

PREVIEW

2009 TOYOTA VENZA



Toyota has unveiled a new vehicle called Venza, which it refuses to identify as a crossover or a station wagon. Incidentally, the latter designation is banned from the vocabulary of American consumers, despite their past fondness for this type of vehicle. Toyota's semantic and linguistic contortions aside, the Venza can easily be considered a Camry station wagon, since it rests on a modified version of the Camry platform. It also comes with elements originating from the Highlander in addition to its own specially designed parts. Distinguishing the Venza from a classic station wagon are its higher, 20.5-cm ground clearance and its 19- and 20-inch tires, depending on the model.

The chief engineer identified six objectives in designing the Venza: style, ease of ingress and egress, driving pleasure, interior roominess, generous standard equipment and versatility. Offering a spacious, functional cabin, the Venza's dimensions are similar to those of the Volvo XC70: a 277.5-cm wheelbase, 480 cm in overall length, 190.5 cm in width and 161 cm in height. Inside, we noted the simple, efficient centre control console and the fact that each section of the 60/40-split rear seatback reclines up to 14 degrees. Also, as the bottom of the doors is lower than the doorsill, trips to the cleaners will be less frequent for Venza owners.

In terms of standard equipment, all models come with features such as a tilt-and-telescoping steering column, dual-zone climate control, an eight-way power-adjusted driver's seat, heated outside mirrors, cruise control, seven airbags, electrochromatic rearview mirror with compass, stability control, four-wheel antilock disc brakes, alloy wheels, and more. Of course, several option packages are offered and can include heated leather seats, panoramic sunroof, navigation system, power rear door, xenon headlamps, backup camera, etc.

The Venza is available with an all-new 2.7-litre 4-cylinder engine developing 182 hp and 182 lb-ft. of torque, or with a 3.5-litre V6 producing 268 hp and 246 lb-ft. of torque. Both these engines are mated to a six-speed automatic transmission and also can channel torque to all four wheels via an on-demand all-wheel-drive system. The beauty of this system is that it does not wait for a front wheel to spin to send power to the rear wheels. It does it as soon as the driver accelerates, no matter the type of acceleration. It can transfer up to 50% of torque to the rear wheels and if no spin is detected, it transmits 100% of torque to the front wheels. Towing capacity with the 2.7-litre is 1,133 kg, whereas the V6 can tow 1,587 kg. The Venza is equipped with a hill-start feature that holds it in place for a few seconds in an incline.

The engineers equipped the underside of the platform with deflectors and winglets to better control airflow under the vehicle. This reduces air turbulence, which in turn increases fuel economy, stability and handling. The four-cylinder model rides on 19-inch, P245/55R19 tires whereas the V6 comes with 20-inch P245/50R20 tires. These are performance tires; replacement and winter tires will likely come at a hefty price.

On our test run on the roads of Pennsylvania, we found the Venza to be a comfortable, fun-to-drive vehicle with a sturdy feel. The ride is smooth and handling is more than adequate. The new four-cylinder proved impressive and the transmission functioned very smoothly. Unfortunately, a hybrid version is not in the works for the time being.

The V6 Venza will arrive in showrooms in January 2009. The four-cylinder model should be available a few weeks later, with a starting price under \$30,000.