Hybrid Synergy Drive gives Prius more muscle

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selector in "park" and then push the start button on the dash.

There is no noise, even thought the car can be driven away because it relies on the electric motor, not the gasoline engine for power. The four-cylinder cuts in only when the battery needs more juice. Because you can also recharge the battery by regenerative braking, it is possible (I actually did it) to hit 99 miles per gallon on the instant readout that's shown on the dash-mounted information monitor.

The monitor is almost worth the price of the Prius for what it does. Besides giving a wonderful schematic of which way the power is being routed, it also controls the heating and air conditioning system and the audio controls.

Climbing Mount Wilson, I rode in the back to check on the claim that there was tons of room back there and I had plenty of legroom. During the whole climb in 90 degree F weather, the air conditioning blew nice and cool, which speaks volumes about the efficiency of this hybrid system.

At highway speeds the Prius drove like a Camry. Light on the controls but with lots of outward vision, the mix of controls and trim materials was typically Toyota, which means first rate. There's nothing cheap about how this economy car feels and looks.

The interior design of the Prius is very contemporary and has the same high quality materials you expect in a Toyota.

Because of the high efficiency of the Toyota Hybrid Synergy Drive, Prius can offer a wider array of options than before. Customers can choose a theft deterrent system with immobilizer, fog lights, Premium JBL AM/FM/cassette/CD audio system with nine speakers, vehicle stability control (VSC) and curtain side airbags.

For the first time in a Toyota vehicle, a new Smart Entry and Smart Start option allows hands-free keyless vehicle entry and startup. As the driver reaches for the door handle, an on-board sensor recognizes the signal from a key in the pocket or purse and automatically unlocks the doors. Having been security cleared, the driver merely pushes a "start" button located on the dash, taps the gear selector to "D" and drives away. Personally, I dislike this item. If you ever leave the keyless fob in another pair of pants or another purse, you're going to have a problem. If you lose the fob, it's going to get worse.

The Prius is no sop to the environmentalists. Toyota is committed to the concept, so much so, that I suspect it may become the primary motive source of many Toyotas in the near future.

It makes sense, really. When you can have the same performance and room as gasoline-only cars costing the same, why would anyone not want to get 60 mpg when the cost of fuel continues to rise? And to sweeten the decision, we get a $2,000 rebate from the Ontario Government for buying one.

Would I consider purchasing a Prius as my next car? The answer is a definite yes.

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