

Road beat: AWD best choice with Highlander



The Highlander comes close to perfection. Photos/Larry Weitzman

By Larry Weitzman

Now in the second year of its third generation, the Highlander remains a midsize crossover SUV based on the Toyota Camry chassis. While it is about 3-inches wider (76 inches) than the Camry, it rides on a similar 110-inch wheelbase and it is a Camry like 191-inches long. It uses the V-6 engine and transmissions as well. The Highlander does get a slightly bigger 2.7 L inline four. About the only similarity in their appearance is the huge wide-mouth frown grill that seems to be a Toyota and Lexus theme in most of its vehicle.

Outside the Highlander has great proportions with a sleek window line hiding its boxiness and its shelf lights. Both

tail lights and the head lights are finished with a flat chromed shelf. You can find this treatment also in the tail lights of the RAV 4.



Specifications

Price \$29,675 to about \$46,000

Engine

2.7L DOHC 16 valve inline four 185 hp 5,600 rpm

184 lb-ft of torque @ 4,200 rpm

3.5L DOHC 24 valve V-6 270 hp @ 6,200 rpm

248 lb-ft of torque @ 4,700 rpm

Transmission

Six speed torque converter automatic

Configuration

Transverse mounted front engine/FWD/4WD

Dimensions

Wheelbase 109.8 inches

Length 191.1 inches

Width 75.8 inches

Height 68.1 inches (add two inches for the shark fin antenna)

Ground clearance 8.0 inches
Track (f/r) 64.4/64.2 inches
Fuel capacity 19.2 gallons
Passenger volume (moon roof)
154.0 cubic feet
Cargo volume behind 1st row/
2nd row/ 3rd row
82.6/42.0/13.8 cubic feet
Weight (FWD/AWD) 4,354/4,508
Max Tow 5,000 pounds
Steering lock to lock 2.74
turns
Turning circle 38.7 feet
Performance
0-60 mph 6.69 seconds
50-70 mph 3.65 seconds
50-70 mph uphill 5.28
seconds
Top Speed Well into triple
digits
Fuel economy EPA rated
19/25/21 mpg city/highway/
combined. Expect 28-29 mpg
on the highway at legal
speeds 22-23 mpg overall in
suburban driving.

Powering my test vehicle was Toyota's ubiquitous DOHC 24 valve V-6 which also powers the Camry, Sienna, Avalon, Lexus RX, IS, ES, RC and GS and maybe a couple of other models. It cranks out 270 hp at 6,200 rpm and 248 pounds of twist at 4,700 rpm which equates to 222 hp at 4,700 rpm. There is another option, a big stroking inline four that makes 185 hp at 5,600 rpm and 184 pounds of twist at 4,200 rpm. Both engines use the same six-speed torque converter auto cog swapper. If you want AWD, it only comes with the V-6 for a reasonable \$1,460 and the mileage penalty is one mpg over the FWD. Forget the four as it

only offers one mpg over the V-6 and no AWD. Later you will see another huge reason for AWD.

Performance is excellent, posting excellent numbers and more than that, it feels powerful. Zero-60 mph takes just 6.69 seconds. Passing performance runs from 50-70 mph on the level is just 3.65 seconds and up a steep grade only slows that time to 5.28 seconds. Highlander absolutely rocks. As this was an FWD car and with that much power there is significant torque steer. If you stab the throttle too quickly, even with the traction control engaged, it will still smoke the tires. That is why AWD will improve the Highlander as it will reduce the tendency for both issues. That alone is reason enough to go for AWD, never mind the better traction and utility it offers.

Fuel economy is also better than advertised, even better than the four banger's EPA numbers. The V-6 EPA numbers are 19/25/21 mpg city/highway/combined. For the AWD it drops one mpg with numbers of 18/24/20. The four cylinder returns 20/25/22, but here are the numbers attained during this test during a highway run at 70 mph the Highlander averaged 28.9 mpg and overall the average was 22 mpg. With the exact same gearing the AWD might lose one mpg with its 154-pound weight penalty (4,354 vs. 4,508 pounds). Buy the V-6 AWD.

Handling by the numbers should be good, but it's a bit soft, so when pushed hard body roll is an issue. Steering is very quick at 2.74 turns lock to lock, 7.5 x 19 alloys and 245/55 x 19 rubber which should mean great handling doesn't always work all that well. Understand in normal driving it is a luxury ride with easy handling, but high speed (.8-.9) in the twisties the Highlander becomes a lowlander. I would prefer a slight retuning of the of the state of the art suspension system. Rapidly oscillating the steering wheel approximately 1-inch left and right on the highway had little effect on the vehicle. It doesn't require constant correction on the highway, but it does reduce on center feel.

Ride quality on the other hand is superb. Suspension is state of the art with MacPherson struts up front and a trailing arm double wishbone out back. It comes with front and rear stab bars. It has the set up and the ride reflects that. Not only is it extremely smooth, it is anechoic chamber quiet. So for 99 percent of the people out there it would be hard to find a better ride. The engine spins a low 2,000 rpm at 70 mph which helps highway mileage.

Braking with large four-wheel (front ventilated) discs and all the acronyms is very good arresting forward progress from 40 mph in 41 feet. In addition to great brakes, it features about every safety acronym known including hill start assist, downhill assist, blind spot monitor and rear parking assist and I am only warming up here. The V-6 is rated to tow a substantial 5,000 pounds with the tow package.



Plenty of room for family and friends.

Inside is an interior that could be mistaken for a Lexus. Lots of leather, super seats, up to eight passengers, all the electronic wizardry and most everything you can touch is soft-touch materials. Even the front seats are heated and cooled while the second row has its own heat system in the Platinum edition. Third row seating is three place with a 60/40 split and they fold flat into the floor. Its massive interior is also impressive. Total interior volume is 154 cubic feet with the standard panoramic moon roof that comes with the Platinum.

The second and third row seats folding cargo volume is 82.6 cubic feet. The third row up it still has nearly 14 cubes of cargo volume, or the size of your average mid-size sedan. Don't go to Home Depot without a spending limit.

Its instrument panel has all the gauges including a big tach and a complete trip computer. There was nothing left wanting. Even the sound system did a great imitation of Carnegie Hall.

OK, so you think it will take 50 large to buy one. My fully loaded FWD Limited Platinum stickered for (2016) \$42,680 plus \$885 for the train from Princeton, Ind. Running boards, mud guards, tow package, mats and a couple of other small items brought the total to \$45,718. AWD, which I recommend highly, adds \$1,460. But a Limited AWD with the tow package should come in at about \$45 large and that is a smoking deal for a near luxury loaded crossover do all vehicle. It's not perfect, but it's darn close.

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.