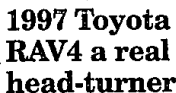


Published Every Monday



By Anne Fracassa
Avanti NewsFeatures

The 1997 Toyota RAV4 is really, really cute. It's been out about a year now, and heads still turned when I drove it around town.

Although the RAV4 is billed as a new concept on sport utility vehicles — the mini SUV — it has comfy seating for four, has a surprising amount of rear cargo area and a pretty nice ride.

The RAV4 comes in both 2-door and 4-door models. Driven was the 4-door model, which suits a more than two-person family just right. Even with the two-door model, Toyota has a walk-in mechanism for the front passenger seat that allows the seat to slide forward to ease entry and exit from the rear seating area.

The RAV4 blends the convenience, accessibility and comfort of a passenger car and the handling, off-road ability and interior space of a light-duty off-road vehicle.

It's high enough off the ground to take just about anywhere. It's available in a 2-wheel-drive and 4-wheel-drive model and with either a manual or automatic transmission. It's got unibody construction and 4-wheel independent suspension — the first and only mass-produced SUV to offer it.

It shares the floorpan design with previous generation Celicas and Camrys. And even though it is high off the ground, you don't feel it's not stable. It's quite the oppo-



ROAD
TEST
By
Anne
Fracassa

site and feels very solid. Roll around a corner and you don't have the fear you'll tip or two-wheel the puppy.

Outfitted with a steel block and aluminum head 2.0-liter 16-valve twin-cam 4-cylinder engine that outputs a respectable 120 horses. That's really adequate for this vehicle because of its size. Any more than that would be too much.

The air-cooled 5-speed manual transmission is standard on all models, but available is a water cooled 4-speed electronically con-

trolled automatic. The exception is the 2-door models. You can only get the 5-speed on that one.

All-wheel-drive has a standard locking center differential. What that means is that on the automatic models, the center differential locks automatically when it feels excessive slip between the front and rear wheels. On the manual transmission models, there's a switch that allows you to manual lock or unlock the center differential. Bottom line: More control of your vehicle.

Other stuff you'll find on the RAV4 include gas-filled MacPherson struts, anti-roll bar, power-assisted rack-and-pinion steering, double wishbone suspension, all-season radials on 16-inch steel wheels (alloy wheels are an option) and front disc brakes. Four-wheel anti-lock brakes are also available.

I talked about it having a lot of room. Try this on for size: Front seat passengers have a whopping 39.5 inches of legroom, while anyone in the rear seats will enjoy 33.9 inches of legroom. The rear

seats are 50/50 splits and can be reclined or pushed forward.

With the rear seats upright, you'll get 9.3 cubic feet of storage space in the 2-door and 26.8 in the 4-door. Take off the front headrest and reclining both the front and rear seat backs, you can convert it into a bed.

There's safety all around with standard dual airbags, 3-point seatbelts in all outward seating positions (in the rear seat, the middle passenger has a lapbelt), height-adjustable front seatbelts on 4-door models, side-door impact beams, impact-absorbing chassis reinforcements, an integrated center high mount stop light in the rear and an energy-absorbing steering wheel.

The automatic shifter is located on the floor and seemed a little — I don't know how to describe it. Shifting from park to reverse always landed me in neutral and shifting from rear to drive always landed me in D2.

The standard features list was respectable and included flush mounted halogen headlamps, dual

outside mirrors, fabric seating, carpeting throughout, front-door pockets, cupholders, full instrumentation. (which included speedometer, tachometer, resettable trip meter and fuel level and temperature gauges), intermittent front and rear wipers, rear window defogger and digital clock.

There's a lot of stuff you can outfit your RAV4 with like a sunroof, 4-wheel ABS, air conditioning, cruise control, 16-inch aluminum wheels and two sound systems. You can customize the RAV4 with 4 different packages with interior and exterior amenities.

For example, the upgrade package includes power windows, door locks and mirrors and steel steering column. The style package gives you cladding graphics and hardware spare tire cover. The active package adds a roof rack and projector fog lamps to the style package's graphics, fender flares and side tubecovers. Finally the convenience package includes a removable rear door bags, center console and floor

By the way, this mini-SUV can tow up to 1,500 pounds.

I did have a heck of a time with the front seatbelts, however. I seemed they would stop just short of where it would lock. I'd have to return it to its retracted position three or four times before I could get it out all the way to buckle the belt. Just an annoyance.

Truly, this is a really neat little number. The styling is so different, so radical and such a departure from generally conservative Toyota. Good job done here.

Snatch on to this mini-SUV. I
sure is a lot of fun.

Anne Fracassa is senior editor of *Avanti NewsFeatures*.

1997 Toyota RAV4
Vehicle class: Special purpose vehicle.

Engine: 2.0-liter 4-cylinder dur

overhead cam.
Mileage: 22 city / 27 highway.
Where built: Toyota City, Japan
Price: \$18,098.

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True or False?

When the brake warning light on the instrument panel lights up the brakes should be checked within 50 miles.

False! When you see that light, pull off the road at once. Failure may be imminent. Ask for qualified assistance to determine whether or not it is safe to drive. If there's any discrepancy in the braking system the vehicle should be towed to a service shop for repairs.

Brake failure, the leading mechanical cause of highway accidents, nearly always can be averted with regular inspection and maintenance of the braking system.

If you'd like to see a particular model tested or if you have a car question, send Anne Fracassa a message at AVANTI 1054, Avanti's America Online mailbox...Or comment through the Internet at AVANTI1054@aol.com.




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