

Sienna AWD minivan a capable family hauler



In terms of passenger comfort, cargo capacity and power, the 2007 Toyota Sienna minivan makes an ideal family hauler, even at the base trim level.

BY NEIL MOORE

Sometimes this job can mess with your head.

I was, just recently, piloting the \$120K-plus Lexus flagship sedan, feeling every bit the successful young executive, a rising star, the next Donald. People even looked at me differently. Strangers, anyway.

Next week, I'm in a Toyota Sienna minivan. Certainly not a captain of industry — barely even a lance-corporal.

There's a lesson to be learned here — two really. 1) Never identify too closely with your ride. 2) Demographically speaking, I am a minivan guy (and number one still applies).

Still, if you're a couple with kids (and the boatload of gear that goes with them), make weekly trips to the grocery store, Costco and Home Depot, admit it or not, you probably need a minivan. Sure, there are 'cooler' alternatives such as SUVs and crossovers, but for true seven-passenger comfort, ease in and out, and sheer cargo capacity (typically 4 cubic metres compared with half that for SUVs and CUVs), there's little that measures up to these family haulers.

And before you begin wagging your finger and recounting the 'good old days' when everybody made do with five kids and a dog crammed into the Country Squire station wagon (an air-bagless steel box with kids rolling around in back), think again. Back then, long car trips truly sucked.

As automobiles have evolved, so has the minivan and so has the Sienna. For 2007, power is up as Toyota has replaced its competent 3.3-litre V6 (215 hp, 222 lb/ft) with a 3.5 that delivers a respectable 266 hp at 6,200 rpm and 245 lb/ft of torque at 4700 rpm.

Combined with Sienna's smooth shifting 5-speed electronically controlled autobox, which manages shift decisions based on engine speed and load, this drivetrain gets you up to speed as fast as many V6-powered sedans I've driven.

But power is only the icing on the cake when it comes to minivans. The true substance of these vehicles can be measured in terms of cargo capacity, interior flexibility, seating comfort and amenities.

Starting from the back, open the rear hatch and you'll find a deep well behind the third-row seats, which is ideal for sports bags, groceries and all that small stuff you don't want rolling around. Here, you get 1.24 cubic metres (43 cu. ft.) of cargo space.

When that's not enough, the 60/40 split third-row seatbacks can be folded flat individually without removing the headrests, or each side can be stowed level with the cargo floor to create 2.68 cubic metres (94 cu. ft.) behind the second row captain's chairs.

This is the position I favoured, as we could seat both kids comfortably in the centre row, and then slide in the stroller, uncollapsed, with room to spare.

If you're moving furniture or other bulky items, the second-row captain's chair seatbacks can be folded flat or tumbled forward separately. They can also be removed for a maximum cargo capacity of 4.22 cubic metres (149 cu. ft.).

There are a surprising number of ways to configure the seating to accommodate passengers and cargo — 17 to be exact.

Look around and you'll find plenty of storage compartments to keep the interior free of clutter. There's a front door armrest-covered storage compartment, door pockets, seat-back pockets, overhead sunglass holder and an integrated garage door opener, not to mention several front and rear cup and bottle holders and shopping bag hooks in the cargo and passenger areas. Even the glovebox has two levels, helping you separate small items from your maps and manuals.

My tester was the all-wheel-drive, seven-passenger LE and getting in and out was easy with its keyless entry and dual power sliding doors. At this trim level, you also get power six-

way adjustable driver's seat, multi-information display with compass, clean air filter, Homelink programmable garage door opener, rear audio controls, removable centre console and 16-inch alloys.

Not bad for \$41,270, but even at the base trim level, (\$31,200 for 7-passenger CE FWD; \$32,440 for 8-passenger) you get such standard features as front and rear climate controls, power windows in the sliding doors, jam protection on the driver's window, pinch protection on the side and rear hatch windows, and AM/FM/CD/MP3 player with six speakers and steering wheel audio controls.

Minivans like the Sienna are now sporting standard features that were once the domain of upmarket sedans. These include reflector-style halogen headlamps, power remote heated exterior mirrors and a heated area at the base of the front windshield that frees frozen wipers quickly when the car is started. Other more utilitarian, yet useful features include an intermittent wiper/washer and electric defroster with timer for the rear window, side window defoggers and a conversation mirror located in the overhead console that allows you to keep an eye on the kids without turning your head.



There are 17 ways to configure the Sienna's interior, allowing you to carry up to 4.22 cubic metres of cargo.



The gauge cluster, with its blue illumination, offers an attractive contrast to the monochrome light gray that dominates the interior. The sporty, gated shifter can be found on the centre console.

If you want all the available niceties and are willing to part with \$51,375, the XLE AWD Limited (7 passenger) adds three-zone climate control for driver, front passenger and rear passengers, large power moonroof, laser cruise control, clearance and back-up sensors, and more.

This may sound like a lot of money — and it is. But keep in mind that you get the AWD utility and amenities of a typical \$50K-plus SUV, with more passenger room and about twice the cargo capacity.

Yet despite the Sienna's bulk, it is relatively fuel efficient, using 11.7 litres/100 km city and 8.1 litres/100 km highway for FWD models, and 13.3 litres/100 km city and 9.5 litres/100 km highway for AWD models.

Minivans are all about family, and accordingly, safety is a key consideration. To help stop you safely, Sienna includes ABS with electronic brake-

force distribution and brake assist as standard equipment. CE FWD models are equipped with ventilated front discs and rear drums, while other trim levels use solid rear discs.

All-wheel-drive models are outfitted with vehicle stability control (VSC) and traction control (TRAC). Both VSC and TRAC are available as options on the LE FWD seven-passenger model as part of the Value package.

Dual-stage front airbags, front seat-mounted side airbags and side curtain airbags that protect passengers in all three rows are standard equipment.

Safe, comfortable — and a bit boring. Admittedly, the humble minivan lacks the panache and supposed ruggedness of today's SUVs and crossovers. But if you spend more time driving your vehicle than staring at it, you may find that passenger comfort and utility will trump style every day.

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