



Toyota Camry

## Hybrids Offer Genuine Benefits... At a Price

### Toyota Prius and Camry Hybrids

While most questions coming my way used to be about performance issues, now they're all about fuel economy and hybrids. Funny how an extra buck at the pump changes things.

Toyota is the current leader in hybrid sales, offering an ever-expanding lineup (including its Lexus brand) of cars and SUVs that sip less fuel.

The Prius has been a popular seller, often commanding long waits. Research showed that many hybrid buyers want the world to know they are being "green" and thus want their hybrids to have distinct styling. The Prius certainly succeeds there.

With a tall roofline, the Prius allows its occupants to sit higher, while keeping a short overall length (about three inches shorter than a Corolla). It also facilitates inclusion of a highly practi-

cal, box-shaped cargo area when rear seats are folded.

Inside, seating is generous for four, tight for five. The seats are comfortable for commuting duty. They lack adequate side bolsters for hard cornering, but that's okay because the cornering limits on the Prius are quite modest anyway. My tester had leather; I'd stick (pun intended) with the standard cloth because it holds you in place better when cornering.

Toyota's hybrid system allows for driving in electric-only mode as long as your right foot adopts a light touch. Encounter an incline, go past about 40 mph, or push a bit further on the accelerator, and the gas engine kicks in. Driving the Prius is a different kind of fun, as you see how long you can keep the gas engine from engaging via the in-dash LCD display.

In the handling department, sluggish steering response and low grip 65-series tires hinder cornering ability. The compromises demanded by the Prius are clear. Just relax, take it easy, and enjoy the ride.

By contrast, the

Camry Hybrid asks for fewer compromises. It looks like a regular Camry. And it's more fun to drive than the Prius.

Camry's are available with a 158 horsepower 4-cylinder, 268 hp V-6, and the Hybrid's 147 hp 4-cylinder plus its 45 hp electric motor.

Both Prius and Camry hybrids come with CVT automatic transmissions, to optimize the power/economy levels.

The complete redesign for 2007 has turned out a much more sophisticated and stylish looking Camry, with design cues hinting at a few other upscale makes.

Its interior is nicely styled as well, and with optional leather I suspect some who sit in one will wonder why they would need a Lexus ES 350. There are differences, naturally, but the first impression of a loaded Camry Hybrid is that of a mid-luxury sedan.

For an "economy car" this hybrid is pretty quick, registering a 0-60 time in the high-seven-second range. With greater weight and more power, it also registers fewer mpg than the Prius. In return, though, you get a more comfortable, refined, faster, better handling car, with more available luxury features.

The Prius is EPA-rated at 60-city, 51-highway mpg. In my normal mix of city, freeway and mountain driving, I averaged 42.7 mpg. In the Camry Hybrid, EPA-rated at 40-city, 38-highway, I got 36.2 mpg. The Prius with leather, rear back-up camera and much more totaled \$29,611 including delivery. The Camry, also loaded to the hilt, totaled \$30,667.

Since hybrids typically add \$3,000-5,000 to a car's sticker price, you can calculate how many years of gas savings it will take for you to offset the higher price. For some, the roughly 500 mile range of the Prius and 600 mile range of the Camry Hybrid will do the trick. It's nice to have that choice, and with either one of these Toyotas, you'll at least be stopping for gas less often.



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