

Road Beat: An improved Toyota Tacoma



The Toyota Tacoma is designed for pavement and dirt trails.
Photos/Larry Weitzman

By Larry Weitzman

Tacoma makes the point that smaller engines don't necessarily make the case for better fuel economy. With the new Tacoma there are two engine choices, a 2.7L DOHC, 16-valve inline four cylinder and a 3.5L DOHC, 24 valve V-6 with direct injection and a high 11.8:1 compression ratio.

The 2.7L cranks out 159 hp at a low 5,200 rpm and 180 pounds of twist at 3,800 rpm. However, the V-6 (about 750 more ccs) produces 278 hp at 6,000 rpm and 265 pounds of twist at 4,600 rpm, over 100 more hp and 85 more pounds of torque. It basically the same 3.5L V-6 found in so many Toyota and Lexus

models.

So you would expect the 2.7L truck to achieve better fuel economy. In this case the EPA fuel economy numbers are virtually identical. In a 4X2, the V-6 actually gets better fuel economy with 19/24/21 city/highway/combined versus the four cylinders 19/23/21 mpg. For the 4X4 models, the V-6 returns 18/23/20 mpg, the four returned 19/22/20 mpg, effectively the same. Those numbers are for the six speed automatic tranny versions. The manual tranny actually hurts fuel economy for both engines by as much as one mpg.



Specifications

Price \$27,105 to about \$40,000

Engine

3.5L DOHC, 24 valve directed and port injected V-6 278 hp @ 6,000 rpm; 265 lb.-ft. of torque @ 4,600 rpm

Transmission

Five speed manual

Six speed Manual

Six speed torque converter automatic

Configuration

Longitudinal front engine/
rear wheel drive/four-wheel
drive

Dimensions

Wheelbase 127.4 inches

Length 212.3 inches

Width 74.4 inches

Height 70.6 inches

Ground clearance 9.4 inches

Fuel capacity 21.1 gallons

Track (f/r) 63.0/63.2 inches

Weight 4,480 pounds

GVWR 5,600 pounds

Tow Capacity 6,400 pounds
(properly equipped)

Steering lock to lock 3.64
turns

Turning circle 44.1 feet

Co-efficient of drag 0.386

Performance

0-60 mph 7.48 seconds

50-70 mph 3.97 seconds

50-70 mph uphill 5.85
seconds

Top speed Triple digits

Fuel economy EPA rated
18/23/20 mpg

city/highway/combined.

Expect 19-20 mpg in rural
driving. 24-25 mpg on the
highway at legal speeds.

What I saying here is buying the four cylinder is false economy. Pay the premium (which runs from \$1,500 to about \$2,500 depending on the model) for the V-6, you will thank me later, especially for the added performance gain.

While the body is new, the chassis remains pretty much the same with a wheelbase of 128 inches a track of 63 inches, front and rear, a width of 74.6 inches and a 9.4-inch ground

clearance. But the new, rugged body has grown with four more inches in length (212 inches long which is a foot longer than your full size SUV or minivan), a one-inch deeper cargo bed and it stands an inch taller at 71 inches. It looks big and you have to look twice to make sure it is not a full size truck. When you park the Tacoma in your garage, you will appreciate its actual slightly smaller size and at the same time realize it is not a full size truck.

Its new looks also come with a slightly lower co-efficient of drag at .0386, down from 0.394.

Perhaps the biggest change is the new, to the Tacoma, 3.5L V-6 down from a 4.0L V-6. Half a liter less displacement, and about 20 percent more hp and no loss in torque even with the smaller displacement. But it certainly does help fuel economy. And this is even with more curb weight of about 400 pounds. Zero to 60 mph lasted 7.45 seconds, identical to my test six years ago which used the 4.0L V-6 and was 400 pounds lighter. However, the new engine in passing performance is quicker with 50-70 mph taking 3.97 seconds and the same run up a six percent grade extended that time to 5.85 seconds. The six speed auto cog swapper was smooth and enhances performance, although it does hunt for gears a fair amount keeping the engine in the power band.

