



Steve Says This Highlander Platinum Is A Lexus In Disguise

Over the past 2 decades, the Highlander has been America's go-to family mover by offering a car-like ride with SUV versatility. But this one here is all about raising expectations by taking everything farther.

The all-new 2020 Highlander Platinum gives Toyota owners a healthy dose of Lexus.

Toyota sold 240,000 American-made Highlanders in the U.S. last year making it the company's 2nd best-selling SUV so when conceiving this next generation there was neither motivation nor need for radical change.

Look under the hood and you'll find the same 295 horsepower, 3.5-liter V6 mated to the same 8-speed auto. Same 8" of ground clearance. Same approach and departure angles.

Same 5,000 pounds towing capacity and the 3rd row remains the same size. But that doesn't mean the Highlander hasn't taken a big step forward.

It's built upon a new, stronger and lighter platform, the styling has been emboldened, there's additional length to the body, but most of all it's the Highlander's newly discovered ultra-premium character that makes the strongest impression backed by a smarter all-wheel drive system with intelligent multi-terrain controls.

The Platinum's cabin is really something to behold. I mean, I could easily be sitting in a Lexus right now.

Highlights include this giant touchscreen, an unbelievably great-sounding JBL audio system, a high technology influence throughout and an SUV-like seating position with really comfy seats. And talk about quiet and smooth; riding in here is like being in a library.

No longer just an option package, the Platinum is now its own grade level, available in front- or all-wheel drive and priced from \$48,000. Goodies you'll only find here include the 12" touchscreen with its simple to use apps and easily configurable layout, adaptive LED headlights that swivel in the direction of travel, rain sensing wipers, 20" alloy wheels, a panoramic moonroof, a camera-based rearview mirror, a 10" color heads-up display, illuminated scuff plates, and some exterior styling cues.

In Ruby Flare Pearl with all-wheel drive and optional carpeted floor mats, this one stickers for \$50,663. That leads to some initial sticker shock until you realize that's just where the high end of this segment is these days and at least this Highlander convincingly plays the 50k role, replete with premium touchpoints, and I hate to keep using the analogy, but a Lexus level look.

I love the new design details and its arsenal of tricks. The graphic displays and animations are bright and easy to understand, there's a conversation mirror to complement the Driver East Speak feature that broadcasts the driver's voice through the rear speakers, a shelf with USB cable management, a conveniently placed wireless device charger, the bird's eye view camera with perimeter scan, and an 11-speaker premium audio system with Clari-Fi technology that brings vibrancy to compressed music.

There are a few misses, however. The height adjustable passenger seat is becoming extinct when even 50 grand doesn't buy you one, Toyota cheesed out by not putting the Smart Key system on all doors, closing said doors requires more effort now as they've acquired a heavier feel, and there're no USB ports in the 3rd row.

Lesser trims can be specified with a 2nd row bench seat however this Platinum trim comes exclusively with the captain's chairs in a 7-seat configuration. But they're very nice. There's a sliding feature here that creates good balance between the 2nd and 3rd row when it's occupied and the feature content in here is definitely on-point with a platinum trim.

Sunshades, heated seats, climate controls, USB ports, a panoramic roof and more legroom? This is a good place to be. Accessing the 3rd row is also simple and these seats also recline so for a couple of kids without long legs, it's fine but you will have to make a deal with the person seated in front of you to avoid claustrophobia.

The Highlander has grown in length and the beneficiary of those additional 2 ½" is right here in the cargo area. So, you can take a few more things with you on vacation.

A kick of the foot works to open up the hatch. There's an underfloor storage cubby that holds the cargo cover and I like how the 3rd row seats lock in a forward position when using this area for a smaller contained space. Would remote levers to drop all the seats be appreciated at this price? Yes. But it's not to be.

The driving experience feels far more substantial than before, taking on a greater SUV-like persona. Bigger, bolder, smoother and nearly silent inside, the Highlander is a great long trip cruiser with a more

sophisticated ride quality. Now, the mileage isn't great but the Highlander is a winner and it also sports a new level of off-road capability.

Multi-Terrain Select allows you to dial in various off-road surfaces for a tailored experience and the torque vectoring all-wheel drive system on the higher level trims benefits both on- and off-road driving. It's not a sporty SUV or one you'd want to take too far off-road but the Highlander balances all of its responsibilities with grace.

It's a pleasant drive with new levels of smoothness and quietness. Gas mileage of 23mpg in combined driving is 1 tick better than before but a smaller tank slightly reduces total range to 412 miles.