

# Born to be different

BY JOE SAGE

There are those who say Americans' love affair with the station wagon has never really gone away, the current love affair with SUVs and crossovers being an evolution of much the same thing. They surely share attributes of layout, function and capability. (Minivans, largely in a category all their own, overlap considerably, as well.)

At its launch in 2009, the original Toyota Venza intended to create "a completely new kind of vehicle—70 percent car, 30 percent SUV—expressly tailored to the times and filling a niche that was previously unfilled," combining degrees of the styling, handling, fuel economy and entry-egress of a sedan with the cargo capacity, all-wheel drive and higher driver position of an SUV.

Much was different when Venza hit the market twelve years ago, although it was evidence in and of itself that evolution was underway. The one-of-a-kind-ish vehicle returns today to an absolute tor-

rent of crossover choices. Toyota today says Venza "breaks the sameness barrier," while also, despite its unique-niche origins, simply calling it a crossover. Most features are not specific to this car's layout, with one exception—they refer to its maneuverability, an attribute from the car end of that car-to-SUV formula, and it has the sophisticated suspension and tight turning circle to deliver.

Venza is what you might get if you took a European performance sportswagen—those low-slung supercars with a full-length roof—and gave it the bones, from the waist down, for America's driving surfaces, weekend fun and generally tougher duty.

We liked the original Venza for its stated purposes, distinctive styling, capacity, beyond-sedan ground clearance—and for its range of engines, transmissions and drivetrains (though not every possible combination thereof). In an era when Prius was still a pioneering brand, Venza's drivetrains were more traditional.

The new Venza has just one drivetrain, a well-developed set of systems Toyota has been perfecting for decades—all are hybrids, all with electronic sequential-shift CVT, and all with electronic on-demand all-wheel drive (the electric motor system

kicks in for both front and rear wheels). Three trim levels from low to high 30s make shopping easy.

The new Venza sits up high enough to feel like a crossover as you step in, while cabin height from the beltline up is more like a sedan, which can lead to a tall person hopping in and hitting their head till oriented. Inside, it feels much like a wagon—its long cabin a defining feature, and as with the original bearing ample rear legroom.

The new Venza has equal parts mainstream and innovative styling, layout, and details of form and function that give it just the right futuristic leanings (the kind that aren't so likely to become quickly dated, as many attempts to look like 'the future' do). Inside, the touch interface, with curved 'covers,' within which you can customize the positions and sequence of screen contents, is slick and nicely done, although some contents presented in two shades of grey are not very legible. The console's arrangement presents a combination of well-positioned and ill-positioned controls, with a mix of useful and odd spatial voids and shapes, notably a sizable projecting power button that makes it hard to get a large hand into the USB and device space. Temperatures were in the 30s during our week, and

Venza's rear styling is distinctive in an era of look-alikes, with bold three-dimensional styling evoking somewhat the feel of a very cool sci-fi spaceship.

some controls did not work with gloves on. The shifter is conventional. (We envisioned feature, function and graphics teams that don't talk enough among themselves—style is innovative overall, but could use some fine-tuning for function.)

Driving performance is unremarkable, in a good way—its complex system is quite transparent, other than gauge readouts and some regenerative braking characteristics you may notice.

Though its style and layout are not as distinctive today as they once were, the new Venza still offers all the attributes that defined it in the first place. Are you looking at sedans, but have this feeling everybody is supposed to want a crossover? Looking for a station wagon but maybe not quite? Looking at Prius but maybe not quite? Kind of could use a minivan but kind of not? Venza may be just what you've been looking for—the not-quite-any-of-those option. Do these together comprise a small market niche? Or maybe one of the biggest?

Try it on for size. Then try on some more conventional cars and crossovers. You will likely find yourself saying, "Ah! Now I see what they mean." Toyota Venza may not quite fit the standard categories, but then again, that's the whole point. ■



## SPECIFICATIONS

PLANT	.....Takaoka Assembly, Aichi, Japan
ENGINE	.....2.5L Dynamic Force 4-cyl 16v DOHC alum alloy, VVT-iE intake, VVT-i exhaust
HP/TORQUE	.....176 hp / 163 lb-ft
COMPRESSION RATIO	.....14.0:1
ELECTRIC MOTOR	.....perm magnet sync (F/R)
POWER	.....F: 88 kW (118 hp) R: 40 kW (54 hp)
TORQUE	.....F: 202 Nm (149 lbft) R: 121 Nm (89 lbft)
BATTERY PACK	..Li 252V 70 cells, 650V system
TOTAL NET HP	.....hybrid syst comb.net 219 hp
DRIVETRAIN	.....electronic on-demand AWD (gasoline+elec front; sep elec rear on demand)
TRANSMISSION	.....eCVT w sequential shift mode
SUSPENSION	.....F: indep MacPherson strut w 24.2mm stblzr bar; R: multi-link w 22.2mm stblzr bar
STEERING	.....elec rack & pinion pwr assist
BRAKES	.....F: 12.0 vented; R: 11.1 solid
WHEELS	.....(XLE, Limited) 7x19 alloy
TIRES	.....(XLE, Limited) P225/55 R19 AS
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	.....186.6 / 105.9 in
GROUND CLEARANCE	.....7.8 in
TURNING CIRCLE	.....(XLE, Limited) 37.4 ft
HEADROOM (F/R)	.....(w pano roof) 38.1 / 36.9 in
LEGROOM (F/R)	.....40.9 / 37.8 in
CARGO CAPACITY	.....(w pano) 28.7 / 54.9 cu.ft
WEIGHT	.....(Limited) 3913 lb
FUEL / CAPACITY	.....regular unl / 14.5 gal
MPG	.....40/37/39 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE	.....\$39,800
ADVANCED TECH PKG:	heads-up display (speed and hybrid system info), rain-sense variable intermittent wipers.....725
STAR GAZE FIXED PANORAMIC ROOF	.....1400
DESTINATION CHARGE	.....1175
TOTAL	.....\$43,100

## VENZA LINEUP

LE AWD	.....\$32,470
XLE AWD	.....36,000
Limited AWD	.....39,800

*When something is part crossover and part something else, is it a crossover-crossover?*