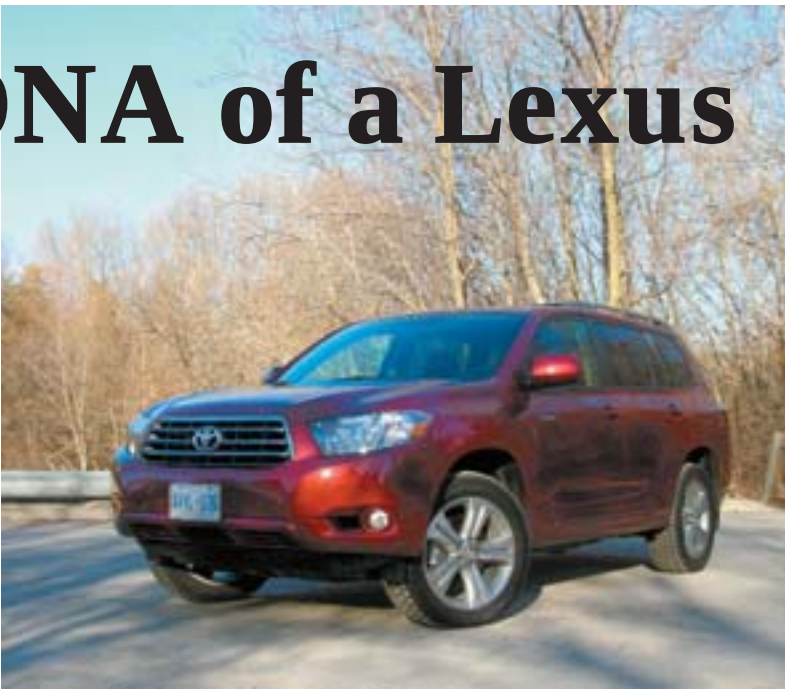


driver's seat

Highlander Sport has DNA of a Lexus



Toyota's 2009 Highlander Sport has plenty of headroom, legroom and shoulder room and moves around well thanks to the 3.5 litre V6. Canwest photo

Brian Harper for Canwest News Service

While I have always appreciated the Toyota Highlander for its family-focused nature, I had forgotten how well it goes about its business. Taking my octogenarian parents to a downtown medical appointment brought things into perspective, with Dad commenting to Mom on how smooth and comfortable the ride was. I then realized how right he was - the Highlander was not just smooth, it was Lexus smooth. And this was the Sport model, its MacPherson gas struts, gas shock absorbers, coil springs and stabilizer bars all tuned for a firmer ride. The stalwart and well-proven 3.5-litre V6 under the hood - which is shared with the Lexus RX 350 - was the very definition of discreet, barely transparent in its action even when on-ramp merging power was called for. With 270 horsepower and 248 pound-feet of torque at the ready, getting to speed was not an issue. I looked around the cabin. Even with three six-foot-pluses aboard (plus Mom), legroom, headroom and shoulder room were more than plentiful for the four of us. Short of driving a limo, at the time I couldn't think of a more suitable conveyance with which to whisk them to their appointments. The Highlander might not have a Lexus nameplate or its sex appeal, but it sure has the DNA. The closest thing approaching big news for the Highlander for the 2009 model year is the addition of a more fuel-friendly four-cylinder. The 2.7L engine, which is mated to a new six-speed automatic transmission, delivers a yeoman 187 hp at 5,800 rpm and 186 pound-feet of torque at 4,100 rpm, giving the base model a usable towing capacity of 1,588 kilograms. The V6, with its extra power, ups the towing limit to 2,268 kg. Interestingly, it gets one fewer gear than the four-cylinder - a five-speed manual only - not that it

needs the extra cog. The sporting advantages of the manual mode are somewhat limited, though I could see some benefit if subjecting the Highlander to tougher off-roading applications than the rut-covered road into the cottage. As for fuel economy, the Sport delivered an average of 14.2 litres per 100 kilometres for the week. Dry road conditions meant little need for the Highlander's full-time four-wheel-drive system. But should the skies turn dark and nasty or the tarmac devolve into dirt and gravel, it's reassuring to know that the crossover's traction abilities are enhanced with stability and traction control systems, not to mention Hill Start Assist Control and Downhill Assist Control technologies. I found solace in the light yet responsive steering while deking around road construction and thumping over streetcar tracks - the Highlander moves well for a mid-sized vehicle. At 1,930 kg, it's no lightweight, even though it's built on a passenger car platform. With all seats occupied, cargo room is at a premium - only 10.3 cubic feet. Fortunately, converting that back row into extra storage space takes just a couple of tugs, and the resultant 42.3 cu. ft. once the seats fold flat is far more user friendly. If maximum cargo carrying is needed, dropping the second-row, fold-flat seats opens up a hangar-like 95.4 cu. ft. For its \$42,085 retail price, the Highlander is well contented. For 2009, all V6 trims get to dip deeper into the features bin, adding a 3.5-inch LCD monitor with a backup camera, a power liftgate with jam protection, a flip-up rear glass hatch, an eight-way power driver's seat, premium cloth seats, an in-dash six-disc CD changer and fog lamps. As a less expensive and broader-based sibling to the Lexus RX, the Highlander continues to anchor Toyota's long-standing marketing strategy that most consumers would rather have sport-utility vehicles and crossovers with car-like driving dynamics.

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Spec Sheet

Vehicle type: All-wheel-drive mid-sized crossover
Engine: 3.5L DOHC V6
Horsepower: 270 hp @ 6,200
Torque: 248 lb-ft of torque @ 4,700
Transmission: Five-speed manual
Brakes: Four-wheel disc with ABS
Tires: P245/55R19
Fuel economy: L/100 km: 12.3 city, 8.8 hwy.
Price: base/as tested: \$42,085/\$45,285, plus destination charge of \$1,440

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