

# TINY GIANT

SEGMENT PIONEER CONTINUES TO MOVE THE GAME FORWARD

JOE SAGE



It's likely unfair that we got straight into the RAV4 at the airport, after flying back from the launch of the 500-hp Mercedes CLS63 AMG. And it's likely unfair that we were subjected to snickers from a neighboring car at the very first traffic light. One unfair advantage may have been the RAV's pure white-on-white dress.

As we drove up the freeway to the office, lo and behold, we had a twin in the next lane: this one driven by a college girl with ASU and sorority stickers on the back. Bingo. If only she pulled off where we pulled off, we might have the perfect interview on this vehicle, from its perfect demographic.

Or so we thought. But she didn't.

Nonetheless, as the AMG's horsepower faded in our rearview mirror, and as we drive the new Toyota RAV4 Limited in its own right, the stigma faded away. Mostly.

The poor little Toyota. Looking back, we last drove its 4x4 Sport iteration, reviewed in our November/December 2009 issue, suffering a similar fate, sharing the issue with (and covering behind a cover featuring) the then-brand-new Chevy Camaro SS. We could make it feel like Rodney Dangerfield about now, except that Rodney was a pretty hardy party animal, and the RAV4 has more of a "good provider" personality. And that is certainly is.

It did get a good review in 2009, with a preview of all that would be new in 2010. And here we are in 2011:

### OUR TEST RAV4 LIMITED

ENGINE: 3.5L DOHC 24v V6 dual VVT-i: 269hp, 246 lb-ft  
 TRANSMISSION.....5-speed electronic automatic  
 DRIVE.....front-wheel drive  
 SAFETY/SECURITY: Stability control, traction control, ABS with electronic distribution and assist, smart stop, airbags galore, safety headrests and child anchors/tethers/locks, tire pressure monitor.  
 EXTERIOR: Halogen headlamps, spoiler, spare tire cover, color keyed mirrors w/ turn signals, intermittent wipers, fog lamps, privacy glass, roof rack.  
 COMFORT/CONVENIENCE: Dual zone climate, AM-FM-CD, cruise, smart key, PW/PL, fold-flat second row, more.  
**Base price.....\$ 26,835\***  
 Auto-dim RV mirror w/ integrated backup camera...475  
 Special color.....220  
**PREMIUM PLUS VALUE PACKAGE:** Mucho audio, leather, moonroof, heated power seats and more.....3,480  
 Tow prep package (radiator, fan, alternator).....160  
 Carpet floor mats, cargo mat.....199  
 Destination charge.....810  
**TOTAL.....\$ 32,179**  
 Extreme Value Package MSRP discount.....- 2,000  
**TOTAL after discount.....\$ 30,179**  
 \*Online, this is now \$30,035 base; 4WD adds \$1400. A front-wheel-drive 4-cylinder base RAV4 starts at \$22,025.



### TOYOTA, TESLA PREP RAV4 EV

Toyota unwrapped its second generation RAV4 EV and announced plans to build 35 of the vehicles for a demonstration and evaluation program with their new electric vehicle partner, Tesla Motors. Toyota planners have targeted an operating range of 100 miles in actual day-to-day driving patterns and in a variety of climates and conditions. Tesla was responsible for building and supplying the battery, as well as other related parts. Toyota was responsible for development and manufacturing leadership as well as the seamless integration of the powertrain. The RAV4 EV received several distinct exterior styling changes including a new front bumper, grille, fog lamps and headlamps. The interior received custom seat trim, multimedia dash displays, push-button shifter and dashboard meters. The RAV4 platform brings a 73-cubic-foot cargo area with rear seats folded down — no cargo space was lost in the conversion to an electric powertrain.

—Bill and Barbara Schaffer

### OUR WEEK WITH THE RAV4 LIMITED

The 269-hp V6 RAV4 has lots of pep in a small package. In the southeast Valley, we were up against Hondas, Priuses, minivans and such, and it held its own quite well. In the northeast Valley, where competition is stiffer, we were able to keep up with the lane changes and merges necessary for survival, more than adequately. We were impressed by its lack of torquiness, especially as a front-driver. The RAV4 doesn't feel high-centered yet offers great visibility and good command of the road.

The Limited is well appointed inside, instrumentation was user-friendly, and we like the combined mirror/camera. Add keyless entry and start, dual climate zones and full power seats, and the RAV offers great value.

Steering wheel controls are manual but easy to operate; seats weren't the most comfortable, audio controls weren't as friendly as the rest, and the sound system, an upgraded one, might disappoint that college girl (or us).

Ultimately, we conclude that the reworked front fascia and grille are attractive and maybe even masculine to a degree; perhaps we just need a different color. By our last day, we'd made fast friends with the RAV4, concluding that whatever anyone might think about its gender—and that may be a factor for some—it has plenty of power, easy access/egress, features galore, and we could live with it indefinitely on its own merits. ■

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