

avalon...
only
the name
remains
the same

By Joe Sage



Toyota, a company with seven SUVs and crossovers in the US alone, has no shortage of domestic passenger car models—nine. Not even counting the four Prius models, there are four sedans plus one hatchback. The non-Prius (though sometimes hybrid) cars—Yaris, Corolla, Matrix, Camry, Avalon—range in base price from \$14,370 to \$30,990.

That last jump to Avalon is the biggest: from \$22,055 base for the Camry. Yet even in the rarified atmosphere of the Avalon, these vehicles offer value. And they sell like hotcakes, especially the Camry and Corolla. What the value-packed top-tier Avalon may have been lacking is a bit more flash, a bit more soul, more than anything perhaps a more youthful feel. For 2013, the Avalon has been completely reworked. We flew to San Antonio to learn all about it and get behind the wheel.

THE AVALON AURA

Whether you connect it with the Avalon Ballroom in San Francisco, the tonier-than-average town of Avalon at the Jersey Shore or the island of Avalon in the legend of King Arthur, the name has panache. And history. Maybe a little too much history, as Toyota has realized they needed to make an active effort to attract younger buyers and move the Avalon nameplate in a new direction.

There is a bridge between Camry and Avalon, via the Lexus lineup: the front-wheel-drive Lexus ES sedan has grown this last year to adapt the same platform as the new Avalon. There is a lot of overlap among the cars in each brand's lineup and between the two brands, but this move makes sense, as they are all front-drivers, unlike the rear-drive Lexus GS, which has otherwise overlapped the Avalon platform in some years, too. The new Avalon is being built in Kentucky, and was also conceived in the US (Toyota employs over 20,000 design and engineering professionals in Arizona, California and Michigan).

Last spring, when this new Avalon was first introduced at the New York International Auto Show, Toyota found it was attracting more interest from a younger demographic than ever before. In this case, that would mean a median age in the low fifties.

REDIRECTED FROM THE VERY TOP

Avalon is the first vehicle in Toyota's lineup that has been redeveloped to align with Toyota president Akio Toyoda's call for more exciting products. Out with the feeling that this is your grandparents' car. Out with cost-cutting philosophies. In with a new aura of kinetic energy. The team was inspired—as are most such teams, at least to start—by an aggressively new style seen in one designer's sketch. They thought it demonstrated elegance, and at the same time a newly bold and athletic stance. Reportedly, when Mr. Toyoda saw the resulting model, his response was, "It looks cool. Don't change a thing."

"The car you see now," Toyota corporate manager of car marketing Rick Lofaso tells us, "is that sketch."

The Avalon seems as though it's been around forever, perhaps because our grandparents have been, but it was first launched in 1995, the short end of just one generation ago. At the time, Toyota was known for small cars with bucket seats and floor-mounted shifts. Along came the Avalon, with a bench seat and column shifter. The reason was simple enough: baby boomer customers were growing older, and so were their parents. Toyota



AVALON DRIVE #1

2013 Toyota Avalon XLE Touring
3.5L DOHC 24-valve dual VVT-i V6
FWD / 6-speed ECT-I automatic

From the live oak countryside to beautiful, wide open, curvy and hilly two-lane highways, the hill country around San Antonio, reminiscent of Austin's hill country not that far to the north, is a great place to get a first taste of the new Toyota Avalon, under the blue skies of a Texas early winter's day.

wanted to keep its customer base as they grew up and grew older. The idea worked, as Toyota sold 70,000 Avalons the first year.

But the more that segment filled up with younger-thinking boomers—a generation of rockin' elders—the more they needed to adjust, just as Cadillac has been doing for over a decade and Lincoln is now striving toward.

NEW MARKETS AND NEW MARVELS

Toyota expanded its focus group research for the new Avalon, still showing it to older buyers—the same folks who were buying it when they were five, ten, fifteen years younger—but also to younger boomers and Gen Xers. They've been happy with the reaction. Anecdotally, one younger shopper commented on the styling's sense of "exuberance," which fits the company's goals.

These buyers showed even more enthusiasm over the interior—remarking on its spaciousness, comfort and clean layout of instruments. They particularly focused on dashboard stitching, heated/ventilated seats, and the "futuristic" look and feel of the center stack's IntelliTouch capacitive switches. They welcomed more front and rear headroom, as well as rear legroom. Another potential buyer said the car "made me feel like



KEEP RIGHT >>



AVALON DRIVE #2
2013 Toyota Avalon Limited Hybrid
2.5L DOHC 16-valve dual VVT-i 4-cylinder
ECCVT continuously variable automatic

Lower left: Mexican tile art welcomes us to town and sends us back on our way, at the San Antonio airport (SAT). The air route from San Antonio back to Phoenix takes us above El Paso, Texas, here looking south into much larger Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico, with the US-Mexico border brightly lit across the lower part of the photo.

a VIP.” So the company says to them, welcome to the next level—entry luxury, Toyota style.

