

Road Beat: '18 Camry Hybrid, the rebirth of Toyota



The latest Camry hybrid restores Toyota's image. Photo/Larry Weitzman

By Larry Weitzman

Thirty or more years ago, Toyota was showing the world how to make cars, especially the United States. While they have continued to always produce well designed, great cars, other manufacturers had caught up in terms of design and quality. Its bread and butter car, the Camry, while an excellent automobile, was being overshadowed by other brands who produced cars that were perhaps more daring and edgy.

Today that has all changed with the new 2018 Camry. It is an unbelievable vehicle, offering top in the class performance, incredible style, brilliant design inside and out, outstanding

fuel economy, superb handling, ride and quiet and of course, it's a Toyota.

Where to begin? Outside, despite the front end (which is muted by the blacked-out grille), the new Camry is beautiful, with soft flowing lines and body contours, giving it a luxury look. The rear end is exceptional with the softly rounded and sculptured rear fenders and shoulders, giving it a look of one of my favorite cars ever, the sixth-generation (1991-1995) Mazda 929. Proportions of the new Camry are perfect as is the window line. Kudos to Toyota. Now just clean up the front end, although some of the new front end adds to the car's aggressiveness.

Camry has grown as well, about 2 inches in wheelbase and length, an inch or so in width adding to new found roominess. Wheelbase, length and width now measure 111 x 192 x 72 inches, which follows the trend of mid-size car spaciousness.



Specifications

Price \$30,395 to about \$33,695

Engine

2.5L DOHC, 16 valve inline four cylinder !76 hp @ 5,700 rpm

163 lb.-ft. of torque @ 3,600-5,200 rpm

Electric motor 118 hp

(maximum hp available at full throttle 32 hp)

149 lb.-ft. of torque

Battery: Nickel-Metal Hydride

Maximum combined power output: 208 hp

Transmission

CVT

Configuration

Transverse mounted front engine/front wheel drive

Dimensions

Wheelbase 111.2 inches

Length 192.7 inches SE (XLE 192.1 inches):

Width 72.4 inches

Height 56.9 inches

Ground clearance 5.7 inches

Track (f/r) 62.2/62.6 inches

Fuel capacity 13.0 gallons

Trunk capacity 15.1 cubic feet

Weight (SE) 3,549 pounds

Interior passenger volume 99.9 cubic feet

Steering lock to lock 2.7 turns

Turning circle 38.0 feet

Wheels 18X8 inch alloys

Tires 235/45X18

Performance

0-60 mph 6.78 seconds

50-70 mph 3.38 seconds

50-70 up 6-7 percent grade 5.04 seconds

Top speed anyone care?

Fuel economy EPA rated
44/47/46
city/highway/combined.
Expect 44-46 mpg in rural
country/suburban driving. 50
mpg on a level highway at
legal speeds.

Also growing is engine power and performance. The standard 2.5L four-banger now puts out 203 to 206 hp (at 6,600 rpm) depending on the model and at 13:1 compression can run as a more efficient, Atkinson Cycle engine. The 3.5L V-6 also with a super high compression ratio of 11.8:1 now extricates 301 horses, up about 15 percent and fuel economy is also up by about 5-10 percent. But my hybrid version gets the 2.5L DOHC, 16 valve inline four with an even higher compression ratio of 14:1. It's the highest I know of in automotive gas engines.

In hybrid form it produces "just" 176 hp but at a much lower 5,700 rpm and a strong 163 pounds of twist at a low 3,600-5,200 rpm. But it gets a strong kicker in the form of a 118 hp electric motor, but battery output limits output to about 32 hp as the combined number it 208 hp. But those are some of the biggest horses ever found under the hood of an automobile as you will see. They transmit power to the front wheels via an electronic CVT. The results are close to spectacular.

