

Defining a new
do-it-all category
of form and function:
Toyota Venza



We knew from the get-go that Toyota was very excited about the launch of the Venza. The buzz was that this was a completely new kind of vehicle, expressly tailored to the times and filling a niche that was previously unfilled, possibly even previously undefined. We hear this a lot.

In fact, we found Toyota had done something very special, though they had a little trouble defining the new niche themselves. We'd been generally expecting a crossover of some sort, engineered from a combination of the top-selling, ultra-reliable Camry sedan and the Highlander crossover/SUV. The Venza does derive from these in part.

Toyota Division Group VP and General Manager Bob Carter explained that the Venza has its roots in the well-received Toyota FT-SX concept car presented at the 2005 Detroit auto show. Whereas a concept designer's vision is often compromised a great deal in production, due to the realities of engineering, tooling, materials sourcing, vendor capabilities and such, the Toyota design centers in Newport Beach and Ann Arbor were tasked with keeping the styling intact. Chrysler has famously accomplished this a few times, the Prowler, PT Cruiser, Challenger and others. And Toyota had accomplished it with the FJ Cruiser.

In the continuing effort to define vehicles that are neither car nor SUV, but nobody wants to call a crossover or especially a station wagon, Toyota has identified this vehicle as "70% car and 30% SUV." On the car side, they mention styling, handling, fuel economy, lower roof height, step-in/load-in access and 5-passenger capacity. On the SUV side, they mention all-wheel drive, cargo capacity and the driver's higher sightline. On balance, they call the Venza "a passenger car, optimized."

Toyota Chief Engineer Michihiko Sato explains that focus groups from the Detroit concept insisted they wanted comfort and driving fun, which they felt were not offered by conventional SUVs. These goals were meshed with ingress/egress ease and a broad set of features. There is a higher sill than on a car, and there is great width and depth from doors to seats to legroom. Ingress and egress, in fact, are claimed to be better than a car or an SUV. The driving experience was engineered toward responsive steering, body control and a well-balanced ride, all better achieved with the lower overall height of the Venza compared to an SUV.

Powertrains include two engines: a 3.5-liter V-6 and a 2.7-liter 4-cylinder, the all-new dual VVT-I, plus one of two 6-speed automatic transmissions, and optional all-wheel drive with either engine. The V-6 is familiar from

the RAV4, Camry and Highlanders to date—engineered for less scheduled service, while putting out 268 horsepower and 246 lb.-ft. of torque and delivering 19 mpg city and 26 highway, respectable for a 5-passenger utility pod that achieves 0-to-60 in 6.7 seconds. The new VVT-I 4-cylinder is a DOHC with aluminum block and head, to be used also on the 2009 Highlander—with figures of 182 for both horsepower and torque and delivering 21 mpg city and 29 highway. There is no hybrid version at this time. The 6-speed automatics for the two engines are different, with weight savings on the 4-cylinder version. A Tow Package with heavy-duty alternator and other upgrades allows the V-6 to tow 3500 pounds, the 4-cylinder 2500 pounds. You can tow 1000 pounds without the Package.

So what is the Venza? There is something about the styling that's reminiscent of the cars of the future that graced illustrations decades ago. Carter reminds us that both the Toyota RAV4 and the Lexus RX300 were examples of vehicles that found customers who "didn't know what they wanted till they saw it." They are expecting the same reaction as customers discover the Venza, a vehicle Toyota claims delivers "everything in one package"—a tall claim, indeed, until you start to actually check out the Venza.

So let's check it out and see what we find.

The cabin provides a top-notch sound system, a 6-CD/6-speaker standard unit or a JBL upgrade with 13 speakers, navigation and 90 days of free satellite radio. A Denso Bluetooth navigation unit understands English, French and Spanish for nav-by-voice control, and you can also navigate using phone numbers or XM NavTraffic. Rear entertainment includes DVD, wireless headsets and game inputs. A backup camera is included with or without nav. The display screen can be customized in many ways, including function and even font size.

There is ample storage throughout—in the dash, the doors, the console—including shifting cupholders and a sliding console cover that enable individual adaptation of the storage components to one's needs. All windows are one-touch, and a panoramic sunroof includes shades. A smart key option controls both doors and the power rear door.

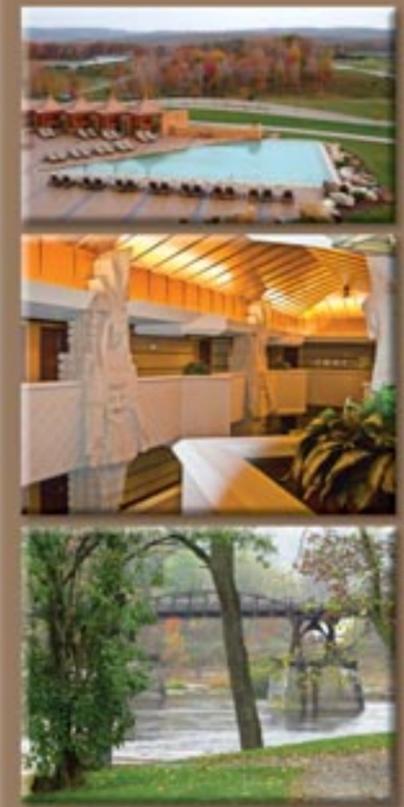
The vehicle is 189 inches long and rides on 19" wheels for the 4-cylinder or 20" for the V-6. There are nine exterior colors available, with interiors of grey or ivory, including leather options with piping (reminiscent of an Aston Martin but for \$100k less). Cockpit design has given equal emphasis to both

FALL IN PENNSYLVANIA

Nemacolin Woodlands Resort & Spa is located on over 3000 acres in southwestern Pennsylvania, a great place for a test drive in the heart of fall colors, even if a bit far afield from Arizona. We were hosted at the resort's Falling Rock hotel, one of only 21 hotels and resorts in the world to earn a AAA Five-Diamond rating. Interestingly enough, it turns out the hotel is a tribute to Frank Lloyd Wright's style and organic philosophies, so it turned out we were not so far afield at all.

