

2013 Toyota Venza Crossover SUV based on Camry.

Overview

The Toyota Venza drives like a car but offers the cargo space of an SUV. It offers more utility than a sedan, yet it's smaller and sits lower than an SUV. Venza seats five and comes with premium equipment and attributes normally associated with SUVs.

For the 2013 model year, Toyota has freshened the styling of the Venza, and has added standard and optional features. The 2013 Venza comes with Toyota's Entune multi-media system. Otherwise unchanged, the Venza is built on the platform of the previous-generation (2007-2011) Camry, and is assembled in the same plant in Georgetown, Kentucky.

But the Venza is more than an upscale, contemporary rendition of a Camry station wagon. The Venza is more original than that, and more functional, loaded with a mix of highly evolved features and fresh design ideas. Venza compares most closely with the Honda Crosstour, which is based on the Accord.

Venza is essentially a tall car, with a roomy, cleverly designed interior, that can handle the hauling tasks that make SUVs a popular choice. It's a family car, a good daily runabout that's easy to drive and park. And it's highly useful, for moving people, pets and grocery-getting. We found it spacious and comfortable. And it's much better looking than the Honda Crosstour.

Venza is available with a 2.7-liter four-cylinder engine or a 3.5-liter V6, both backed by a 6-speed automatic transmission. It's available in all-wheel-drive (AWD) and front-wheel-drive (FWD) configurations.

The 2.7-liter four-cylinder engine makes 181 horsepower and 182 pound-feet of torque and gets an EPA-estimated 21/27 mpg City/Highway. The V6 is rated at 268 horsepower and 246 pound-feet of torque and is rated at 18/25 mpg with all-wheel drive.

On the road, the Venza feels like a car. It rides smoothly and quietly and steers easily. We were impressed with its stability on slippery roads, whether equipped with all-wheel drive or not. Although there are some SUV attributes, such as the higher seat height and a high degree of cargo versatility, from the driver's seat you'd swear you were in a four-door sedan.

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Model Lineup

The 2013 Toyota Venza is offered in three trim levels: LE, XLE, and Limited. Venza LE and Venza XLE offer a choice of four-cylinder or V6 power, while Venza Limited comes only with the V6. All four-cylinder models roll on 245/55R19 tires, while V6s upgrade to 245/50R20. All three grades come with front-wheel drive or optional all-wheel drive (\$1450). All Venzas come with a 6-speed automatic transmission.

Venza LE (\$27,700) and LE V6 (\$29,520) come well equipped with cloth upholstery; dual-zone automatic climate control with air filter and second-row vents; eight-way power-adjustable driver's seat; power windows, power locks, power mirrors, cruise control; 3.5-inch LCD multi-information display; tilt/telescopic steering wheel with audio controls; dual vanity mirrors; overhead console with map lights; rear-seat reading lamps; cargo cover; three 12-volt power outlets; multi-projector-beam headlamps with auto on-off; fog lamps; UV reduction windshield; privacy glass; and aluminum-alloy wheels. Standard audio is a six-speaker AM/FM/CD/MP3/WMA system with 6.1-inch touch-screen control, Bluetooth hands-free phone and music streaming, USB port with iPod connectivity, auxiliary audio jack, and auto sound leveling. An LE Convenience Package (\$750) adds a power liftgate and a rearview camera, and upgrades the information display to a Thin Film Transistor (TFT) unit that can be customized to adjust the font size and content. The Preferred Package (\$2850) includes the Convenience Package plus a panoramic glass roof that incorporates a power moonroof up front and the Entune multi-media system.

Venza XLE (\$31,360) and XLE V6 (\$33,180) upgrade with leather seating surfaces, steering wheel and shift knob; a four-way power passenger seat; multi-stage heated front seats; satin mahogany wood-grain interior trim; anti-theft system with alarm and engine immobilizer; Smart Key with pushbutton start and illuminated entry; power rear liftgate and a back-up camera; reverse-tilt outside mirrors; and the upgraded TFT information display. The audio system retains all the input options and connectivity features of the standard setup, while adding its SiriusXM satellite radio (with three-month trial subscription), Navigation, Entune, and advanced voice recognition. The XLE Premium Package (\$1,850) adds the panoramic glass roof with power front moonroof; and a 13-speaker JBL Synthesis surround-sound system that includes all of the audio features already mentioned, plus Premium HDD Navigation; XM NavTraffic, NavWeather, Fuel, Sports & Stocks (with three-month trial subscription); HD Radio with iTunes Tagging; and other features.

Venza Limited (\$37,420) comes with all of the above, including HDD Navigation, JBL audio, Entune, and the panoramic glass roof with power front moonroof: plus high-intensity discharge (HID) headlamps with automatic high beams; and new LED daytime running lights.