That same tranny also improves fuel economy. You have the EPA numbers above, but in real life the new Tacoma does a little better with an overall mpg of about 19-20 mpg mostly on rural, hilly byways at 55-60 mph with almost no highway driving. On the highway the Tacoma average about 25 mpg at a steady 70 mph in a two way run. On a round trip to South Lake Tahoe from Placerville the average was 20.8 mpg. My prior 4.0L truck averaged 16-17 mpg and 20 on the highway. Fuel tank is large at 21 gallons. But here's the rub, full size V-8 trucks almost or do get the same fuel economy numbers as the Tacoma.

Part of the reason for the Tacoma's new found fuel economy is

its new taller gearing which causes some of that tranny hunting. But at 70 mph instead of spinning 2,450 rpm, it now spins at 1,850 rpm which is a huge factor in its fuel economy increase as well as the new, more efficient 3.5L V-6.

Handling is quite good, although with 3.64 turns lock to lock in the steering it takes some winding. Suspension is fairly standard full-sized truck, with double wishbones up front and a live axle in the rear with leaf springs and staggered shocks. On smoother roads the live axle doesn't step out as a result of bumps and the Toyota tracks where you point it with little body roll. Big 265/60 series tires and great looking 18 inch alloys are fitted to this a sporty truck which already boasts a wide 63-inch track. On center steering is excellent. It's not a sports car, it's sporty truck. One item with respect to the steering wheel while tilt and telescoping, it is a bit too horizontal. The lower part of the wheel is much closer to the driver than the upper part. I noticed that in the new Prius too. Most trucks have the wheel on the same plane and is set 90 degrees to the steering column. The Tacoma wheel is set maybe at 75 degrees. Just a note.

Ride quality is like a pickup. It is extremely smooth on a smooth highway or road, but on more challenging pavement it is a bit jiggly. Not harsh, but somewhat unsettled. Being a 4X4, this Toyota is designed for real off road and has suspenders designed for that. Overall you get used to the jiggles which turn into giggles when off-road. But when on the interstate or Highway 50 even going into the mountains, the ride is smooth. Wind and road noise are well subdued as are the big tires quiet.

While the brakes feel strong and that this Toyota with the tow package is designed to tow up to 6,400 pounds, its brakes are rather small. Ten and three-quarters inch ventilated discs in front, and 10 inch drums in the rear. Compact cars have bigger brakes. Maybe that is a misprint in the factory specs but on the plus side, the system feels strong although I did no

towing. Without the tow package the tow limit is 3,500 pounds, but in either case I would want trailer brakes. For the \$650 tow pack, you don't get bigger brakes, but a hitch, oil and fluid coolers for the engine and tranny, pin connector and trailer sway control. Of course all the basic safety acronyms are there, ABS, ESC, TC and more plus eight airbags. My Limited model also got rear sonar, backup camera, Blind spot monitor and rear cross traffic alert.

Toyota has done a number on the interior with seats swathed in gorgeous leather, more like the kind you would find on a saddle or in a tach room, soft and thick. No power seat option is offered something Toyota should think about as there is no manual seat height adjustment. But they are big and comfortable. The IP while done in quality materials, there is not much in soft touch. Instrumentation is complete with a big speedo and tach separated by a trip computer. The center stack and controls are stylish and easy to use. Nav was standard. Pricing for this maxed out fully loaded 4X4, V-6 Limited is \$37,820 plus \$650 for the hard, three piece tonneau cover and \$650 for the tow package. In all models power windows and mirrors are standard, even cruise is standard on all but the base model. The total with the \$900 for the boat from Japan is \$40,020. The 4x4 option adds about \$2,000. With the deeper the Tacoma has more versatility and utility than ever before.

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.