



All grown up: Toyota's frisky new RAV4 is running with the big boys

[by Jerry Garrett]

Is it possible to have too much of a good thing?

In the case of Toyota's new, third-generation RAV4, that argument could be made.

Toyota made the RAV4 larger and more powerful, in just about every measurement. But has Toyota overdone it?

It's now more powerful than either the Highlander - in gasoline or hybrid form - or the Lexus RX 330. And it's within a couple of inches of being as large.

So, it would seem the RAV4 is competing with those vehicles for many of the same buyers; in that fight, a cheaper, friskier RAV4 would be the smarter choice.

The new RAV4 can also be ordered with such upmarket features as electronically controlled four-wheel drive, plush leather seats and a rear seat entertainment system. Toyota has even managed to cram in a third row of seats.

Is this the same RAV4 that started the small SUV segment 10 years ago?

No, but that's not exactly how Toyota is positioning it.

"Doing something for the third time carries special significance in Japan," says Kiyooka Ise, the vehicle's executive chief engineer, citing a Shogun belief that dates back 400 years. "The third time, or third attempt, is considered the turning point.

"It could be good, or it could be not so good."

Competitors, the other 20 or so with vehicles in the class, are probably hoping this change of direction for the RAV4 will wind up in the latter category. Toyota believes a bigger RAV4 will be just as much of a surprising sales success as the original one was.

But, my, how Toyota's baby SUV has grown: adding 14 inches in length to 181 inches (compared to the outgoing model), and 4 inches in width, which makes it as large as anything in the compact SUV class.

"It's not a RAV4 anymore!" groused a colleague as she tried unsuccessfully to wedge the new one into a tiny New York City parking space the old RAV4 would have fit in with ease. (A first-generation RAV4 two-door, a model discontinued in 2000, was even shorter.)

When the RAV4 first appeared in 1996, it looked like Toyota's attempt to imitate the spectacularly unsuccessful Suzuki Samurai. Toyota said it was different, though, because it was the first SUV built on a passenger car platform. And the RAV4 proved to be stable, maneuverable, easy to park, economical and fun to drive.

"It was an instant hit," says Toyota Vice President Jim Lentz, "with passenger car buyers, looking to move up to an SUV."

Emboldened, Toyota brought out the car-based Highlander SUV and the Lexus RX. Those, in turn, went on to also become best-sellers. Toyota has become a believer in the viability of car-based SUVs, but as the

segment matures, what direction should new models go?

In deciding what the next RAV4 should be, Ise said, "I turned to one of America's most beloved philosophers, Yogi Berra, who said, 'You can observe a lot - just by watching.'"

Ise watched what small SUV buyers wanted from their vehicles. The answer was bigger vehicles.

So, the RAV4 became bigger.

Buyers also wanted small SUVs to handle better.

So the new RAV4 now enjoys an independent MacPherson strut front suspension, and a double-wishbone rear, with stabilizer bars.

And buyers wanted more power. So the RAV4 gets an optional V-6 engine that turns it into weapon of mass acceleration.

Let's talk for a minute about this motor. It's a version of the 3.5-liter V-6 that's in the Tundra pickup and much larger 4Runner SUV. In this iteration, it generates 269 horsepower and 246 foot-pounds of torque - just a few ponies shy of the output of a Subaru WRX or a Mitsubishi Evo.

It'll easily break seven seconds in a 0-to-60 sprint. But its real strong suit is the way it can zip through traffic with all the quickness and agility of a motorcycle.

When I asked Ise how he managed to get



approval for this from Toyota's notoriously conservative management, he just laughed and sauntered off.

Even the base RAV4, which still comes with an inline four-cylinder engine, gets a significant boost in horsepower and torque.

Despite the added oomph, each engine actually gets better fuel mileage than it used to, and that's with automatic transmissions - a four-speed for the four-cylinder and a five-speed for the V-6.

The base four-cylinder 2WD is rated at 24 miles per gallon in town and 30 on the highway; the 4WD models earned a 23/28 rating. There is virtually no mileage penalty for upgrading to the V-6: the 2WD version is 22/29; the 4WD is at 21/28. Both engines run on 87 octane.

Because the V-6 option only costs about \$2,000 more, that would seem to be a must-have option.

The base 2WD four-cylinder model has an MSRP of \$20,905 - about 1 percent more than the outgoing model - for a heckuva lot more car, or SUV. The 4WD option adds \$1,400. The big ticket model is the V-6 "sport" package at \$25,795.

These are reasonably good values per dollar. The buying decision comes down to whether RAV4 fans will miss the petite predecessor, or be happy with the new plus-sized version. It's definitely more to love.

SPECS BOX

2006 Toyota RAV4

Body style: Compact 5- or 7-passenger SUV; front-wheel drive or optional all-wheel

Engine: 2.4-liter DOHC 16-valve inline 4-cylinder; optional 3.5-liter DOHC 24-valve V-6

Horsepower: 166 at 6,000 rpm; V-6, 269 at

6,200 rpm

Torque: 165 at 4,000 rpm; V-6, 246 at 4,700 rpm

Transmission: 4-speed automatic; V-6, 5-speed automatic

Acceleration: 0 to 60 mph, 8.7 seconds; V-6, 6.9 seconds

EPA estimated fuel mileage: 24 mpg city, 29 highway (4WD, 23/28); V-6, 22/29; 4WD, 21/28

Fuel Capacity: 15.9 gallons; 87 octane recommended

PRICING

Base price: 4-cylinder 2WD, \$20,905; 4WD, \$22,305; V-6 2WD, \$22,940, 4WD, \$24,340; Sport, \$22,480 for the 2WD with 4-cylinder engine to \$25,795 for the V-6 4WD; prices include \$605 freight charge

Competition: Jeep Liberty, Honda CR-V, Toyota Highlander, Suzuki Grand Vitara

Where assembled: Japan

PLUSES: Best non-hybrid mileage for a 4-cylinder; outstanding power and handling with V-6.

MINUSES: Has grown perhaps too much?

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