

Venza revisited

FOUR COMPELLING DRIVETRAINS

By Barbara and Bill Schaffer



Toyota Venza V6

Toyota planners threw out all notions of categorization when they created the Venza, which combines elements of sport sedan, hatchback, wagon and SUV into one amazing package. It looks great, is fun to drive and is loaded with functional space. Tim Morrison, corporate manager of marketing for cars and vans, described the Venza like this: "We see Venza as a new direction in Toyota passenger car design. Its styling, dimensions and features are more car than SUV. In fact, I like to refer to it as a car optimized, or 70 percent car and 30 percent SUV."

Venza takes Toyota in a new direction, with bolder and more cutting-edge styling than on previous cars. It has the same wheelbase and length as the Camry, with a few more inches of body width and height. Those, combined with the standard 19-inch wheels (20-inch on the V6), give it a sporty, contemporary look. We've never been big fans of Toyota styling. It's not bad, it's just that it's so safe and conservative. The Venza is starting to push this a little bit. The raked body, sharp edges, more aggressive wheel arches and fastback roofline combine to create one of the best-looking Toyotas we have seen.

Venza has a strong appeal from the second you slide into the interior. The door cutout allows an easier step-in position so you don't

have to step over a wide sill. It's also a perfect height, so it's not necessary to climb up or drop down onto the seat. Once in, the comfortable seats provide a higher ride than a sedan in front and slightly higher, theater-like rise in the rear for better forward visibility.

The five-passenger interior is a twin cockpit design with high-quality materials. The front bucket seats are a new sculptured pattern in fabric or leather with contrasting piping. The ergonomically designed center stack, which also includes the shifter, has pods of controls rather than just rows of buttons and dials. A large high-mounted color display screen serves the audio and navigation, plus displays the backup camera view. At the top of the center stack, a small display panel indicates climate control and trip computer info.

The center console can be customized by sliding panels and compartments to the most convenient positions, plus it contains pockets for iPods and cell phones with passages to hide wires. The spacious rear bench seat-backs can be tumbled forward, expanding the cargo area from 34.4 to 70.1 cubic feet.

Venza displays the high quality fit and finish typical of Toyota, but with more flair than other models. It is obvious a lot of passion went into the design and execution of this car.

Venza shopping is easy, with just the one

model and a choice of two engines and two drivetrains. All models are very well equipped with standard features like 19- or 20-inch alloy wheels, filtered-air climate control, power windows and locks, keyless entry, tilt and telescoping wheel, HomeLink® and much more. Eight option packages and four major stand-alone options add all the frosting to the cake, with everything from leather seating, to an entertainment system with JBL Synthesis® Surround Sound, to a voice-activated navigation system. All the option packages can add about \$12,000 to the final price.

The Venza is no BMW in the handling department, but it is sure-footed on all types of roads and surfaces. The stiff high-tensile-strength steel platform is rigid, and the four-wheel independent suspension keeps the V6's big 20-inch tires well grounded even in exuberant runs through the mountains. Braking is strong, with four-wheel vented discs and Toyota's STAR Safety System™. Standard on all Venza models, the STAR Safety System™ includes ABS brakes, with electronic brake-force distribution, stability control, traction control and brake assist.

All models have seven airbags, including a driver's knee airbag. To make driving on hills easier, Hill-start Assist Control keeps pressure on the brakes to prevent the vehicle from



Toyota Venza inline-4

SPECIFICATIONS: TOYOTA VENZA

Visit your dealer or www.toyota.com for the latest info.

DIMENSIONS

EPA Size	SUV
Wheelbase	109.3 in.
Length	189.0 in.
Width	75.0 in.
Height	63.4 in.
Ground Clearance	8.1 in.
Turning Circle	39.1 ft.
Fuel Capacity	17.7 gal.
Cargo Capacity	34.4 to 70.1 cu. ft.

rolling backward when the driver switches a foot from the brakes to the accelerator.

We recently tested the 3.5-liter V6 AWD, rated at 268 -hp, boasting a 0-to-60-mph time of 6.7 seconds. This engine gets an EPA rating of 19 mpg city and 26 mpg highway for the front-drive model and one mpg less for AWD. The 6-cylinder Venza offers an impressive balance of power and economy.

The four-cylinder engine, a new 2.7-liter aluminum alloy block with DOHC is rated at 182 hp. We drove it several months ago in Pennsylvania and were so impressed we agreed this would be the best engine for everyday use. It has amazing power for a four-cylinder engine. It gets an EPA rating of 21/29 city/highway in the front-wheel-drive version (and, again, one mpg less for AWD).