The resort was developed from an existing game reserve by Joe Hardy, founder of the 84 Lumber Company, who had attended an auction seeking a small fishing parcel for his daughter, until this property caught his eye.

Nemacolin is home to Mystic Rocks championship golf course, as well as the location's original course, The Links, and also to the Off Road Driving Academy, for training in rock, trail and even what they call crater driving skills. ■



Photos: Joe Sage





driver and passenger. In fact, each has been given *more* than equal emphasis, with a layout ethic Toyota calls 60/60, giving both people an unconfined feeling of more than half the available space up front. The rear seat really amazed us, with wide doors and then delivering legroom on a par with the largest German luxury sedans. You'll have to enter it to believe it, given the price range and overall vehicle size. Rear seats also recline 14 degrees and have one-touch laydown.

On-demand all-wheel drive delivers 50/50 traction front and rear, using the electromagnetic system from the RAV4 and Matrix. Compared to a viscous system, Toyota claims better start-off performance and integrated vehicle stability with this system. The vehicle also has uphill/downhill logic systems, with shift points adjusted to conditions. In a nod to drive-by-wire trends, the Venza includes electric rack-and-pinion power steering, claimed to be their best-ever system. It utilizes no hoses, fluids (a "green" improvement) or belts, and it only runs when needed, increasing fuel economy. An enhanced VSC safety suite includes cooperative steering control with multiple modes, including "off." The STAR™ safety system from Toyota SUVs and trucks is brought to the Venza, also. Headrests have active impact response, all mechanical with no need to reset anything.

The Venza comes in just one model grade, with eight packages and four options, plus accessories (including new Pet Product Accessories). Features, features, features—this is one of their main messages, and a visit to your Toyota dealer or the Venza website will give you even more details.

Natae Rayner from the University of Toyota (new product education) slots the Venza between the Camry and Highlander, which turns out to have been a perfectly-sized gap for something new. Though six inches *lower* than the Highlander, the Venza has 8" ground clearance, completely out of the league of the Camry or any sedan. So is the Venza just a "different Camry"? Toyota emphatically says no. The floorpan, key to platform derivation, is based on the Highlander in the front, picks up Camry floorplan elements in the comfort-zone middle, and is new and unique to the Venza in the rear—a combination that, overall, let Toyota deliver their vision on time and under budget. Throughout the design process, Toyota took the unusual step of having non-Venza engineers check the work of the Venza engineers, a collaboration with big payoffs.

We test drove three out of four—the all-wheel-drives with both engines, and the

front-drive 4-cylinder. And we took them on three different routes, one that included a highway foray into Maryland and West Virginia, others on very twisty tree-lined highways. Road conditions were great for the comparison, with a light rain and slick autumn leaves on the pavement. We even had one very close encounter with a deer, in which the brakes proved their mettle admirably. We were surprised to find no appreciable loss of comfort or control with the larger 20" wheels on the V-6. If buying, we would probably opt for all-wheel drive, though in our tests, the front-driver did just fine. But just to be ready for anything, and for a reasonable price, we'd take the traction. As for the engine, that's a tough choice. The V-6 is not much more to purchase, but the fuel economy could make a difference over time. All in all, we favor either the top or the bottom, for exactly that reason—either go for it all and pay the moderate price, or go for economy and smile about that.



Carter points out the market already has an amazing 60 crossovers, and Toyota set out to make the Venza *not* be the 61st. When all the comparisons are done, you may find yourself still looking at wagons, crossovers and SUVs and seeing certain similarities to this vehicle. But we come back to several points that distinguish it. It's a given that there is a great combination of style, purchase price economy and fuel economy. But then there is that enormous back seat legroom and cargo capacity. And last, there is that 8-inch ground clearance. Add to this the choice of the 4-cylinder or V-6 powertrains, and the front-wheel-drive or all-wheel-drive option, and the only other thing we'd like to see would be an available manual transmission.

Production began in November at Toyota's plant in Kentucky, with V-6 deliveries slated to start in December and the balance in January. Toyota expected to deliver 2000 units in 2008 and targets 60,000 for 2009, of which the V-6 and 4-cylinder are predicted at 50/50 sales, although the factory can adjust if one is outselling the other. They expect top sales to be for the 4-cylinder in front-wheel drive and the V-6 in all-wheel drive.

Direct competitors are stated to include the Nissan Murano, Ford Edge and Mazda CX-7 and CX-9, all decidedly considered crossovers, though each does bend that label a bit itself. And yet, the Venza is also expected to compete with the Honda Accord and Nissan Sentra (though Toyota does not accordingly mention it taking sales from the Camry).

The base 4-cylinder front-wheel-drive model is expected to start at \$25,975, the fwd V-6 at \$27,800, and all-wheel drive adds \$1450 to either. A destination charge of \$720 is added to any. A crossover can mean any number of things to any number of people (or any number of manufacturers). But a game-changer is harder to come by. The Toyota Venza may be in a category of its own, as yet unnamed, but it is indeed a game-changer. ■

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