Toyota Camry Hybrid - Car of the Year 2007

The Camry Hybrid was voted 2007 Car of the Year in the Family Sedan (over $30k) category by the Automobile Journalists Association of Canada

The first Toyota hybrids in 1997 were wheezy little boxes, interesting technically but pathetically ill-suited to American driving. No foul — they were models for the home market.

The Camry has been America's bestselling car eight of the past nine years, and this all-new 2007 version comes with three powertrain choices: four-cylinder conventional, V-6 conventional, or hybrid. Call 'em vanilla, chocolate, and strawberry. You can't get more mainstream than strawberry on the Camry starting roster.

The Camry's hybrid operation continues the pattern set by the Prius sedan and Highlander and RX400h sport-utes, albeit with new hardware. The engine is a 2.4-liter Atkinson-cycle four of 147 horsepower, coupled to a continuously variable transmission and supplemented by up to 45 horses from an electric motor. The car moves easily on electric power alone at low speeds and on downgrades. Both the engine and the motor pitch in when acceleration is needed. The engine runs only when the computer tells it to.

There's nothing wheezy about this hybrid. Holding the pedal down brings a high-revving purr from the engine room and a surge to 60 mph (100km/t) in 7.7 seconds, almost a full second quicker than a four-cylinder, five-speed Camry SE (March 2006). The quarter finishes in 16.3 seconds at 92 mph, compared with 16.9 at 86 mph for the four. This is punchy strawberry.

Still, if performance were all that mattered, you'd opt for the 268-hp V-6, which will be quicker still, and save (we estimate) about $3000 on the sticker. You pay extra for the hybrid's promise of performance and fuel savings, as seen by the EPA's ratings of 43 mpg (16,3 km/l) city and 37 (14 km/l) highway. We find it easy to get 33 or 34 (12 km/l) in mixed metro driving. Then again, it's easy to drop down toward 25 mpg (9,5 km/l) if we romp on the power often. As with conventional cars, how you drive determines mileage. Overall, we averaged 33 mpg (12 km/l).

Hybrid or not, there's a lot to like about this new Camry, starting with its intriguing shape. It crouches with its nose low, ready to pounce as you approach from the front. The side glass arcs inward as it rises, suggesting a

Fact Box:

Vehicle type:
front-engine, front-wheel-drive, 5-passenger, 4-door sedan

Estimated price as tested: $30,000

Engine type:
DOHC 16-valve 2.4-liter inline-4, 147 hp, 181 Nm;

AC permanent magnet 650V electric motor, 141 hp (battery limited to 45 hp), 270 Nm;

Combined system, 192 hp

Battery:
NiMH 245V traction battery with a maximum output of 30 kW

Transmission: continuously variable automatic

Wheelbase: 277 cm

Length/width/height: 480/182/146 cm

Curb weight: 1650 kg

Performance:

0 to 100 km/t: 7.7 sec
0 to 160 km/t: 19.6 sec
Top speed : 187 km/t

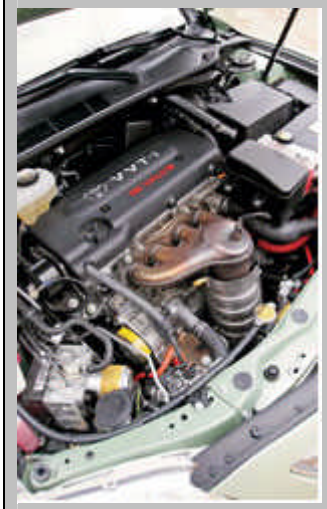
Braking, 110-0 km/t: 161 m

EPA fuel economy
city driving: 16 km/l
C/D-observed fuel economy: 12,5 km/l

The power steering, brakes, and heater/air conditioning are all

canopy. Inside, the feeling is spacious, with the windshield and dashboard pushed forward and out of your face. The driving position is excellent. Even with the optional navigation system, remarkably few buttons are needed to operate this complex machine. The new instrument cluster, with large white-on-black markings, is wonderfully legible. Instead of a tach, the hybrid features an instantaneous-mpg gauge that swings a long, well-damped needle over a broad arc marked from 0 mpg to 60, and then into a blue range beyond the numbers — the zone of infinite mileage that the Camry enters when it drives without engine power.

You give up a little when you opt for strawberry — about four cubic feet of trunk space and 1.4 gallons from the normal 18.5-gallon tank (the 150-pound nickel-metal hydride battery has to live somewhere). Still, at 30 mpg, you'll cover just over 550 miles between swipes of your card for regular unleaded.

Although Toyota has not yet released Camry hybrid prices, we expect you'll have to drive some six-digit distance to save enough gas to pay back the extra cost. You'll enjoy the trip.

electric, which allows the car to run on the electric motors only.