



National - Sep 01, 2013

Page No: 16
Page Name: n.a.
Size: 1740 sq. cm
AVE: INR 428,150

Type: Magazine
Language: English
Circulation: 165,000
Frequency: Monthly

News monitored for: Toyota

Toyota Camry Hybrid FIRST DRIVE 88
Could it change the perception of hybrids in India?

News monitored for: Toyota



FIRST VERDICT

Appealing combination of efficient hybrid and comfortable luxury car.

★★★★★☆☆

SO GOOD

- Seamless power delivery
- Comfortable, well-equipped cabin

NO GOOD

- CVT gearbox
- Expensive to buy

PHOTOGRAPHY ASHLEY BAXTER

DESPITE HAVING DRIVEN many a hybrid, driving the new Camry for the first time freaks me out. Hitting the start button elicits no response from the car. And nothing happens

when I pump the accelerator pedal either. But put it in Drive and the car moves forward silently, like there's a ghost under the bonnet. It's eerie. In a pure electric car like a Mahindra e20, you expect no engine noise, and that's fine. But in something like a Camry, totally noiseless operation comes as something of a shock.

Of course, you soon get over the surprise, and then, it's quite pleasant. Keep speeds in check, below 40kph, and the Camry can run for a fair bit on electric drive alone, the only sound emitted being the crunching of gravel under its wheels. And the Camry moves forward smartly on electric power because the electric motor puts out the equivalent of 140bhp. As a result, the hit of torque is quite instant

when you tap the pedal.

If you are not paying attention, it's also difficult to tell when the four-cylinder petrol motor kicks in. The new hybrid system integrates really smoothly and feels evolved, improved and more refined than before. It clearly is better than the one on the Prius.

As ever with Toyota's hybrid cars, there's an Eco mode present. Here, with the electric motor working in conjunction with the petrol engine, there's enough power and torque to make driving effortless. Acceleration is pretty strong initially. Push harder, however, and the rate of acceleration drops as you encounter something of a 'flatspot'. And the feeling of abundant power does not come back even after you've waited a bit. This

is due, in part, to the ECU of the car being miserly with the amount of performance doled out. It also does not help that the electronic Continuously Variable Transmission (e-CVT) gearbox takes its own sweet time to 'shorten' its virtual gear ratio, or do the equivalent of dropping down to a lower gear.

If you want even more performance, all you have to do is switch off the Eco mode and feel the combined maximum power of 202bhp go to work. In fact, the Camry Hybrid now feels like a larger 3.5-litre engine. It responds immediately to a tap on the throttle and is a lot more fun to drive as performance improves dramatically.

Toyota's petrol motor has always been torquey. Here, with the electric

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Like the Prius, it's a full hybrid.

QUICK FACTS
Price Rs 31 lakh (est., ex-showroom, Delhi)
On sale Next month



FIRST DRIVE

The Camry Hybrid doesn't look too different from the outside, but is vastly more complex under the skin.

Hyper drive

Hybrids are unpopular in India because they are expensive and don't fulfill the role of a luxury car very well. The new locally assembled Camry Hybrid could change that.



Vent on rear-seat back for batteries.



Headrest flips for better visibility.



Rear seats can be reclined by eight degrees; rear bench has plenty of space.



Petrol and electric motors blend together beautifully; combined power 202bhp.

motor assisting it, it's even better. Push down the gas pedal or, in this case, a combination of throttle butterfly and an electric switch, and you get an instant shove in the back which keeps getting stronger for a few seconds. In fact, the Camry gathers pace so fast, you can easily touch 180kph without too much trouble. Yes, there is a bit of a 'rubberband effect' from the CVT gearbox that generally holds on to an engine speed but varies the gearing. Still, it isn't enough to spoil the otherwise positive driving experience.

Toyota has cleverly made the car more appealing for passengers too. There's three-zone climate control (driver, front and rear passengers), cooled front seats, cruise control

and powered rear seats that recline by up to eight degrees. The rear armrest also houses controls for the recline functions and climate control. There's a powered sunblind for the rear windscreen, along with manual side-blinds.

The rear-seat passenger sat on the left can flip the front seat's headrest forward for better visibility. As with the regular Camry, there's also a button on the side of the front passenger's seat that allows you to take it forward.

The regular Camry has an absolutely amazing rear seat, with plenty of thigh, back and shoulder support. The Hybrid's rear seat, too, is very comfortable, with a recline feature that's simple to use. It's just that it does not feel as →

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FIRST DRIVE



Blue dials help differentiate the interior from that of the standard Camry. Hybrid also gets goodies like cooled front seats.

TOYOTA CAMRY HYBRID

Price	Rs 31 lakh* (ex-showroom, Delhi)
L/W/H	4825/1825/1480mm
Wheelbase	2775mm
Maximum combined output (Hybrid synergy drive)	202bhp
Engine (petrol)	
Type, capacity	4-cyls, 2494cc
Layout	Front, transverse, FWD
Power	158bhp at 5700rpm
Torque	21.71kgm at 4500rpm
Electric motor	
Type	Permanent magnet synchronous
Power	105kW/140bhp
Torque	27.5kgm
Max voltage	650V
Battery	Nickel-metal hydride
Gearbox	CVT
Suspension (f/r)	Independent, MacPherson struts, stabiliser bar/Independent, dual-link, stabiliser bar
Brakes (f/r)	Ventilated disc/Ventilated disc/solid disc-regenerative
Tyre size	215/55 R17
Kerb weight	1625kg
Fuel tank capacity	65 litres
Ground clearance	160mm

*estimated

← supportive as that on the standard car. And what's with the grab handles behind the front seats? They could prove to be seriously hazardous in the event of a crash, especially if the rear-seat occupant is not smart enough to strap on his or her seatbelt.

Also well set up is the car's suspension. It both rides and handles well – not something you could say of the Prius. The 150kg-heavier Camry Hybrid feels comfortable and pliant even on rough patches, soaking up road undulations

reasonably well. And because the heavy batteries sit behind the rear passenger seat, there isn't too much bobbing or pitching either. There's no escaping the larger bumps though – they tend to get through – but the ride never gets hard. Ground clearance (identical to the normal Camry at 160mm) could be an issue on bigger bumps if the car has a full complement of passengers.

Unlike the Prius, this is a car you can also enjoy driving in a slightly more spirited manner. The variable ratio steering is impressively direct

and the Camry Hybrid holds on gamely in corners, even as you pile on the power. Brake feel isn't the best, though. You can feel the regenerative brakes working away, which makes the pedal feel a bit spongy. But the feel has been improved over the years in hybrid Toyotas, and in the Camry, it's definitely a step up over the Prius.

The new Camry Hybrid is an ideal combination between a hybrid and a spacious luxury car. Several times more appealing than the Prius, it offers plenty of comfort,

good performance and drives well too. It should also return approximately 12-13kpl in real-world conditions, which is impressive. A lot, however, rests on how well Toyota prices it. Expected to be priced at a Rs 4-5 lakh premium over the already-expensive regular Camry, the Hybrid could, however, run into some serious competition from other luxury car makers. Will car buyers be willing to pay more to go green? That's something Toyota will have to seriously consider.

SHAPUR KOTWAL



Tacho is replaced by power meter.



Rear seats get their own 'remote'.



Stretching every litre is a priority.



Drive modes for improved efficiency.

