

Night and day? A tale of two hybrids

By Joe Sage

These two compact crossovers from Toyota and Lexus, both hybrids to boot, bring to mind the old *Gilligan's Island* meme, "Ginger or Mary Ann?" As on the *Island*, it's not an easy decision.

The hybrid version of Lexus's popular RX—the RX450h—strikes us as Ginger, more stylish, more expensively dressed, pricier in general. The stage is set by its stunning deep blue Nightfall Mica paint job, although its very plain shoes detract from the theme (an optional \$1170 set of 20-inch dark machined alloy wheels would fix this).

If your taste runs more toward the simple vir-

tues of Mary Ann, the hybrid version of Toyota's popular RAV4 may pique your interest. Our sample's silver paint job gives it a dull nature (though its available Electric Storm Blue paint would turn heads), while it seems to have borrowed Ginger's nightclub shoes (our XLE trim has stylish 17-inch wheels; Limited trim has 18-inchers).

Apples and oranges. Pineapples and coconuts.

You are likely to get some of what you expect out of the comparison, possibly more differentiation than you expect, and a few surprises.

We had the two for a week each, back to back,

the Toyota RAV4 Hybrid first. We had driven this last spring at Mudfest in the Pacific Northwest and had been quite impressed on both the off-road course and the track. The basic formula is clear: a compact crossover and a hybrid drivetrain, from people who have perfected both for a long time.

With electric motors front and rear, both vehicles are rigged for silent running when you first power up. Downsides to this are that A/C is slow to come up (we had them in 115-degree summer), and you have to be very sure you have turned them off before you lock and leave. This, combined with the auto start/stop feature, can also give you a disquieting effect if you linger in the vehicle to check your email—when it shudders back to gasoline life, you may think you've just been rear-ended while parked. We assume you will get used to this and notice it less over time.

We did have a couple of instances of unwanted squealing panic braking in the RAV4 Hybrid under normal application of the pedal, which may be related to the nature of regenerative braking systems, and the presumably low-rolling-resistance tires had a tendency to wander at times.

LEXUS RX450h HYBRID

ENGINE	3.5L V6, alum block/heads
DRIVETRAIN	electric AWD
HP/TORQUE	259 hp / 247 lb-ft
MOTOR GENERATORS (F/R)	165 hp / 67 hp
HYBRID BATTERY PACK	288v / 37 kW
TOTAL SYSTEM POWER	308 hp
TRANSMISSION	electronically controlled CVT; planetary gear reduction/power split

SUSPENSION	F: MacPherson strut, coils; R: double wishbone, coils
STEERING	Electric rack and pinion
BRAKES	F: 12.9 vented, R: 13.3 vented discs
WHEELS	7.5x18 (7.5x20 available)
LENGTH/WHEELBASE	192.5 / 109.8 in
CARGO VOLUME	18.0 / 55.9 cu.ft
GROUND CLEARANCE	8.2 in
APPROACH/DEPART	17.0 / 24.9 degrees
TURNING CIRCLE	38.0 ft
WEIGHT	4740 lb
MPG	30/31/30 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE	\$52,235
• Blind spot monitor, rear cross-traffic alert, panoramic view monitor	800
• Color heads-up display	600
• Lexus Safety System with triple-beam LED headlamps	2250
• Touch-free power rear door	200
• 12.3" nav / 15-spkr Mark Levinson audio	1510
• Heated leather steering wheel	150
DESTINATION CHARGE	940
TOTAL	\$58,685

We picked a few other nits with a slow-moving power liftgate and with oddities of lock/unlock and start sequences. But overall, the RAV4 delivers a smooth, transparent experience.

Back to pineapples and coconuts. Moving directly from a week in the RAV4 to a week in the RX450h, we were fully aware of the difference in power—more than double the horses delivered by a V6 just forty percent larger than the RAV4's four. The RAV4 Hybrid has 194 combined horses and weighs 3925 pounds, considerably less than the Lexus's 4740 pounds, but Lexus has 308 combined horses. At low-speed electric mode, the power is closer to the same, yet it somehow feels like a more potent premium-experience-multiplier within the leather cocoon of the Lexus.

The RAV4 drivetrain delivers notably higher fuel

economy in city driving, 34 mpg (well over the 23 city in a gasoline RAV4, though just one point higher on the highway). The Lexus hybrid advantage is more dramatic—30 mpg city versus 20 with gasoline, and four points higher highway.

RAV4 seems more ready for off-road duty, as despite its prominent snout, it has healthy approach and departure angles (see spec sidebars) compared to the RX450h with its own ample snout. But the RX450h has notably more ground clearance, above eight inches, more in line with rough roading. The RAV4 (with 17-inch wheels) beats the RX's turning circle by more than three feet. Both have continuously variable transmissions (CVTs). Suspensions are similar, both warranting cautious crawls over speed bumps.

The Lexus RX450h of course has a much high-

er level of premium fitment throughout, and its styling, though certainly still in your face, is generally more elegant. One feature you won't want to miss is its panoramic view monitor, an animated back-top-side-front wide and integrated view that is not only informative but can keep you entertained while you wait for the A/C to kick in.

The biggest RX pitfall is common to Lexus—the Remote Touch controller, a Chiclet-shaped console joystick with the general feel of a seven-year-old's loose tooth. Our notes were consumed by struggles with this interface, and we have confirmed through forums that it is not just us. We hope Lexus engineers are working on a serious update.

You could buy two Toyota RAV4 Hybrids for the price of one Lexus RX450h Hybrid. The Lexus is a more compelling vehicle in most regards—a lot of what you pay more for in the Lexus is well worth it. The Lexus is not as nimble as the RAV4 off-road or in a tight turn, but its fuel mileage deficit is more than offset by its power advantage, and its premium appointments put it in a different realm. One Lexus downside, though, is the eternally frustrating Remote Touch controller. Try it out for yourself, but this alone might make the less expensive RAV4 a win-win.

That's right. Mary Ann is easier to live with long term, and less expensive, but Ginger will always make a bigger splash as your prom date. ■

TOYOTA RAV4 HYBRID XLE AWD

ENGINE	2.5L 4cyl, alum alloy block/heads
DRIVETRAIN	AWD
HP/TORQUE	150 hp / 152 lb-ft
MOTOR GENERATORS (F/R)	141 hp / 67 hp
HYBRID BATTERY PACK	244.8v
SYSTEM NET POWER	194 hp
TRANSMISSION	electronically controlled CVT; electronic on-demand AWD

SUSPENSION	F: MacPherson strut; R: double wishbone coils, 1.0"/0.91" stab. bars
STEERING	Electric rack and pinion
BRAKES	F: 11.6 vented, R: 11.1 solid discs
WHEELS	7x17 on XLE (7x18 on Limited)
LENGTH/WHEELBASE	181.1 / 104.7 in
CARGO VOLUME	35.6 / 70.6 cu.ft
GROUND CLEARANCE	6.3 in
APPROACH/DEPART	28 / 21 degrees
TURNING CIRCLE	17" wheels 34.8 ft (18": 36.7)
WEIGHT	3925 lb
MPG	34/31/33 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE	\$28,370
ENTUNE PREMIUM AUDIO WITH NAVIGATION & APP SUITE: navigation, 7-inch split-display touchscreen, rear camera, 6-spkr audio, AM/FM/SiriusXM, iPod/MP3 connectivity, aux inputs, voice recognition, hands-free phone, Bluetooth phone book and music streaming, HD radio, HD predictive traffic, Doppler weather overlay	525
TOTAL	\$29,795

