

Road Beat: 2018 Toyota Highlander SE does it all



Hard to find a complaint with the 2018 Toyota Highlander SE. Photos/Larry Weitzman

By Larry Weitzman

Bob Lutz, a car wizard who spent time as a high-level executive such as vice chairman and executive vice president at Ford, Chrysler, GM and BMW, once called Toyota the “default” brand. What he meant by that was that many customers when buying a car simply didn’t think about it, they simply went to their Toyota dealer and bought a car.

That’s high praise coming from a competitor. Buying a Toyota was simply a no-brainer. The brand was that good.

Toyota has not rested on that laurel as evidenced by their new

fabulous Camry and this new 2018 Highlander. It is that impressive. Now in its third generation, Highlander is all grown up. The first generation was impressive and this new issue will blow you away.

While it is still loosely based on the Camry platform, Highlander has become a serious mid-size CUV. Just look at the creds. It sits on a 110-inch wheelbase while stretching out 193 inches with massive shoulders giving it a breadth of 76 inches. Ground clearance is significant at 8 inches.

Its design is rugged while maintaining an edge of class. The front end is massive and powerful. You can see some 4Runner. Its sidelines are sleek, especially the sweeping window lines and the rear end is squared off a bit making for serious cargo and three row seating. It's a great looking vehicle and certainly an improvement over the first and second generation.



Specifications

Price \$44,355 (loaded SE AWD V-6)

Engine

3.5L DOHC, 24 Valve V-6 295 hp @ 6,600 rpm

263 lb.-ft. of torque @ 4,700 rpm

Transmission

Eight-speed torque converter automatic

Configuration

Transverse mounted front engine/AWD

Dimensions

Wheelbase 109.8 inches

Length 192.5 inches

Width 75.8 inches

Height 70.1 inches

Ground clearance 8.0 inches

Track (f/r) 64.4/64.2 inches

Fuel capacity 19.2 gallons

Cargo capacity (behind front seats/second row/third row)

82.6/42.0/13.8 cube feet

Weight 4,590 pounds

GVWR 6,000 pounds

Tow capacity 5,000 pounds

Steering lock to lock 2.74 turns

Turning circle 38.7 feet

Wheels 19 x 7.5 alloys

Tires 245/55 x 19

Performance

0-60 mph 6.36 seconds

50-70 mph 3.61 seconds

50-70 mph uphill 4.93 seconds

Top speed – plenty fast

Fuel economy EPA rated 20/26/22 mpg city/highway/combined.

Expect 23 mpg in country or suburban driving and 29 mpg on a level highway at legal speeds.

Mechanicals are also improved with the 3.5L DOHC, 24 valve V-6

pumping out a prodigious 295 hp at 6,500 rpm along with 263 pounds of twist at 4,700 rpm. You can see its Camry roots in the transverse mounted engine. There is also a 185 hp, 2.7L inline four offered, but take a pass as the four gets a six-speed auto cog-swapper while the V-6 gets an eight-speeder. I would acquire the V-6 just for the eight-speeder. Only front wheel drive is available for the four banger while AWD is optional on the V-6 which my tester had and there isn't any fuel economy benefit with the four banger, it is a negative.

Performance is outstanding with 0-60 mph arriving is just 6.36 seconds, a near world-class number. Passing times match that number with 50-70 mph occurring in 3.61 seconds and the same sun up a 6-7 percent grade only slowing that number to 4.93 seconds. And Highlander is no lightweight, tipping the scales in AWD at 4,590 pounds with a GVWR of 6,000 pounds, making it easily up to the task of transporting 7-8 adults depending on whether you opt for a second-row bench seat. It is also rated to tow 5,000 pounds. It would do it easily.

Don't fret about fuel economy. All this performance plus utility doesn't drink a lot of fuel. EPA rates the Highlander AWD V-6 at 20/26/22 mpg city/highway/combined. Interestingly, the four cylinder, FWD Highlander is EPA rated at 20/24/22 mpg. The AWD V-6 while carrying an extra 400 pounds and a larger, over 50 percent more powerful engine returns better fuel economy. The four-cylinder model is not the one to buy. It achieves nothing except a slightly smaller price of admission.

In real world driving, the Highlander averaged 23 mpg overall with almost no time on a four-lane freeway, but when I ran my 70-mph highway test, the Highlander returned 29.3 mpg in a two-way run. In a 200-mile round trip from Placerville to Carson City, the Highlander averaged 25.4 mpg. During that trip full throttle was used about a dozen times. Fuel capacity is a large 19.2 gallons meaning 500 mile legs on the highway.

Handling is another strong suit for Highlander. It has all the right equipment, suspension is Macpherson struts up front and double wishbones in the rear (my SE tester was sport tuned, meaning it was stiffened up a bit). Steering is an electric rack which is a very quick 2.74 turns lock to lock (turning circle is a reasonable 38.7 feet). And it has large stab bars at both ends. Cap all that off with 19 x 7.5-inch alloys shod with 245/55 series rubber and you have a handler. Highlander is a pleasure in the twisties, with accurate steering, crisp turn in and tremendous grip. It feels like it weighs a thousand pounds less as it complies with your directional wishes. Nice job Toyota.

Ride quality is very smooth and quiet. It's uncanny as to how quiet the Highlander is which is punctuated by its smoothness. But it is a firm ride. If you are looking for float, this is not your boat. It is compliant and supple and head tossing is kept to a minimum, a ride quality that I look for in a vehicle. In top or eighth gear the engine spins a very low 1,700 rpm at 70 mph. It also comes with auto stop which stops the engine at a stop and restarts when the brake pedal is released. It was a bit disconcerting and it is defeatable by a switch but it will always default to auto stop at the beginning of every trip. It's part of meeting EPA numbers.

Safety is standard on Highlander. Toyota Safety Sense plus everything else is included down to Lane Keep Assist with steering assist. Brakes over a foot in diameter and strong. Headlights are good.

Inside is a leather interior that provides excellent comfort for at least the first and second row. I wouldn't vouch for the third row, but smaller adults and kids should be fine back there. Instrumentation is complete with a large tach and speedo flanking an info/trip computer center.

The center stack was easy to use, there were no mice to deal with relative to operating the excellent sound system.

Cargo volume is huge with over 82 cubes behind the front chairs with the second and third rows folded flat and they do fold flat. There are 42 and 14 cubes respectively behind the second and third rows, so the Highlander could be dangerous at Home Depot or Lowe's. And the space is well shaped.

Pricing for this loaded Highlander SE AWD, V-6 starts at \$41,550. My tester had one option an entertainment system that will set you back an additional \$1,810 plus \$995 for the train ticket from its Princeton, Indiana assembly plant bringing the total for my tester to \$44,355. But scratching the upgraded entertainment system brings the total to about \$42,500 a veritable bargain considering its extremely high performance and utility. It's just another example of the huge roll that Toyota is on.

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.