

Transformed

BY JOE SAGE

Hybrid pioneer is back on the cutting edge

After a quarter-century during which the category-defining Prius, the original and enduring high-volume hybrid, has been joined by many other hybrids, Toyota is turning the page in a big way—new everything, notably a wildly improved new look and greatly increased power. Joining our fleet would be the 2023 Toyota Prius Limited, the top of three hybrid grades (though a front-driver, so not quite the top version, as each is also available with all-wheel drive). MPG ratings are all above 50 (as high as 57) except for the top trim AWD at 49. In the face of EV-everything, Toyota makes it clear the hybrid's original mission remains solid, and we were definitely excited to have it coming in.

The new car is sharp, its highly aerodynamic form evoking near-future concepts and prototypes

many have lusted after, and it's here today. While generally smooth and slippery, its side sheet metal has an especially cool detail, a firm crease running from the rocker panel upward to the rear, that line continuing to the seam between bumper and quarter panel. Styling continuity holds up from stem to stern, no more a clunky combination of elements, yet still with the overall persona of the prior Prius.

The new larger engine and upgraded hybrid system put out a whopping 60 percent more combined system horsepower than the old Prius, and, whereas we have considerable time separating this from our last Prius drive, it is clearly plentiful. What's more, the powertrain does not hesitate—its electronically controlled continuously variable transmission (CVT) is always solid, holding power

through turns while providing the feel of very light simulated shifts. Job well done in all regards.

Regenerative braking was noticeable at first, almost a boat anchor feel when doing its thing, but this awareness quickly fades away.

The turning circle is quite tight (and note that it's even a foot tighter in the base trim with 17-inch wheels—see sidebar).

There were times our sample's front-drive basis made itself known, not via torque steer, but by letting out a notable chirp as power was applied either from a full stop or upon sudden acceleration.

Our biggest beef with driving was a tendency, really more of a compulsion, for driver assist systems to forcefully yank the car not away from painted lines (common enough and bad enough in many systems), but toward them. We have no explanation for this, but we were finally able to turn it off, though this had to be done again upon restarts.

We're also not nuts about the whirring sci-fi

sound effects when in reverse (and to a lesser degree when driving forward). Intended as a safety feature to alert pedestrians and kids when running in pure EV mode, it's not used universally, and even most modern IC engines are very quiet now, anyway. Maybe you can get used to it, but we have one in our neighborhood and never have.

Most of the instruments are very well organized, though a few functions are ill-placed (e.g. heated seats and heated steering wheel controls are in no way related by layout), and a few critical issues remained elusive for the duration, notably insufficient interior lighting—despite playing with entry-exit settings repeatedly, we ultimately had to pull out our phone as a flashlight many times.

Speaking of visibility, here's another caveat: the windshield is of such a shallow slope, the A-pillar running at such an extreme angle, with small fixed windows filling its forward area, that some critical visibility is lost, especially in righthand turns. This could be more dangerous for those neighborhood kids at play than the quiet e-powertrain (for which they were compelled to add that whirring).

One interesting phenomenon was aggressive behavior from a number of other drivers—tailgating, attempts to incite racing and so on. Perhaps it was just a response to our Texas manufacturer's plates, but we're thinking it's a sign that, despite such a complete redesign, lingering Prius detractors still recognize it. (This could be helped by the large Prius lettering on the rear deck lid.) But fans will recognize it, too, and that's all to the plus.

All in all, Prius has put its dorky days behind it, while carrying the best of its brand equity into a new era. And Toyota has reaffirmed the magic and market appeal of its leading edge hybrid engineering—you can drive this almost 600 miles (or the LE almost 650) before needing a quick refueling, range and speed EVs are nowhere near touching. And three PHEV versions joining the mix next (not yet fuel mileage rated) will surely be even moreso.

The all-new 2023 Toyota Prius brings equal parts moderately radical change and brand continuity. It affirms that the hybrid has not lost its significance. The best of the Prius persona persists. This car should prove to have incredible appeal. ■

SPECIFICATIONS

ASSEMBLY	Toyota, Aichi, Japan
ENGINE	M20A-FXS Atkinson cycle 2.0-liter 4-cyl alum/alum DOHC 16v VVT-8
HP/TORQUE	(engine) 150 hp (hybrid net, FWD) 194 hp / 139 lb-ft
COMPRESSION RATIO	14.0:1
TRANSMISSION	electronic CVT (eCVT)
DRIVETRAIN	FWD
SUSPENSION	F: indep MacPherson strut, stblzr bar; R: multi-link, stblzr bar
STEERING	elec pwr-asst rack & pinion
BRAKES	F: 11.1 vented; R: 11.0 solid
WHEELS / TIRES	19-in alloy / 195/50R19 a/s
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	181.1 / 108.3 in
GROUND CLEARANCE	6.0 in
TURNING CIRCLE	35.4 ft
HEADROOM (F/R)	38.0 / 36.4 in
LEGROOM (F/R)	43.2 / 34.8 in
CARGO CAPACITY	20.3 cu.ft
WEIGHT	3219 lb
FUEL / CAPACITY	reg unl / 11.3 gal
MPG	52/52/52 (city/hwy/comb)
BASE PRICE	\$34,465
DIGITAL REARVIEW MIRROR	200
LIMITED PREMIUM PKG: advanced park, panoramic view monitor	1085
HEATED REAR SEATS	350
CARPETED FLOOR/CARGO MATS	299
DESTINATION CHARGE	1095
TOTAL	\$37,494

2023 TOYOTA PRIUS LINEUP

Prius Liftback (hybrid)	FWD	AWD
LE	\$27,450	\$28,850
XLE	30,895	32,295
Limited	34,465	35,865
Prius Prime (PHEV)	FWD	
SE	\$32,350	
XSE	35,600	
XSE Premium	39,170	

While it's easy to gravitate to a top trim, it's worth noting that the top-top Limited and even the mid-grade XLE are not necessarily tops at everything. The base LE grade offers a number of advantages, in addition to its price—turning circle is a foot tighter (thanks to its 17-inch wheels versus 19s on the higher grades), cargo volume is a whopping 3.5 cu.ft larger (for reasons unexplained), and it's considerably lighter with the same powertrain, all combining for staggeringly high fuel mileage ratings of 57/56/57 for an LE with front-wheel drive. Only its ground clearance is a little less.

The new Toyota Prius just won MIDSIZE VEHICLE OF THE YEAR at the Texas Auto Writers' Association's Texas Auto Roundup.

