

Definition. by Joe Sage

There are fully six crossovers and SUVs in Toyota's lineup (eight counting two hybrids), from the little C-HR to the mighty Sequoia and luxurious Land Cruiser, and six trim levels of the Highlander (nine counting three hybrids), from the base LE at \$31,330 to the Hybrid Limited Platinum at \$48,630. With three trim levels below and five above is the Highlander SE, the model here, with a nice set of premium, sport and tech features (see sidebar).

One fundamental option of note is all-wheel-drive at just \$1065 more (ours was a front-driver).

With so many Toyota utilities on the market, so many trims of the Highlander among them, and Toyota sales high in general, it's no wonder they may fade into the background a bit. This may have been the case for us with the Highlander, until we realized earlier this year that it had caught our eye a number of times and decided we hadn't been paying enough attention to it.

In fact, it has been exactly five years since we last had a Highlander in our fleet. At the time, we had noted that while it was kind of vanilla, that is indeed the best-selling flavor of ice cream, so it made sense that it could be much the same with Toyota's hot-selling three-row SUV.

At that time, we had also noted the impending 2014 model, which would be an all-new third-generation effort. The 2018 model driven here is that

same generation, but with a refresh in 2016, which included an upgraded direct-injection V6, a new 8-speed transmission and a facelift. The facelift has done wonders, creating an overall shape as enticing as, though decidedly different from, its Lexus cousins (Highlander's direct cousin is the Lexus RX 350, also featured in this issue).

We consistently seem to like three-row SUVs, whether we personally need them or not. Each has its own traits, while collectively they share a great deal. The Toyota Highlander nails all the fundamentals to the point that it could be in the dictionary as the illustration for "3-row SUV." Yet in its current iteration, it has considerable presence.

We also like a high degree of utility in an SUV. Highlander's ground clearance and departure angle are fairly close to Grand Cherokee's—quite a benchmark—though its approach angle (thanks to its dramatically restyled nose) is considerably less. But as a three-row, a better comparison might be Dodge Durango, which it edges out on approach and departure angles and only misses by a tenth of an inch on ground clearance.

It's clear the parent company takes one route for Lexus and one for Toyota, and it's easy to see the Toyota advantage in Highlander—it's slim and trim outside, spacious inside (except for third row legs), nicely instrumented and featured, all while delivering almost 300 hp, yet reasonably close to 30 mpg highway, and all for \$40 grand. ■

SPECIFICATIONS

SEATING	eight (seven with captain's chairs)
ENGINE	3.5L DOHC 24v Atkinson cycle V6 w VVT-i
HP/TORQUE	295 hp / 263 lb-ft
TRANSMISSION	8-spd direct shift electronic auto
DRIVETRAIN	FWD
SUSPENSION	F: indep MacPherson strut w L-shaped lower arm w stblzr bar (Sport-tuned for SE) R: dbl-wishbone style multi-link (Sport-tuned for SE)
STEERING	electric power steering
BRAKES	F: 12.9 vented disc twin-piston steel calipers R: 12.2 solid disc single-piston alum caliper
WHEELS/TIRES	7.5x19 / P245/55 R19 A/S
LENGTH/WHEELBASE	192.5 / 109.8 in
TURNING CIRCLE	38.7 ft
GROUND CLEARANCE	8.0 in
APPROACH/DEPARTURE	18.0 / 23.1 deg
HEADROOM (F/2/3)	(w/o moonroof) 40.7 / 39.9 / 35.9 in
LEGROOM (F/2/3)	44.2 / 38.4 / 27.7 in
CARGO VOLUME	13.8 / 42.3 / 83.7 cu.ft
WEIGHT	4430-4590 lb
TOW CAPACITY	(V6) 5000 lb
FUEL / CAPACITY87 oct reg / 19.2 gal
MPG	21/27/23 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE	\$40,090
REAR SEAT ENTERTAINMENT: BluRay DVD, 9-inch display, RCA jacks, remote, two wireless headsets	1510
SE PACKAGE: Toyota Safety Sense P (TSS-P, including pre-collision w vehicle & pedestrian detection, lane departure alert, auto high beams, dynamic radar cruise control, road sign assist, lane tracing assist), 19-in multi-spoke machined alloy wheels, sport-tuned suspension, projector-beam halogen dark-accent headlights w auto on/off and LED DRLs, leather-trimmed first- and second-row seats, Entune premium audio w integrated navigation and app suite	incl
CARPETED FLOOR MATS, CARGO MAT	224
REAR BUMPER APPLIQUE	69
DESTINATION CHARGE	995
TOTAL	\$43,188

