leather called SofTex that will have you second guessing as to whether it's leather. They seem more comfortable with excellent support than in my previous go-round. The instrument panel is a joy to use. Yes it has all the bells and whistles but it is very intuitive. Instrumentation is complete and extremely legible and usable as you would expect. Rear seating is huge also meaning cargo room is copious, about 90 cubic feet behind the front seats and almost 50 cubic feet behind the second row. A third row option is available as is a slide out rear table, very convenient for tailgating or loading and unloading.

Pricing for the Trail Premium starts at \$38,645 plus \$860 for the boat ride from Japan. It also had the optional KDSS for \$1,750. Add in running boards, sliding cargo deck and floor mats and you are at \$42,175. Everything else is standard including NAV, sunroof, backup camera, the connectivity to talk to the space station and power heated front seats. In 30 years the 4Runner has matured nicely. Maybe they should change the name to "4MostRunner."

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.