

Road beat: Toyota Camry SE – A proper mid-size



The Camry SE Special Edition is stellar in almost all categories. Photos/Larry Weitzman

By Larry Weitzman

If Webster's had a definition for a mid-size car, it would likely have a picture of a Camry SE Special Edition. Now in its seventh generation Camry has been the bestselling car in the United States from 1997 to 2015 except for year model 2001. For every year but two, sales exceeded 400,000 units. Quite a record.

As Bob Lutz said at an automotive press event about 10 years ago, Toyota has become the "default" brand in the United States, meaning when you need a new car, people simply default to brand "T" without thinking about any other brand. It's a

reputation built on reliability and quality.

While many automotive scribes write that the mid-size sedan market is loaded now with quality choices that are claimed to handle and perform better than some others, this Camry SE "Special Edition" tested here can hold its own with the best of them and in some categories it is the best of them.



Specifications

Price (base including transportation) SE \$27,075 to over \$35 large for a loaded V-6

Engines

2.5L, DOHC 16 valve inline four 178 hp @ 6,000 rpm
170 lbs.-ft. of torque @ 4,100 rpm

Transmissions

Six speed automatic

Configuration

Transverse front engine/front wheel drive

Dimensions

Wheelbase 109.3 inches

Length 190.9 inches

Width 71.7 inches

Height 57.9 inches

Track (f/r) 62.4/62.0 inches

Ground clearance 6.1 inches
Weight 3,305 pounds
Tow capacity 1,000 pounds
Passenger volume 102.7 cubic feet
Trunk capacity 15.4 cubic feet
Fuel capacity 17.0
Steering lock to lock 2.85 turns
Turning circle 36.7 feet
Wheel sizes 7.5X18 inches alloy
Tires 225/45X18
Coefficient of drag 0.28

Performance

0-60 mph 7.47 seconds
50-70 mph 3.99 seconds
50-70 mph uphill 6.19 seconds
Top speed Do you think that any of the prior nine or so million Camry buyers in the United States really care? But without intervention electronic or otherwise even the four cylinder should top out at close to 130 mph (but not with me in the car).
Fuel economy EPA rated at 25/35/28 mpg city/highway/combined. Expect to achieve 28-29 mpg in overall driving and 38 mpg plus on the highway at legal speeds.

When the 2006 Camry was introduced, it created the theme for this new generation, with the exact same side window line with this new model adding a piece of applique to the down line of the rear window to make a different look. But the overall shape was a 100 percent improvement with respect to the generation the ceased production in 2005. Size-wise since 2006 and through three generations, the dimensions are essentially the same. Wheelbase remains 109.3 inches, length is 190.9 inches and width is 71.7 inches. As designs go, this is not a spectacular car, but a very attractive design with nothing offensive to spoil its pleasing proportions, except for its upside-down frown front end. The designer at the time must have been going through a divorce or worse.

Under the hood is a Toyota 2.5L inline four cylinder DOHC, 16-valve engine that cranks out a very respectable 178 hp at 6,000 rpm and 170 pounds of twist at 4,100 rpms, about average for the class. One thing that would even improve performance and fuel economy more is direct injection with the Camry doesn't have. With direct injection the Camry would make 10-15 more hp without any fuel penalty. But it is still anechoic chamber room quiet and extremely smooth running. It transmits power to the front wheels via a six-speed cog-swapper and the gears shift quickly and smoothly. Gearing is tall keeping rpms low. At 70 mph the tach shows just 1,950 rpm. Even though this "Special Edition" is there sporty model it is dead quiet, no road engine or wind noise.

Performance for the Camry is very good with 0-60 mph taking just 7.47 seconds, that's mid-pack or better for this extremely competitive class with the standard engine. Even the class leader the Mazda 6 is only a tenth of a second quicker. Passing performance is also very good with a 50-70 mph elapsed time of just 3.99 seconds and the same exercise up a six percent grade was scored at 6.19 seconds. It is truly amazing how well cars perform today, being able to smoke big V-8 muscle car from the late 1950s.

But here is the difference, the muscle car would be ready for the shredder by 100,000 miles and would average about 12 mpg over its life. The Toyota Camry with reasonable maintenance will go for 300,000 miles or more and average near 30 mpg over its life. And the Camry has a sticker price \$27K including destination and with standard equipment that was unknown to the industry even 30 years ago, GPS, full power, Bluetooth and probably some stuff I haven't discovered yet. Cars today are a phenomenal bargain.

As to fuel economy, the EPA rates the Toyota at 25/35/28 mpg city/highway/combined. It does at least 10 percent better with an overall fuel economy of 28-29 mpg, some city, but mostly rural hills. On the highway at 70 mpg the Camry averaged on a two way run 38.5 mpg. Fuel economy is again mid-pack maybe a bit better.



Handling is not a problem with this Camry

But here's where it gets interesting, the Special Edition Camry with the "tighten up" suspension really acquits itself in the twisties, it is not just competent, it is aggressive. After just a few miles your confidence builds as it goes where you point it, holding its line perfectly with benign response from the quick electric rack steering that goes lock to lock in just 2.85 turns. Cornering power is very good especially with a front and rear track of 62 inches.

Suspension is the usual MacPherson struts up front and a dual link independent set up in the rear with stab bars at both ends, which really limit body roll. But that's not all, it comes with stock 18X7.5-inch great looking machine finished alloys shod with serious rubber (225/45X18). Hey, Kyle "Rowdy" Busch won two races in Camrys last weekend and he is on a roll to win it all in NASCAR this year. Yeah, sure Busch's Camrys just look like a Camry and it is a completely different car. The drive train and chassis are different as is the suspension, but Toyota must be learning from it as this Camry changes direction beautifully.

The other half of the equation is ride quality and this is where the Camry shines. It is extremely quiet like a hybrid and smooth like a Lexus. Camry retains its composure on the most difficult roads. There is no wind and road noise so highway trips, especially with all its room, quiet and fuel economy would be fabulous. And it is super long legged as the fuel tank holds 17 gallons or almost 600 miles with a two-gallon reserve.

Braking performance with the full alphabet soup of acronyms was excellent stopping the Camry in 41 feet at 40 mph. It has a standard back up camera plus a plethora of electronic interventions and enough airbags to refloat the Titanic.



Plenty of power with this engine.

Interior quality is good with comfortable and supportive seats done in a rich cloth. There are some hard plastic trim pieces, but they look quality. Instrumentation is complete with big sporty black/blue tach and speedo on white, which flank left and right of the trip computer, information center.

Rear seating with copious legroom can easily and comfortably handle three adults and the trunk is over 15 cubic feet.

The bottom line including the train ticket from its Georgetown, Ky., assembly plant is \$27,075. I just read in an automotive publication the U.S. vehicle content is more than many American cars. And the standard equipment list is long and deep and nothing is left wanting. GPS, check, trick sound system with XM, check, 8-way power driver's seat, check, back up camera, check. Even the Special Edition embroidered, carpeted floor mats, check. It had everything I would want. The only option was an upgraded radio system at just \$525. This Camry is a hard to beat, it's great value and it's a (NASCAR winning) Toyota (sort of).

Larry Weitzman has been into cars since he was 5 years old. At 8 he could recite from memory the hp of every car made in the U.S. He has put in thousands of laps on racetracks all over the Western United States.