

# Favorite flavor

There are reasons the most obvious flavor is also the most popular

by Joe Sage

## SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE.....	3.5L DOHC V6 with Dual VVT-i
TRANS.....	5-speed electrically controlled auto
POWERTRAIN.....	full-time 4-wheel drive
POWER/TORQUE.....	270 hp, 248 lb-ft torque
FUEL MILEAGE.....	17/22/19 MPG city/hwy/comb
<b>BASE (LIMITED V6 4WD) .....</b>	<b>\$39,400</b>
• Cross bars .....	\$229
• Door edge guard .....	\$109
• Carpet/cargo mat (3 row seating) .....	\$280
<b>DESTINATION .....</b>	<b>\$845</b>
<b>TOTAL AS TESTED.....</b>	<b>\$40,863</b>

The Toyota Highlander was a pioneer—the first car-based midsize crossover—back in 2000 (as a 2001 model). But despite its car-based unibody chassis, Toyota calls it an SUV in its official full product name on the Monroney sticker. The three-row, seven-passenger Highlander has been a strong-selling (often top-selling) option between the 4Runner SUV or the smaller RAV4 crossover.

We're taking one last look at the 2013 model, which arrived here at the end of summer, several months after the introduction of the 2014 model at last spring's auto shows. We'll include a peek at the new one.

This 2013 model is the last of the second generation, which launched in 2007. For 2013, Highlander offered new feature and option packages and updated navigation, audio and Toyota's Entune infotainment system.

There are four conventional-drive Highlanders and two hybrids. The base 4-cylinder straight-gasoline model starts at just \$29,020 (available only with two-wheel drive). Close in price but a big jump in content is the Plus (which replaces a Tech Package from the prior year) for \$30,475—a small jump in price,

but now with a V6. Next up is a Highlander SE, in the mid-30s, then our test vehicle, the Limited, at a base price just under \$40,000.

The Hybrid and Hybrid Limited are the priciest, at \$40,170 and \$46,370 respectively.

Our test Highlander's highway fuel mileage is 22 MPG. The Hybrids are rated at 28 MPG, and the 4-cylinder model at 25 MPG.

This is the top-of-the-line Highlander, Hybrids notwithstanding—Limited 4WD—and is out the door fully outfitted (this one had three minimal add-ons). Forty grand for tops, versus 30 grand for starting model is a very reasonable spread for the variety of offerings that provides.

Our sample had optional full-time 4WD. All have four-wheel independent suspension, 8-inch ground clearance and approach/departure angles of 22/23 degrees.

Wheelbase is 109.8 inches, overall length 188.4 inches, and turning circle—of interest in town or in the forest—is 38.7 feet. We did no off-roading in this. It really didn't cross our minds. But we did drive it around town, where it proved refreshingly straightforward.

Styewise, we noted that the front sheetmetal was very car-like, especially in the grille and headlight area (see photo at left, the 2013 model).

Despite being top trim, the vehicle had manual tilt and telescope steering wheel.

Controls were clear. Audio tuning worked well through intuition. Prominent knobs on the center stack imply easy audio tuning with eyes on the road, but oddly they're not knobs at all—they're circular housings for little-used functions (four-way flasher and passenger airbag indicator).

A small screen at the upper center of the instrument panel contains vital time and outside temperature info, once you get it legible, which required the manual—a well-organized one with great reference diagrams and indexing. We also learned that the outside temp is only accurate from minus 40 to plus 122 degrees Fahrenheit—pushing the limits for summertime here.

The third row has its own air supply (with its own controls), a huge advantage that can be a deal-maker for family buyers.

While performing routinely aggressive suburban neighborhood maneuvers at a pretty decent clip, we noted that the Highlander handles well overall—certainly not a road-hugging performance vehicle, but the fact we'd even about think that demonstrates how good it is.

Multiple times, we noted the Highlander's smooth handling, smooth cornering and smooth acceleration. One logbook note aside, we found its steering to generally be very solid, steady and reliable, with just the right amount of effort, no electric feel and no disconnect—in an era where so many steering systems are just the opposite.

The Highlander, for all its capability, does not feel high-centered or bulky. Ultimately, we con-



cluded that it would be no trouble at all making this a daily driver.

So, the Highlander is identified an SUV, though built on a unibody chassis. We contemplate this and conclude that if the SUV were invented today and were not made a little carlike, people would probably wonder what kind of shortcuts the designers took to just press some truck chassis into service, when all anybody really wanted was a big station wagon, of sorts. This just works.

The Toyota Highlander is ubiquitous, it's not overdesigned, its interface is near-transparent. It's easy to describe this vehicle as being kind of vanilla. Another way of putting that is that this is one of those vehicles where you could say that if there were only one vehicle in the world, this could be it. That's not to say it's a take-me-now, to-die-for vehicle. It just means it's simple, to the point and handles probably 100 percent of the tasks that 98 percent of people need. ■

Bill Fay, Toyota Motor Sales group vice president and Toyota Division general manager, introduces the all-new third-generation 2014 Toyota Highlander at the 2013 New York International Auto Show.

The 2014 Toyota Highlander was revealed at the New York International Auto Show in March 2013.

You can see at a glance its more trucklike grille—reminiscent of the big Tundra—bringing it closer to its SUV self-image. Everything's more aggressive around the front, from that grille, to its new fascia, to the enhanced power bulge and more angular fender definition, to the wheel arches, which are tighter to the wheels now, giving the vehicle a more purposeful stance.

The vehicle has been refined inside to accommodate up to eight passengers (the second row can be a bench or two captain's chairs).

Two versions of the Entune infotainment system are available, with 6.1-inch screen or 8-inch screen and 12-speaker JBL audio. There is a new one-touch power liftgate, plus driver selectable memory height settings.

There will again be four-cylinder, V6 and V6 hybrid powertrain alternatives. Smoothness and fuel efficiency are aided by a new 6-speed transmission.

Thirty percent more insulation, new acoustic glass and exhaust redesign reduce noise-vibration-harshness.

Toyota says the Highlander promises to deliver style, comfort and utility. They seem to have kept all three benchmarks in mind as they put this new one together. ■