Zero-60 mph comes up in a very quick 6.78 seconds and if that isn't enough for you, passing performance in 50-70 mph tests averaged just 3.38 seconds on a level highway and 5.04 seconds up a 6-7 percent grade. Twenty years ago, a level pass of 5 seconds was considered high performance. This hybrid rocks and throttle response feels even stronger. It is a high-performance car.

OK, so it goes like "stink," what about fuel economy? Glad you asked. Camry Hybrid is rated at 44/47/46 mpg

city/highway/combined. But this hybrid will exceed those numbers. First, on a level highway with cruise control set at 70 mph (speedo is very accurate) it averaged exactly 50 mpg in a two-way run.

In my round trip to Carson City from Placerville, the average was 44.1 mpg and it included about 18 full throttle passing applications and mostly aggressive driving. Breaking the trip up in segments, the trip over the Sierra to Carson City averaged 38.2 mpg while the return trip averaged 52.4 mpg. From South Lake Tahoe which includes climbing the grade to Echo Summit (from 6,200 to 7,400 feet) the Camry Hybrid averaged an astounding 64.4 mpg and yes, I was full throttle at least nine times. Overall my tester averaged 44 mpg including all performance testing. Think about this, 0-60 mph well into the sixes and 44 mpg and 50 mpg on the highway and we are not talking about a two-passenger motorcycle (heck, they don't get that kind of fuel economy) or a mini-car that can't get out of its own way and has a carrying capacity of two to four sardines and a small tackle box, but a high performance, big family sedan with more comfort than a Tempurpedic or Sleep Number mattress.

About the only negative as to fuel economy is the small fuel tank of 13 gallons, but at 50 mpg that still would give you a range of over 600 miles. Maybe Toyota is worried about the fuel going stale as the time between fill ups might be a couple of weeks.

Besides the extreme comfort and quiet, the new Camry hybrid handles well helped in part by some impressive credentials, such as state of the art fully independent suspension (double wishbone in the rear), stab bars at both ends, a quick electric steering rack (2.7 turns lock to lock) and big 18X8 inch alloys shod with some respectable (235/45 x 18) rubber. Track is also wide and 62 and 63 inches front and rear. While the steering is a bit numb, it is very accurate with superb on center feel. Body roll is well controlled and the tires hang

on until tomorrow all adding up to very sporty handling. A little more steering feel and you have a real sports sedan. But, notwithstanding, this Camry inspires cornering confidence beyond any Camry driven before. Even the weight of this hybrid is held in check at 3,549 pounds. Good stuff.

As to the aforementioned comfort, if it wasn't for the excellent sound system your passengers may fall asleep. Forget noise and road imperfections, the Camry simply dispels them.

Safety is also complete, with all the safety acronyms including lane departure warning and steering assist. Toyota Safety Sense and Star Safety Sense are standard. LED headlights are fabulous and the auto high beams improve night safety. You will need all your fingers and thumbs to count the air bags. One item which Toyota could add is the multi-view 360-degree camera, besides the rear camera and rear cross traffic alert system.

Inside are sublime seats done in Toyota SofTex and cloth. With the added wheelbase, rear seating approaches limousine proportions. Everything you can touch is all soft touch with top quality materials. Instrumentation is hybrid style, meaning no tach, but the trip computer allows for great flexibility is calculating mpg.

The center stack, sound system and two-zone HVAC are easy to use except for Bluetooth phone installation, but once understood, no problem or issue. Even all the windows are one touch up and down. Truck capacity is huge for a hybrid at 15 cubic feet.

Pricing is incredible for this mileage machine stickered at \$29,500 plus \$895 for shipping. My tester had a couple thousand in options, a convenience package (\$325), Blind spot monitoring and cross traffic (\$600), moonroof (\$900), upgraded audio (\$1,080) and the special Ruby Flare Pearl paint (\$395) bringing the total Monroney to \$33,695. That's a bargain

considering there are Priuses that sticker for more. Zero to 60 mph in 6.78 seconds and 50 mpg on the highway. Simply amazing.

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.