All V6 models are available with a Tow Prep Package (\$220) that includes an engine oil cooler, larger radiator fan and heavy-duty alternator. (All listed prices are Manufacturer's Suggested Retail Prices, which do not include destination charge and may change at any time without notice.)

Venza also offers an array of pet-friendly, dealer-installed accessories, including a rear liftgate pet ramp; booster seat with harness; rear seat zipline-style harnesses; pet carriers; and bucket seat, bench seat and hammock style waterproof seat covers.

Safety features on all models include seven air bags and active headrests (front); Hill-Start Assist Control. Toyota's Star Safety System comes standard and includes Vehicle Stability Control (VSC) and Traction Control (TRAC) systems with a cutoff switch, plus Antilock Brake System (ABS) with Electronic Brake-force Distribution (EBD) and Brake Assist. A tire-pressure monitor system and child protector rear door locks are standard.

Walkaround

Smooth, fluid lines and aerodynamic sculpting characterize the Toyota Venza, which is slightly shorter and lower overall than most crossover SUVs.

Viewed from the front, a high, wide grille that flows into flame-shaped headlamps functions to accentuate the wide stance of the car. The combination of lamp types gathered in the headlamp clusters, contrasted with the simple, separate fog lamps below, creates a crisp, technical feeling.

A few changes for 2013 highlight and emphasize everything we already liked about the design. It wasn't until we saw the bold simplicity of the 2013 grille, just a substantial chrome outline with a single, equally substantial bar across the middle, that we realized how fussy the old grille looked. Another bright outline within the sides and bottom of the lower air opening naturally extends the shape of the upper grille, and changes what was previously a purely functional gap in the fascia into an integral element of the overall design. Eliminating the former full-bright foglamp bezel for just a bright outline restores balance, subtracting some bright stuff to compensate for adding it elsewhere.

On the XLE, the row of LED running lights that defines the inboard ends of the headlamp clusters seem to reach for the lower grille trim, and vice versa, adding intriguing visual tension. A mid-cycle facelift can ruin a car when stylists exchange a good, original design for one that's merely different. Fortunately, that hasn't happened here. Instead everything the Toyota designers have done with the 2013 Venza has made a good design even better.

In profile, the Venza appears sleek and contemporary, thanks to low rocker panels and narrow doorsills, much more like a car than a SUV. In keeping with the FT-SX concept vehicle that inspired the design, the wheels are placed out at the corners of the body, snugly positioned in the wheelwells, and there is minimal overhang on either end.

The 20-inch wheels of the V6 versions become especially prominent, suggesting something surefooted in everyday driving, even sporty on a winding road. Their five spokes are dramatically three-dimensional, whereas the standard 19-inch, 10-spoke wheels look clean, machined, and high-tech.

At the rear, S-shaped tail lamps contribute to the sporty feeling; subtly changed for 2013, the round elements inside are now more prominent. The end result is to convey the impression of a smart, modern, practical car. Most of all, the design conveys Toyota's long-view DNA, a way of saying that none of the Venza's visual elements are clichés likely to become dated or out of style during the life of the car.

Interior Features

The Toyota Venza is intended to be a refined, potentially luxurious alternative to a five-passenger sedan while offering more cargo and passenger space. So the interior has been endowed with an unusual mix of qualities, selected to combine the easy-to-drive attributes of a premium car with high-utility flexibility of an SUV.

Keyless entry allowed us to just walk up to the Venza and hop in; all five doors unlock at one touch (if programmed that way). The Venza is easy to get into, because the step-in height is quite low, same as a Camry, while the higher roofline makes entry easier for taller people. Once in the seat, we pressed the Start button and the instrument panel came to life, brightly lit and highly visible. Less noticeable is the sound of the engine because the Venza is very quiet at idle.

Seat quality is appropriate for a car that might convey a family and their pets on long-distance drives. The cushion length and seat back width are designed for comfort, and there is just enough side bolstering to allow for side-to-side support when the driving is more spirited. The seating position is a tad higher than the average car, more like a minivan, which affords easier visibility of the road ahead. The power seats have a nice range of adjustment, easily accommodating our average frame, and the steering wheel telescopes and adjusts about an inch and a half, each way. It takes only a moment to adjust for legroom and seat angle, set the mirrors, and select Drive.

From the inside, the feeling is of spaciousness, especially in the front row. The front dash layout uses a cleverly arched console and centrally mounted information pod to make it appear as though 60 percent of the front space is devoted to each side.

