

Convenience by Design

In a Car for all Seasons

By Roger Witherspoon



Benjamin Jimenez had a blank slate, a one-of-a-kind chassis, and a mission to make the first Toyota designed and built in the U.S. uniquely appealing to American motorists. And if you are curious as to how a thoughtful designer can pack a lot into a \$35,000 family sedan, you might try a tour in the Toyota Venza.

Jimenez operates out of Toyota's design studios in Ann Arbor, Michigan, about a half hour's drive from the offices of America's troubled Big Three auto makers. He was handed a newly designed chassis intended to provide the frame for a new "Crossover SUV" in which a third was borrowed from the best selling Camry sedan, a third from the Highlander SUV, and a third created to fit the other two pieces together.

As a "crossover" SUV, the Venza is supposed to provide the maneuverability and handling of a fully loaded Camry sedan, combined with the height and cargo space of an SUV. In that regard, it is along the lines of the Lexus RX series, but for \$10,000 less. For looks, Toyota asked Ian Cartabiano and his associates in their Newport Beach studio to draw something that looked at home in the California sun.

So Ian thinned the grill and stretched it above the air intake and across a sloping front to merge with the high density headlights. The effect is a permanent California smile. Beginning with the smiley face, the Venza is a sleek crossover which looks a bit smaller than the Infiniti 35 or Lexus RX – though it isn't – and more like a large, round sedan. From the side, the Venza has a shape familiar to most crossovers – with the Ford Flex the notable exception – but the roof slopes down towards the back to make the car look smaller and sleeker than it actually is.

Under the hood is a 268-horsepower V-6 engine, which is more than enough for ordinary driving, though the Venza will not take off and run ahead of the pack the way the Nissan FX-35 will. Still, the Venza's engine is strong enough to tow 3,700 pounds, which is sufficient to cover the average snowbird's wardrobe for the winter season. While the Venza doesn't get the best mileage – the EPA estimates it drinks 18 MPG in the city and 25 MPG on the highway – at least it drinks regular unleaded gasoline instead of the higher priced sauce.



But what makes the Venza stand out is the attention to detail paid to the area where motorists spend most of their time – inside the car. It is here that Jimenez earned his keep, for you never feel as if you are going low-rent with the Venza, even if you take the stripped down model in which the seats are cloth and not heated, there is no navigation system, and the trim is plastic simulating wood rather than a real dead tree. It is a thoughtfully designed car, which always makes one feel that he or she is getting more than they paid for.

“With this interior,” said Jimenez, “we were trying to create the perfect space, the ideal vehicle for today's customers. We weren't limited by the standard rules that this is a sedan or SUV.”

The center console, for example, is in two sections and has a slot on the passenger's side which is large enough for the average library book. There is the standard, deep bin under the sliding arm rest, and then a second deep bin under the cup holders, which have a soft blue light that comes on when the headlights are turned on. Inside this second bin is a 12-volt power outlet and an MP3 and iPod connection. There is another iPod connection in the glove compartment. If you plug a power cord into the outlet, you do not have to keep the bin open. There is a hidden chute which opens from a slot on the dash, which is designed to hold iPods or cell phones.

“Everybody working on the car had a cell phone or iPod and we had to find a place to put them,” said Jimenez. “The engineering team did a job so that slot holds virtually any cell phone and neatly stores the cords.”



The idea for two storage bins in the console, he explained, came from observing how drivers and passengers interacted with the vehicle. “I asked myself what does my wife bring with her?” he explained. “And I tried to create spaces for those things – a small handbag, for example, which is why the console has two bins. We have a slot on the side of the console because she usually has a book with her, and needed some place to store it besides putting it on the floor.”

The entry version of the Venza has no navigation system, but there is a backup camera connected to a small information screen in the center of the dash near the front windshield – which also tells the time, temperature, and distance to empty. The three-inch screen was recessed into the dash, he said because it was within the line of sight of the driver focusing on the road ahead.

For another \$2,500, however, Toyota offers an expanded center console with a navigation system, DVD player and touch-screen.



The test car had a two-tone interior, broken by simulated wood, comprised of a soft, padded, faux-leather with a cloth roof, giving the interior a look that is more expensive than it really is. For \$1,600, however, Toyota offers real leather seats, which can be heated, and real wood trim. An additional \$1,000 provides sunroofs over the front and rear sections of the car.

In terms of room, the rear seats both recline far enough to let the passengers take naps, or fold flat to enlarge the cargo area. There is AM/FM and XM satellite radio with a JBL sound system featuring 13 speakers, and an easy-to-use Bluetooth cell phone connection. Both the entertainment and cell phone systems are accessible from fingertip controls on the tilting and telescoping steering wheel.

Toyota's decision to have American designers develop a car for this family market was an astute one. If they continue turning out innovative cars like the Venza, the road ahead for the three American firms down the road will be increasingly bumpy.



2009 Toyota Venza 4WD

MSRP:		\$33,623
EPA Mileage:	18 MPG City	25 MPG Highway
Towing Weight:		3,500 pounds

Performance / Safety:

3.5-Liter aluminum alloy, DOHC V-6 engine producing 268 horsepower and 246 pound-feet of torque; electronic all wheel drive; MacPherson Strut front & rear suspension; stability and traction controls; electronic rack and pinion steering; 4-wheel disc brakes; 20-inch, 5-spoke, aluminum alloy wheels; backup camera; high density lamps with automatic high beam dimmer; fog lamps; driver and front passenger front, knee, and seat-mounted side airbags; side curtain airbags.

Interior / Comfort:

AM/FM/XM satellite radio; JBL Synthesis Surround Sound with 13 speakers; 6-disc, in-dash CD player; MP3 and iPod connection; Bluetooth cell phone connection; tilt & telescope steering wheel with fingertip audio, cell phone and cruise controls; power rear door; 3.5-inch display screen; illuminated cup holders; 60/40, fold flat rear seats.