The Venza is exclusively an American product, designed, engineered and produced in the US. It could easily enough be considered a wagon or hatchback version of the Toyota Camry, only better looking and more fun to drive. We have to give the Toyota Venza high marks for comfort and styling. We found little not to like. ■

COMPARATIVE: 4-V6-FWD-AWD

PRICING4-CYL.....V6

FRONT-WHEEL DRIVE

Base FWD\$25,975\$27,800

ALL-WHEEL DRIVE

Base AWD\$27,425\$29,250

PERFORMANCE/WEIGHT.....4-CYL.....V6

FRONT-WHEEL DRIVE

Weight3760 lb3870 lb

0 to 60 mph FWD8.8 sec6.7 sec

Est. fuel economy FWD21/2919/26 mpg

ALL-WHEEL DRIVE

Weight3945 lb4045 lb

0 to 60 mph AWD8.8 sec6.7 sec

Est. fuel economy AWD20/2818/25 mpg

TOWING.....4-CYL.....V6

W/ Tow Prep Package2500 lbs.....3500 lbs

Standard.....1000 lbs.....1000 lbs

MECHANICAL4-CYL.....V6

Engine2.7L DOHC I-43.5L DOHC V-6

Horsepower182@5800268@6200

Torque182@4200246@4700

Fuel (all)87 Octane Reg Unl

Transmission (all)6-spd auto

Wheels19x7.5 10-spoke20x7.5 5-spoke

Tires245/55R19245/50R20

SUSPENSION (all):

FRONT:

MacPherson strut with L-shaped lower arms, optimized anti-dive geometries for comfort and safety, center axis of coil spring slanted toward outside to reduce friction and lateral forces.

REAR:

dual-link MacPherson strut for superior handling and high torsional rigidity.

BRAKES (all):

FRONT:324x28mm Ventilated Disc

REAR:298x10mm Solid Disc

Enhanced VSC (ABS with EBD, Brake Assist, TRAC. VSC) and Hill-start Assist Control.

OUR CONUNDRUM

by Joe Sage

We drove the full Toyota Venza lineup at its launch, in southwestern Pennsylvania, last fall (see Arizona Driver Magazine, Jan/Feb09). We were quite impressed, and we were intrigued by the fact it comes in four forms: inline 4-cylinder or V6, and with front-wheel drive or all-wheel drive. We still are. At launch, Toyota told us they anticipated sales would concentrate on the most minimal (4-cylinder FWD) and most maximal (6-cylinder AWD). We, however, think both of the middle models are still very much in play. For those, pick your poison: AWD but with the more economical 4, or V6 for its power but as a front-driver.

Lucky for us, we had a chance to spend a full week with each engine recently. Unlucky for us, the press fleet in Arizona includes only the front-drivers. (And that's too bad, since not only does it snow in much of the state, but AWD can be great on sand, wet freeways, on-ramps or punching an apex anywhere).

As you can see by the specifications at left, weight, price and fuel mileage are all relatively close, although you can be out the door in a four for mid-20s and well into the 30s with a V6, and though the EPA has modified its mileage testing to be more accurate, at least in the case of the Audi A3, we've been told to expect the 4-cylinder numbers to be more realistic. Wheels are larger on the V6 (for better cornering grip and style, but likely giving faster tread wear and harsher ride at times).

In driving the FWD V6 for a week, followed by the FWD I-4 for a week, we still liked both vehicles plenty: style, comfort and the utility of a spacious vehicle with lower profile but high ground clearance, all with more than decent fuel economy.

But we still liked the four. It felt lighter, quicker and more balanced, but we have to emphasize that this is highly subjective, and we're still not sure we'll ever be certain of a preference. For one thing, we didn't have a chance to drive them on a challenging climb like I-17 to Flagstaff or the Beeline Highway to Payson, which could challenge the 4-cylinder more (perhaps). And we didn't tow with them, though clearly if you have towing needs, the capacity specs will show you just what you need. And again, we didn't revisit the AWD models, and we'd be most inclined to be comparing the two of those. We hoped to find a bright lightbulb in the specs, to explain this, but knew a modern V6 wouldn't weigh much more than a four. We do note that both horsepower and torque peak earlier (5800 and 4200rpm, respectively) than in the V6 (6200 and 4700), and that may be a key factor. Subtleties of front/rear weight distribution may multiply the differences in weight and power. Or we may be fantasizing the whole thing.

Compared with the Ford Edge, Mazda CX-9, Nissan Murano and others, the Toyota Venza has a great edge in both purchase price and fuel economy. So if that's the basis of a decision, even though the full range of prices isn't all that wide, the same logic would drive you to the 4-cylinder. If you want to add just a little more to the mix, we'd probably sooner spend \$1500 on AWD than \$1800 on the V6, and we'd probably rather gain 185 pounds by adding AWD than 110 up-sizing the engine, or 285 pounds to add both. Tough call. Drive them both. ■