



RAV4 more capacious but price is near rapacious

[By Mark Maynard]

Toyota put its RAV4 through a growth spurt for 2006, adding 14 inches of length so it could offer a third-row seat and a bigger cabin.

And what was once a nimble four-door runabout has seemingly become a one-size-fits-all, entry-level SUV that has moved up in price.

I recently tested a RAV4 Sport 4WD with a 166-horsepower four-cylinder engine and four-speed automatic transmission, and while I liked the contemporary styling, the overall package didn't give the impression of an all-new benchmark-setting Toyota.

Maybe it was the price.

The least-expensive RAV4 four-cylinder ranges goes from just under \$21,000 to \$24,560 for a topline Limited 4WD. Option packages add up quickly, as noted on the tester.

The midlevel Sport has a starting price of \$23,880, with an as-tested price of \$27,428. That's a lot of money for Toyota's smallest SUV, and that price didn't include carpeted floor mats or a cargo area cover.

Side air bags and side curtain air bags are a \$650 option.

The sport model adds a sport-tuned suspension, 18-inch tires and alloy wheels, fender flares, smoked headlamp trim, dark charcoal fabric seats and color-keyed spare tire cover.

Pricing for the V-6 model ranges from \$22,940 to \$26,475 for the Limited 4WD. The Sport V-6 is \$24,395, or \$25,795 for 4WD.

The third-row seat option adds \$700 to \$950, depending on the model, but it is not available on the Sport.

Performance is dutiful with the four-cylinder and four-speed automatic, which has no sport mode or manual shift ability. And no manual transmission is offered.

Despite being a much larger RAV4, fuel economy is 1 mpg better than the 2005 version, and is now at 23/28 for the four-wheel drive or 24/30 for two-wheel drive, using 87 octane.

With Honda putting a five-speed automatic with steering wheel paddle shifters in its new Fit subcompact, a four-speed in an all-new RAV seems dated.

The better value statement, and surely one that makes a more interesting driving experience, would be the V-6 option. That's a 269-hp, 3.5-liter V-6 and five-speed automatic transmission, with an EPA mileage rating of 21/29 for the 2WD, 21/28 for the 4WD.

Both engines have ULEV II emissions ratings.

As pricey as a RAV4 can be, it's still less than the Highlander - the next SUV up in the Toyota lineup of many SUVs - and the RAV4 gets a more powerful four-cylinder and a tad more "interior volume" space.

Volume doesn't always mean roominess, however.

Despite 39.5 inches of front headroom, a 6-foot-4 passenger might not be able to see out the windshield without slumping. And those with long legs will find their shins up against the glove box.

There is good foldability to the seats, durable fabric, cup holders aplenty and a flat second-row floor that makes three on the bench much more comfortable.

Consider the third row as kid space for the school commute. An ample storage area under the cargo floor is a good idea.

The driving experience might not be memorable, but it is solid Toyota: easygoing steering effort, firm brake response and good balance when you have to make an evasive move or want to have a little fun going through the cloverleaf.

Road noise over certain road surfaces was higher than I've experienced in other small SUVs.

And for a vehicle costing \$27,000, there were other notes. The mast antenna seems cheap. The test vehicle's plastic cover of the steering column wouldn't stay snapped in place and generated a scraping plastic sound when the wheel was turned - though my wife's '92 Camry does the same thing.

The damped glove box door is slow. The standard CD audio system has an input jack in the center armrest console for an iPod or other digital music player, but no audio or video plug-ins for the back seat, which could be an issue for today's plugged-in families.



And the interior styling is too plain and plasticky to attract young buyers, but the Sport's metallic-plastic trim might lure mature drivers who can swing a \$400 monthly payment.

Trendy or not, with gasoline costing more than \$3 a gallon, the RAV4 might be the right package at the right time, though some consumers might see it as a little more costing more.

SIDEBAR: SPECS BOX

2006 Toyota RAV4 Sport 4WD

Body style: Compact, 5-passenger SUV

Engine: 166-hp, 2.4-liter DOHC 4-cylinder with variable valve timing; ULEV II emissions rating

Transmission: 4-speed automatic; electronic on-demand four-wheel drive

EPA fuel economy estimates: 23 mpg city, 28 highway; 87 octane recommended

DIMENSIONS

Cargo space: 36.4 cubic feet behind second row; 73 feet, second row folded

Front head/leg/shoulder room: 39.5 (with sunroof)/41.6/57.1 inches

Rear head/leg/shoulder room: 39.7/38.3/55.5 inches

Length/wheelbase: 181.1/104.7 inches

Curb weight: 3,514 pounds

FEATURES

Standard equipment: air conditioning, 6-speaker CD audio system, 60/40-split folding rear seatback, power windows-locks-

mirrors, underfloor cargo space, visors with extenders and illuminated mirrors

Safety equipment: Dual-stage front air bags, pretensioners and force limiters on front seat belts, vehicle stability control, traction control, 4-wheel disc anti-lock brakes with Brake Assist and electronic brake force distribution, tire pressure monitoring system, manual tilt-telescopic steering wheel

CHASSIS

Steering: Power-assisted rack and pinion; turning circle, 36.8 with 18-inch tires; 34.8 with 16- to 17-inch tires

Suspension: 4-wheel independent

Tires and wheels: 235/55 18-inch (base, P215/70 16-inch; Limited, P225/65 17-inch)

PRICING

Base: \$23,880, including \$605 freight charge; price as tested, \$27,428

Options on test vehicle: 9-speaker JBL audio system with 6-disc in-dash changer with MP3-WMA playback with steering wheel controls, \$590; front seat-mounted side air bags and front and second-row roll-sensing side curtain air bags, \$650; cargo area tonneau cover, \$140; daytime running lights, \$40; power tilt-slide sunroof with sunshade, \$900; carpeted floor mats, \$119; towing receiver hitch, \$750; Plus security system, \$359

Where assembled: Japan

PLUSES: Exterior styling, easy drivability.

MINUSES: Pricey for what seems to be an underachieving new Toyota.

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