Review: Toyota Sienna minivan mixes the solid with the subpar

Enlarge / The Sienna resplendent in an elementary school parking lot.

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In the early 2000s, I was in the market for a big car. We needed something that could ferry our daughter and stuff around, carry drywall and other home-improvement stuff, and feel comfortable on cross-country trips to visit my family. Neither our Ford Taurus nor Saturn SL1 fit the bill, and we weren't feeling the SUV love. As we started looking into minivans, it became clear that there were three models to look at seriously: the Honda Odyssey, Chrysler Town & Country, and Toyota Sienna.

Nearly 20 years later, not much has changed. Honda, Chrysler, and Toyota still rule the minivan market in terms of sales. We drove the Town & Country's successor, the Pacifica, last year and came away very impressed. So when I found out there was a 2019 Toyota Sienna on the local press fleet, reviewing it was a no-brainer.

The Sienna got a new powertrain in 2017, and last year's model saw some safety and ride quality improvements. Toyota Safety Sense, its suite of driver-assist technology, became standard on the Sienna. Toyota also tackled ride quality by making the

cabin quieter. For 2019, support for CarPlay and Amazon Alexa has been added, and the all-wheel-drive powertrain is now available on the SE trim.

Family cruiser

- Minivans such as the Sienna may often be found near schools and playgrounds.
  BradleyWarren Photography
- Although it's unmistakably Toyota from the front, the Sienna has a refreshing lack of body cladding.
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- The 2019 Sienna sees some modest tweaks from the 2018 model.
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- Roof rack cross bars are standard across the lineup.
  BradleyWarren Photography
- There's more than 150ft^3 of cargo space with the second- and third-row seats removed.
  BradleyWarren Photography

Under the hood, the Sienna rocks a 3.5L, six-cylinder, 24-valve aluminum alloy engine. It generates 296hp (217.7kW) at 6,600rpm and 263lb-ft (356.6Nm) of torque at 4,700rpm. Both the FWD and AWD models come with an eight-speed automatic transmission. The car itself measures 200.6-inches long (5,095mm) and 78-inches wide (1,983.74mm), so it's a couple of inches shorter and narrower than the Pacifica we reviewed last year.

MSRP for the Sienna starts at $31,115 for the Sienna L, but if you want to spend more, Toyota is happy to help. The car we drove was the Sienna SE Premium, which comes with 19-inch alloy wheels (instead of 17 inches), fog lights, optional eight-passenger seating, leather-trimmed front seats, a massive monitor in the back paired with a Blu-ray player,

voice commands, premium audio, and a few other niceties. Those features brought the sticker price to $44,885 before delivery fees. If you want a Sienna with all of the bells and whistles, you'll be at $47,530—about a thousand dollars cheaper than a comparable Chrysler Pacifica.

Inside, the Sienna is a mixed bag. The seats are very comfortable and supportive, and the sightlines are excellent. Access to the second and third rows is a breeze; the surprisingly light second-row seats can be lifted out of the car without much trouble, and the third row folds down right behind the liftgate. All told, there's 150 cubic feet (4,247L) of cargo space with the second row pulled out, and 117.8 cubic feet with the second row moved up as far as possible. The only downside compared to the Pacifica is that the seats don't fold down into the floor, so removing the second row isn't a spur-of-the-moment thing.

The center console and infotainment system is kind of a mess. Toyota uses a 7-inch touchscreen display for its Entune infotainment system, with four buttons on either side. It's clunky to use and is easily the least-impressive infotainment system currently offered by a mainstream automaker. At least CarPlay is available—no Android Auto—so you can avoid the infotainment system altogether if you'd like, as long as you're inside the Apple ecosystem.

Underneath the display is a massive gear lever and a climate control system. You can control climate settings for the entire car, or you can allow the second-row passengers to tweak things to their liking if you prefer. Below that is a pop-out cupholder, seat heating controls, a 12V power outlet, and the Blu-ray player. I appreciated the extra cupholders on the way to church, so my wife and I had places for both our coffee and Soylent. [*Why do so many of my colleagues reject real food?—Ed.]*

Backseat passengers get their own climate controls, a pair of

2.1A USB ports for charging, and a massive widescreen display capable of playing a different video on each half of the display. If you go with the backseat monitor option, you'll also get a remote control and a pair of headphones. There's also an HDMI port so you can stream from smartphone or tablet with the appropriate adapter. The second-row seats are comfortable and can slide back and forth depending on legroom needs.

