

Toyota's 2015 Sienna climbs to best-selling van

March 11 2015, by Ann M. Job



This undated product image provided by Toyota shows the 2015 Toyota Sienna. The Sienna, the best-selling family van in the country this year, has refreshed styling, stiffened vehicle structure, more safety equipment and new features for 2015. (AP Photo/Toyota)

Toyota's Sienna, the best-selling family van in the country this year, has refreshed styling, stiffened vehicle structure, more safety equipment and new features for 2015.

The Sienna's new "Driver Easy Speak" feature helps parents be heard by children, or other passengers, in the second and third row of seats. It transmits the driver's voice through the rear speakers. Unfortunately, it doesn't reduce or mute the volume of the audio system at the same time.

Other innovations this year include a Blu-Ray DVD player, a front passenger air bag shaped with twin, air-filled lobes that can reduce impact forces and a push-button, driver-seat center armrest that remembers where it was positioned before the armrest was stowed.

Perhaps most notable for drivers who know how difficult it can be to see what's behind a van while backing up, every 2015 Sienna comes standard with a rearview camera.

Capable of carrying up to eight passengers, the Sienna is a recommended buy of Consumer Reports, which says reliability is above average.

Last month, the Sienna earned another laurel as it ranked best in the minivan segment in J.D. Power and Associates' Vehicle Dependability Study. The study measured the number of owner-reported problems of 2012 vehicles after three years of ownership.

Meantime, the federal government said the 2015 Sienna in both front- and all-wheel drive earned five out of five stars overall for occupant protection during frontal and side crash testing.

The Sienna is the only family van offered with all-wheel drive.

For 2015, added an eighth air bag to the Sienna. It's in the front passenger seat cushion and helps keep an occupant from sliding below the seat belts in a frontal crash.

Starting manufacturer's suggested retail price, including destination

charge, is \$29,485 for a base, 2015 Sienna L with front-wheel drive, 266-horsepower V-6 and six-speed automatic transmission. The lowest starting retail price, including destination charge, for an all-wheel drive, 2015 Sienna is \$34,745, and this is the upper-level LE trim.

All 2015 Siennas have the carryover, 3.5-liter, double overhead cam V-6 that generates 245 foot-pounds of torque at 4,700 rpm.

Surprisingly for many shoppers, the Sienna's base price for 2015 is lower than that of its two major competitors.

Last year's best-selling family van, the Chrysler Town and Country, has a starting [retail price](#) of \$30,990 for a base, 2015 LX front-wheel drive model with 283-horsepower V-6 and six-speed automatic transmission. Honda's 2015 Odyssey van with 248-horsepower V-6 and six-speed automatic has a starting MSRP, including destination charge, of \$29,855.

The Sienna has been on an upswing in sales. In calendar 2014, it passed the Odyssey for third place in the van segment. In the first two months of this year, the Sienna's sales of 19,868 surpass those of the Town and Country as well as the Dodge Grand Caravan.

The freshened styling for 2015 makes the Sienna look new compared with the Grand Caravan and, arguably, a bit less bulky in appearance than the larger Odyssey.

The new Sienna has revised grille and headlight units along with light-emitting diode daytime running lamps on upper-level models.

Inside, the dashboard has new blue lighting, and controls in the center console are better arranged than in the predecessor.

That's not all. The "grain" look on the plastic on the dashboard has a

richer appearance—there was even contrasting color stitching at the top of the dashboard in the test Sienna SE Premium—and plastic has a little "give" to the touch.

The Sienna still does not have the most quiet interior, and a few times, the driver checked that windows were fully closed in the tester because of how much noise from outside came into the interior. The sounds also can intrude and compete with onboard audio, making the wireless headphones a must with the upgraded rear entertainment system.

The entertainment display screen for back-seat passengers measures 16.4 inches and can separate into dual screens to display output from more than one device.

Just watch that this large screen is tucked back into the ceiling as people enter and exit. In the tester, a tall person bumped a shoulder painfully into a corner of the screen while getting situated.

The Sienna's V-6 mated to a six-speed automatic shifted almost seamlessly in the tester. Only hard acceleration shifts were noticed.

Acceleration isn't instantaneous, but the Sienna gains propulsion in a steady, not sudden, manner.

There was considerable "play" in the steering in the test van such that at city speeds, a driver moved the wheel more than expected before the Sienna began to move in the direction desired.

With the tester weighing more than 4,500 pounds, passengers felt mass move from one side to the other of the vehicle body in curves and turns. Road bumps, however, were well absorbed under the vehicle, so passengers mostly felt mild vibrations over broken pavement and even manhole covers.

A flexible interior has long been a Sienna hallmark.

Though slightly shorter, from bumper to bumper, than the Odyssey and Town and Country, the Sienna provides more cargo room—150 cubic feet—behind the front seats.

With a bit of strength, rearmost seats fold down quickly into floor cavities behind them for a flat loading floor.

Because second-row seats have long track travel, legroom among second- and third-row seats can be apportioned and tailored to passenger needs.

One complaint is the lack of left-foot space for the driver's seat.

Last November, Toyota announced a safety recall of 25,552 Siennas from the 2015 model year. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration noted that assist handles at the roof rails inside by second row seats might detach when the curtain air bags deploy during a crash. The handles could strike passengers and increase the risk of injury, NHTSA said.

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Citation: Toyota's 2015 Sienna climbs to best-selling van (2015, March 11) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-03-toyota-sienna-climbs-best-selling-van.html>

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