Both the leather and the cloth models boast high-quality interiors. Both include a nicely textured dash. The cloth interior makes use of carbon-fiber accents for a high-tech appearance, while the leather interior has satin-finish wood-grain accents to achieve a clean, modern take on classical materials. Both convey the look and feel of quality. The shift lever is canted slightly to the driver's side. Whether cloth or leather, the interior color is ivory, light gray, or black, depending on the exterior paintwork.

The instrument cluster prioritizes an oversized speedometer, which is at the center of the cluster, with a slightly smaller tachometer to the left. Semi-circular fuel and temperature gauges are smaller and located to the right. The shift position indicator is a modest LED display at center. The instruments look good, are bright enough even when the sun hits them directly, and pleasing at night.

Twisting stalks for lights, wipers and washers, and cruise control are mounted on the steering wheel.

The center console is designed to be simple, clean, and uncluttered. New for 2013 is a touch screen for control of the audio and related functions; it occupies the same space as last year's conventional radio controls. Additional controls have been added to the steering wheel spokes as well.

The console has a soft armrest cover over an unusually deep storage area, which is highly organized. There is a built-in MP3 player cubby designed to hold players such as iPods securely. The Auxiliary plug is located out of the way, under a retracting lid that houses cup holders, and the wire can be run so that it is hidden while in use, providing near-perfect integration of the iPod into the Venza's interior. There is also a covered slot that made a perfect place to put our cell phone. The doors have bottle holders and a map slot.

Optional on the LE, and standard on XLE and Limited is Toyota's Entune multi-media system. Entune integrates your mobile smartphone with the Venza's on-board navigation and audio systems. It also supports popular apps such as Bing, OpenTable, and movietickets.com, along with accessing useful travel-related services, such as live weather, traffic, fuel information (location and price), stocks, and sports. Toyota Entune also offers a large selection of music options, including iHeartRadio's more than 750 stations, and Pandora's personalized music service. Toyota says that its audio systems, combined with Entune, provide best-in-class, advanced conversational voice recognition that helps the driver to stay focused by eliminating the need to memorize thousands of voice commands.

The rear seats are surprisingly accommodating. With the driver's seat adjusted for a 6-foot person, we easily had enough legroom to be comfortable for long trips. The 60/40 split seatbacks recline up to 14 degrees, which also enhances comfort as the hours roll by. The Venza is wider and taller overall than the Camry, though it shares the same wheelbase, and essentially the same overall length. These dimensions make the Venza appear wider and lower, and permit increased hip room, head room and a higher seating height. Interestingly, while the Venza has a little more rear seat legroom than the Camry, too, it has a little less in front. Overall passenger volume is greater in the Venza than in the Camry.

Venza is thoughtfully designed for pets. Among the available accessories are a selection of pet products, including a travel harness, rear pet barrier, a pet tent for smaller dogs, and seat cover for the rear bench seat. The harness, dog fence and tent add greatly to safety because the forces involved in a flying dog can be deadly to both dog and humans. Dogs should be secured to the floor with a safety harness, however.

Driving Impressions

On the road, the Toyota Venza feels like a car, and not much like a truck. In ordinary driving it rides smoothly and quietly, just like a car, steers easily, and seems as quiet as a Camry. We drove smoothly from place to place, wipers and headlights on in the rain, observing speed limits between 35 and 55 mph, with minimal need to concentrate. At those speeds, cornering was achieved with minimal body roll (lean), and steering was light and accurate. The Venza sits higher off the ground than a Camry, so there is a bit more body lean in the corners, but suspension travel is more like a car than an SUV, so the Venza transitions from side to side cleanly and easily.

We were impressed with the stability of the Venza on steep, curving roads covered with wet leaves. We never felt a wiggle in these slippery conditions, under throttle or braking, all day long. As the day wore on, we tried out both four-cylinder and V6 models, and all-wheel-drive and front-wheel-drive versions, and drove the now-familiar roads harder, occasionally hitting speeds up to 70 mph. We still never got into the traction control, or the anti-lock brakes, which speaks well for the tires and the wide stance of the Venza.

The brakes respond to pressure with a nice, easy-to-control mix of pedal assist and firm feedback.

The Venza is not designed to be an off-road vehicle, although it does have 8.1 inches of ground clearance, comparable to compact SUVs. The all-wheel-drive system (also used on the RAV4) can bias torque equally on a 50/50 basis, front to rear. With that kind of flexibility, the AWD Venza has the capability to be an especially sure-footed, all-weather transport, and that includes snow.

Summary

The Toyota Venza combines the virtues of cars and SUVs resulting in a vehicle that's nice to drive and easy to live with. The Venza seats five, can carry cargo, and should work well for hauling dogs around. It's roomy and comfortable and climbing in and out is easy. It offers good, smooth performance and handles well in slippery conditions.

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