

Losing that spare tire*

Highly reengineered RAV4 gains space inside, clean lines outside and new handling technologies

*(no worries: it's still included, but now stashed inside)

By Joe Sage



The new 2013 Toyota RAV4 represents the fourth generation of this vehicle. The first was in 1995, which Toyota describes as “the world’s first cross-over SUV” (a claim made by multiple manufacturers, as it was a new term that came into use over time, now often used retroactively). Since then, 1.7 million RAV4s have been sold, and an impressive 88 percent are still on the road. Some 45 or so vehicles have now entered the CUV category, ensuring that it is highly competitive.

Toyota has embarked on a brand-wide refreshing project, with the goal of delivering “more emotionally engaging products,” per an edict by Akio Toyoda, president and CEO of Toyota in Japan. (It was first borne out in the new Avalon introduced recently—see our January/February 2013 issue.) Toward this end, the new RAV4 project was brought to Toyota’s Caltex Design Research studio in Southern California for development.

As you can tell by our headline, some of the results are immediately apparent. Whereas eliminating the external spare tire may seem to be something others have long since done, it is a welcome move. You’ll be glad to know there still is a spare—just tucked away inside—while the swinging rear gate is replaced by a more typical liftgate—power adjustable on top models.

Pieces and parts of the new RAV4 package

The 2013 RAV4 has a 2.5-liter four-cylinder engine, mated to a new 6-speed automatic transmission (which is lighter than its predecessor by 6.5 pounds). The V6 engine is dropped from the lineup. The philosophy on this is simple: either appreciate the increased fuel efficiency of the 2.5L—which Toyota gambles will be the case for most shoppers in this category—or move to the Toyota Highlander if you really need that V6. Ditto on a third row—the seven-seat RAV4 option is gone. (The take rate on the V6 RAV4 had been in the teens.)

The RAV4 now delivers 31 MPG highway, surpassing the key 30 MPG threshold after the prior model’s 28.

The new Toyota RAV4 can be bought in either front-

wheel- or all-wheel drive. In AWD form, this is the first RAV4 with Toyota’s Dynamic Torque Control, an integrated, fast-response system using electronic stability functions to distribute power among the four wheels, based on speed, angle, yaw and other input. The new system’s calculations are based on more information than before, including data from the engine, transaxle and electric power steering, and it has three modes.

In Auto mode, Dynamic Torque Control distributes up to 50 percent of power to the rear wheels for acceleration, but all power to the front at cruising speed. When braking, AWD is disengaged to optimize ABS and Vehicle Stability Control.

Lock mode transmits maximum torque to the rear at speeds up to 25 mph, for better traction in mud or snow, or for immediate power to all four wheels when stuck. Above 25 mph, it switches back to Auto.

And a new Sport mode adjusts transmission, throttle, AWD and power steering for more responsive driving on dry pavement, with four-wheel traction.

Combined with the new 6-speed transmission, the RAV4’s new system promises less “hunting” as it works its way through ideal gear settings.

Dynamic improvements go well beyond electronics, with the RAV4 receiving a retuned suspension featuring coated dampening shafts and a bigger rear sway bar.

The interior has been reengineered to accommodate that stashed spare tire, and also to provide more rear occupant space—partly via scalloped front seatbacks—while delivering an interior cargo volume of 73.4 cubic feet when the back seats are down, an increase of about 2 cubic feet—enough to add two basketballs.

The driver’s personal dynamics are addressed with an increased range of seating and steering wheel positions. Heated seat zones cover more areas at higher settings. Climate controls are built around a simple and very welcome three-knob design. The RAV4 is outfitted



KEEP RIGHT >>



with eight airbags.

Removal of the external spare tire also drove attention to body styling in the rear, which has clearly benefited. New body engineering in the front creates Euro-spec pedestrian impact zones and crash-absorbing fenders. Aerodynamics are improved throughout, creating more ride stability as well as improved fuel economy.

The new RAV4 model lineup

Toyota has identified the RAV4 buyer as seeking a good level of standard amenities, with options and models available, but not overwhelmingly so.

The 2013 RAV4 lineup represents a simplified strategy, with LE, XLE and Limited versions. The LE version includes a great many standard items, such as a back-up camera (with 6.1-inch screen) and privacy glass, at a starting price of \$23,300 for the FWD model.

XLE delivers about \$2000 in additional equipment for about \$1000 in additional price—including sport-bolstered, French-stitched seats, 17-inch alloy wheels (replacing the LE's steel wheels and covers), a power tilt/slide moonroof, dual-zone climate, heated mirrors and more. Add navigation and the Toyota Entune® system with voice recognition and text-to-speech—as most buyers will—and you are still at \$25,320.

RAV4 Limited buyers gain a complement of included features, from that adjustable power liftgate—along with keyless entry and start—to a leather-trimmed shift lever and 18-inch wheels. High-tech options available at this level include blind spot monitor and rear cross traffic alert, plus an available JBL eleven-speaker audio system. The Limited starts at \$27,010.

Toyota expects about 40 percent of customers to buy the middle XLE model, with 30 percent each opting for LE and Limited trims. Any RAV4 trim level is available with all-wheel drive for \$1400 more. The AWD share is expected to be about 65 percent, the same as with the prior generation. All these percentages apply to an ambitious goal overall: to top 200,000 units for the year.

Northeast Valley launch tour

New vehicle launch drives can have us traveling anywhere, but this one was near our offices in northeast metro Phoenix. Three loops started at the junction of Scottsdale Road and Carefree Highway. The most interesting and valuable drive was northeast toward Bartlett Lake and out Seven Springs Road, always a fun drive with ample opportunity to test the vehicle's stability controls, modes, steering and handling.

Electric power steering can be good, bad or invisible (which is also good). The RAV4's steering, coupled with its delivery of torque to varying wheels in varying ratios at varying speeds, met the challenge of this road, with its tight curves, narrow pavement and constant elevation changes. We turned around at an off-road point that is barely a road at all, which we took to the bitter end. We give the new RAV4 high marks on all of it.

RAV4 buyers are typically in their 30s and 40s, many with children. The 2013 Toyota RAV4 is stylish, full-featured and performs well. Pricing is favorable enough to drive you straight to the top model, while it is comforting to know the basic package is available at very reasonable cost. As has been the case for almost two decades, the RAV4 belongs on anyone's list. ■