Tech systems abound, of course, including a segment-leading ten airbags, Blind Spot Monitor with Cross-Traffic alert—the first Toyota sedan to receive this—and other electronic handling technologies. New sound dampening includes acoustic glass, aerodynamic door handles and wipers that rest below the hood line. These wipers also perform a very neat trick—they twist while in motion, keeping them pressed against the glass better than any we’ve seen. Breakthrough. We want an Avalon, just to have those, and it doesn’t even rain here very often.

An unsurprising addition to the Avalon this year is a hybrid model, while a surprise is their expansion into the livery and chauffeured limo market. With the demise of the Lincoln Town Car, a number of manufacturers have their eye on this, but it’s a testament to Toyota’s confidence in both the luxury and spaciousness of the new Avalon, to expand here. The Avalon Livery package is built off the base XLE trim level, with black paint, black leather, rear heated seats and rear climate controls. Lincoln hopes to move their Town Car customers to the MKT, but livery complains about the lack of a trunk. With 16 cubic feet of cargo capacity, the Avalon delivers here.

The Toyota Avalon occupies the Premium Midsize

segment, which is expected to grow seven percent to nearly 400,000 units in 2013. Avalon’s annual sales goal of 70,000 would account for 17.5 percent of the segment.

MODELS AND MILEAGE

On sale by the time you read this, the new Avalon also improves handling and fuel economy. Suspension and drivetrain have been updated for improved stability during cornering, a more responsive steering feel, paddle shifters and a sport mode. Or leave the sport mode off, savor the spacious and quiet interior, and those proverbial grandparents will still love their new Avalon.

Toyota is claiming best-in-class combined fuel economy for a V6 in the new Avalon, as well as best-in-class 40 MPG for the new Avalon Hybrid—the first full hybrid in the premium midsize segment—meeting or beating most of the best MPG in any segment.

There are four V6 models (base XLE, XLE Premium, XLE Touring and Limited) and three Hybrid models (the same as those from Premium on up). All XLE models are configured monospec, which reduces obstacles en route to signing the dotted line, picking up a cue from Scion. Only the Avalon Limited offers an option package.

As mentioned at the start, the base XLE starts at \$30,990, which is \$2,205 less than the prior entry level model. An XLE Premium, at \$33,195, matches the prior base model’s price but includes more features. The XLE Touring (more premium than the Premium) adds 18-inch alloy wheels, paddle shifters, and Toyota’s Entune system with nav, at \$35,500. The richly-appointed Limited trim level starts at \$39,650, and with every possible option (plus delivery) totals just under \$44,000.

Prices for the Avalon Hybrid represent the smallest dollar differential ever for a hybrid versus its gasoline sibling—the same thing its Lexus ES cousin had achieved earlier last year. An Avalon Hybrid XLE Premium (the lowest hybrid trim) starts at \$35,555, Touring at \$37,250 and Limited at \$41,400.

Toyota expects the V6 Avalon to account for 80 percent of sales, and the Avalon Hybrid 20 percent. With the Lexus ES, the projected numbers had been 75 gas and 25 hybrid. At that car’s launch drive in Dallas, we had called the ES “a comfortable and straightforward car, offering power that—between the various modes and with the extra grunt from the electric portion—is almost indistinguishable from the gasoline model ... For a couple of grand more, you can top 40 MPG in the hybrid. Lexus expects 25 percent (hybrid) sales, but unless that couple of grand makes all the difference, we could easily see the hybrid accounting for 75 percent of the mix.” Customers may well prove otherwise, but from our perspective, we find the same with the Avalon—the Hybrid offers an awful lot—including torque, fuel economy and even arguably a stronger spot in the resale market five years hence—for just a little more cash at purchase time, and really takes away nothing.

The Toyota Avalon is getting a lot closer to Lexus ES is quality, fitment and style, while still costing thousands less. Compare it to the GS, and the differential is much more dramatic. It’s one thing to see how far up the scale an Avalon is from a Yaris. But it’s quite another to realize how close the Premium segment is to Luxury.

Take that knowledge for a drive, and don’t forget to include the nicely priced Hybrid in your comparison. ■