Moving to the cockpit, the instrument panel has a 4.2-inch TFT display sandwiched between an analog speedometer that can be configured to show speed, radio station, and navigation—the usual stuff. Unless you change the setting, each time you shift gears, the display will show a visual representation of the gear lever position, which is a bit much. On the steering wheel, media and phone controls are on the left side, and driver-assist and instrument panel controls are on the right.

Out on the road

- The cockpit of the Sienna.
  BradleyWarren Photography
- The instrument panel of the Sienna with the 4.2-inch display between the analog dials.
  BradleyWarren Photography
- The front row of the Sienna.
- Backseat passengers get their own climate controls, although they can be overruled by those in the front seat.
  BradleyWarren Photography
- The center console of the Sienna. Most everything is within easy reach of the driver, but it feels cluttered.
- The cramped display and plethora of buttons on either side make for a messy infotainment UI.
  BradleyWarren Photography
- When you change gears, the instrument panel shows you a

graphical representation of the gear lever in case your peripheral vision is really bad.
BradleyWarren Photography

- The second row seats are lightweight and easily removed. They are also quite comfortable and can slide back and forth to accommodate your passenger and cargo needs.
BradleyWarren Photography
- This massive display can show separate videos on each side. You can use the included Blu-ray player or plug a device into the HDMI port.
BradleyWarren Photography
- The well-engineered third row folds down with minimal effort.
BradleyWarren Photography

You'll also take the good with the not so good once you're out on the highway. On the plus side of the ledger is the quiet cabin. It's almost serene in there, and a couple of passengers commented on how little road noise seeped inside. It was definitely better than the Pacifica in that regard. Steering is responsive, and handling is as expected from a minivan—no complaints there. The only niggle is that, once I got the Sienna up over 70mph, I would hear a bit of wind noise near the B pillar.

One nice piece of parent-friendly tech comes in the form of Easy Speak. If you're having a noisy ride because there's a gaggle of kids in the car with you, Speak will transmit your voice through the rear speakers so you can tell your offspring to stop tormenting one another without having to raise your voice. (The system appears to be a production version of something we saw at CES in 2016.)

Kudos to Toyota for making driver-assist technology standard across the line. It's something that all OEMs would do in an ideal world. That said, there are some limitations in the Sienna. First, the adaptive cruise control will not work under 25mph. In my case, it shut off without warning once the car in

front of me slowed down, forcing me to brake manually to avoid a collision. Also, the TFT display in the instrument panel would change to show that the adaptive cruise control was active and acquired a car in front of me each time I changed lanes, which is unnecessary visual clutter. Lane-keep assist is sensitive and gave a couple of false alarms when road markings disappeared unexpectedly. Warning volume can be adjusted, but it’s always a beep instead of a steering wheel vibration.

The AWD Sienna SE is rated at 20mpg, 18mpg in the city, and 24mpg on the highway. I saw 19.8mpg in a week of mixed driving during a warmer-than-normal Chicago January.

There’s a reason the Sienna has been one of the three or four best-selling minivans for the past several years. Toyota makes solid cars with a reputation for dependability. The Sienna offers a quiet and comfortable ride with enough personal space to keep everybody happy. On the flip side, the standard driver-assistance tech feels rough around the edges compared with other mainstream automakers like Subaru, Volkswagen, and Chrysler. Entune, Toyota’s infotainment system, is in desperate need of a radical overhaul. If you have an iPhone, you can use CarPlay instead, but Android smartphone owners are stuck with Entune and Toyota’s suite of apps. Toyota could also take a page from Chrysler’s book when it comes to features. While not must-haves, it would be great to have the second row fold into the floor and be able to vacuum up messes with the Pacifica’s built-in vacuum cleaner. And given that Toyota has such deep expertise with the technology, why not a hybrid?

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