

The very definition of crossover

By
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Breakthrough quirky when new five years ago, Venza has set the pace

When the Toyota Venza launched in 2008 as a 2009 model, the “crossover” term was new but was just starting to really catch on, though there was still debate about exactly what it should apply to. Venza seemed to hit the nail on the head. It didn’t have the styling of an SUV—its sheetmetal was pretty radical for that time. But it was tall, big inside, could tow, had ground clearance of over 8 inches (one of our favorite Venza attributes) and had available all-wheel drive.

The fundamentals remain the same. It still has a choice of AWD or FWD, and of four- or six-cylinder engines. Today, that same sheetmetal blends right in. A four-cylinder was a little bit harder sell, then, but not today. Venza was ahead of its time.

Prices have gone up since 2009, with the 2014 base LE FWD 4-cylinder starting at \$27,950, and our Limited AWD V6 test Venza on top at \$39,570.

The Venza offers large sedan interior volume and seating space—think Crown Vic—but without the big car’s cumbersome overall package of huge hood and huge trunk. We noted only one or two instances of default front-drive torquiness. We did feel a hint of big old sedan handling on just one aggressive corner, with the outboard

front tire wanting to tuck. We’ll cross those items off as minor, since overall we concluded the Venza’s handling was comfortable and precise.

When we drove both engines (and both drivetrains) five years ago, we were on the fence between the V6 and the four-cylinder. The V6 is rated at 268 hp, versus 181 for the four, yet at that time they both felt capable. (The climb to Flagstaff or Payson, in both, could better reveal the difference.) We noted this time that our six seemed a little short on performance—not bad for a daily driver crossover, perhaps, and it is not, after all, a \$95,000 German sedan. But we would drive both engines one more time, before a buying decision.

We probably like the Venza most just because it is *almost* any number of popular vehicle types—almost a wagon, or crossover, or SUV, while at the same time not being any of those.

It really is a genius piece of styling, scaling and packaging. The height of the cabin, the occupant space, cargo volume, ground clearance and towing—all that combined in smaller crossovers can look ungainly. In the Venza’s size and posture it comes together as a perfect fit. ■

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE.....	3.5L 24v V6 w Dual VVT-i
POWER.....	268 hp, 246 lb-ft torque
TRANSMISSION.....	6-speed electronic auto
DRIVETRAIN.....	all-wheel drive
GROUND CLEARANCE.....	8.1 inches
TOWING CAPACITY.....	3500 lbs (w/package)
MPG.....	18/25/21 (city/hwy/comb)
INCLUDED:	20" alloy wheels, HID auto headlamps, heated mirrors, puddle lamps, dual zone climate, keyless entry/start.

BASE PRICE.....	\$39,570
OPTIONS: Blizzard Pearl paint.....	395
Floor mats and cargo mats.....	290
DESTINATION CHARGE:.....	860
TOTAL.....	\$41,115



LOGBOOK NOTES

Setting up the audio was a breath of fresh air—all touchscreen, no wiggly tooth joystick like the Lexus just before it (and at less cost: win-win). Adjusting seats, mirrors and whatnot was all straightforward. steering wheel has mechanical tilt and no telescope, surprising on both counts.

Ironically, a considerable inside blind spot is blocked by a headrest anyway. It doesn’t bother us, since they’re all blind and we rely on the mirrors—but also because this has the extra sunroof in back, a light colored interior, and is just a pleasant place to be.

The Power Easy Access system—an increasingly common feature whereby your seat is pulled out from under you as you park—requires a trip to the dealer, to turn on or off. Heaven help you if you and your spouse have two different preferences.

If you have your headlights set on Auto—an increasingly common feature that is being increasingly used by default—your bright headlights will dim per their own wisdom, for example due to a road sign’s reflection. That works poorly, so Auto is a bad choice.



Some people see a soccer mom aura in the Venza. We can see equal parts storm trooper helmet. Overall, we would say the Venza has plenty of style and no stigma.

