

Cruising in a Toyota Highlander

By Tim Saunders

THE FIRST THING THAT strikes me when I see the Toyota Highlander is that I haven't driven a burgundy-coloured vehicle for years. It really enhances this SUV. It's a colour that holds a strong place in my heart because my parents had a 1988 Vauxhall Carlton with the same finish. Over the years various manufacturers have chosen this palette but it seems to have gone out of favour in recent times. That is until I get behind the wheel of the Highlander and then notice that it's still a reasonably popular choice. Isn't it funny how you only recognise certain things when they relate to you? Or is that just me?

The key facts about this vehicle are that it is a self-charging hybrid petrol electric. Already this scores highly with me because it will not interfere with my lifestyle like an electric vehicle will. I don't need to worry about any aspect of charging because it does it itself. Then it will accommodate no less than eight occupants; that's got to be a first - unless of course you have a van and even those would struggle to transport so many. And, thirdly, it has a nice large panoramic glass roof making it a very light vehicle.

The automatic gearbox complete with paddleshifts makes for easy (some might say boring), driving. For me the driver's seat could do with a little more support - I've been hedge cutting and my back is feeling the strain so needs all the help it can get.

I quickly discover that it will travel in EV (electric vehicle) mode up to about 27mph and then no matter how light your right foot, the petrol engine will kick in. In theory it makes it ideal for travelling through town centres and situations where traffic moves more slowly. That makes it perfect for motorways then during rush hours and holiday getaways. As usual there are lots of roadworks and, travelling through the New Forest, we have to patiently wait in a queue for the best part of half an hour. The Highlander is



great in situations like this because not only does the ignition automatically cut out when the car stops, reducing those pesky emissions but it then restarts when the traffic starts flowing again. At such low speeds EV mode then takes over which means that for about 30 minutes we are being as clean as can be. All the while the strong sunlight is shining through that enormous glass roof. A good proportion of this is also an electric tilt/slide sunroof, which is much appreciated on a warm day. Toyota claims that this vehicle will return up to 39mpg. I can report that we actually get 43mpg - this is a first for me - usually the vehicles I test prove to be less efficient than claimed. On a full tank it should easily travel 400 miles, if not more, depending on driving style. As far as I can tell these economy figures only take into account the petrol engine so adding the miles that might be travelled on EV mode should show a figure closer to 50mpg, I would think.

Externally, it is well designed, the back reminding me of a Lexus but that's hardly surprising as Toyota owns that brand. In common with all other SUVs there's a striking grille. That third row of seats is really only suitable for small children up to Henry's six-year-old age. The second row has to be pushed forward to access it but it is not possible to slide the seat forward and fix it in that position - if that could be done older children with longer legs would be able to use this row comfortably. Another quailm is that things can fall out of that boot very easily. In my old Fiesta there is a lip preventing items from falling out but there isn't any such fixture in the Highlander resulting in Henry's football falling on the road when we arrive at grandma's. That electric boot lid is a



luxury I could live without for two reasons. One is that I find a traditional boot lid is so much quicker to open and close and secondly, safety. Children are too quick for ageing adults and impatient Heidi (9) gets her finger trapped underneath the boot lid as it shuts. And this is after a lecture from me on staying

away from this boot because it is dangerous. She wasn't there when I initiated this operation and then went to sit in the driver's seat. But she had come back out from the house without me knowing and wanted to put something in the boot. We were lucky, there were no breakages but this is an added hassle that I

Facts at a glance

TOYOTA HIGHLANDER EXCEL

Priced from: £51,670

Engine: 2.5-litre petrol hybrid

Top speed: 112mph

0 to 60mph: 8 seconds

Economy: 39.2 to 43mpg

Watch the video at www.testdrives.biz

can well do without. It comes with lots of luxury goodies including heated seats, power folding wing mirrors, air conditioning, rear privacy glass and hardwearing black leather upholstery. We enjoy our time with the Highlander.

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