

Top Gear

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FIRST DRIVES



CAMRY HYBRID

Toyota's flagship sedan is now part-electric. Efficiency is up 50 per cent. And it is made in India

Words GIRISH KARKERA

You can hardly hear the engine come to life. There is no tachometer to indicate whether pressing the large green start button on the dashboard has had any effect under the hood. No need to get alarmed, though. Ladies and gentlemen, say hello to the Toyota Camry Hybrid, the first petrol-electric car to be built in India.

While we have seen hybrid cars being launched in India before this – first the Toyota Prius, then the Honda Civic – the difference this time is that Toyota will assemble the Camry Hybrid at its plant on the outskirts of Bangalore.

Toyota is the largest car manufacturer

in the world. And when the world's largest car manufacturer pushes a given technology, it will have an impact. While each carmaker is pursuing a different technology to power its cars of the future, Toyota is placing its bets on electric hybrids, which it says is a technology that is ready and viable now.

Not surprisingly, hybrids now account for a decent chunk of Toyota's global sales. Last year, it sold around a million of them worldwide, which is roughly 10 per cent of its overall sales. A Toyota hybrid isn't new for India – two years ago, the Prius made its appearance on Indian soil. So far, Toyota has sold just over 200 units of the Prius in India. That may not be a number to boast of, but having tested the waters, it is now ready to bring the more mainstream Camry into the fray.

The new Camry (petrol), launched last year, didn't exactly set Toyota's cash registers ringing. A sorted car, it has found favour with Toyota fans who were ready to overlook the fact that under the hood of this luxu limo was a petrol engine. While a diesel Camry is nowhere on the cards, Toyota has done the next best thing –

IN DETAIL

REAR BENCH
Wide and comfy with twin individual reclining seats



ALLOYS
Bigger 17-inch wheels. Full-size spare alloy is standard



ELECTRIC POWER
Hybrid Synergy Drive complements 2.5-litre beltless petrol unit



bring in a petrol-electric version.

Toyota India claims this Camry Hybrid is meant to showcase its technological prowess. But clearly, the mandate at HQ is to ensure that its hybrid products are accessible worldwide – given that Toyota is investing millions in it.

Although Toyota sells the Camry Hybrid the world over, India is only the sixth country after the US, Japan, Australia, Thailand and China to also get down to building it. Of course, with most of the components coming from Thailand, there will be no real localisation to start with, except for the skill of the Indian workers who assemble it.

On the power front, under the hood is a 2.5-litre petrol engine, which, although similar in capacity to the regular Camry, is a different unit. To start off, there are no belt drives in this block, and it peaks at just over 157bhp. That's around 20 less than the conventional petrol Camry. But not to worry, because if you open the boot of this Camry, you will notice a bit of space lost to some really high-tech Nickel-Metal Hydride batteries that power an electric motor. This petrol-electric combine gives the Camry Hybrid an overall power figure of around 202bhp, which is a significant rise despite the 150kg increase in weight.

The six-speed auto transmission is replaced with an electric CVT unit that is



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LIFE ON THE INSIDE

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seamless if not exactly exciting to drive. At start-up, the car uses only electric power. Which explains why you don't hear the engine come to life when you push the start button. If all the systems on the dash light up, push the gear stick to D, step on the accelerator and you're off.

On paper, there is 270Nm of torque dispensed by the 105kW electric motor. So, pick-up is smooth and quick. The Hybrid's steering feel stays true to the regular car's. It's a chunky and surprisingly sporty wheel that is nicely weighted. Not really a chatterbox but it

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makes sure changing direction is an assuring and precise exercise. Of course, there's a 4.8-metre long, 1.8-metre wide and 1.5+ tonne body to haul so you will feel the car rock like a boat in the unlikely event of a slalom test type drive. But it regains composure quickly.

Just like the steering, the suspension stays true to general Toyota standards. The car rumbles confidently on bad roads without jarring the insides. Give it a clean stretch of highway, let it gather speed and your passengers will feel as if they are gliding on air. Despite its larger 17-inch alloys, this is seriously good ride – as good as a Merc E-Class – just to give it a reference point.

Unlike the petrol Camry, Toyota is bringing the top-end variant of the Hybrid here. This means a better looking interior, three-zone individually manageable climate control, ventilated seats in front and most interestingly, reclining rear seats. Sure, they recline only eight degrees compared to 40 on an S-Class, but it still feels special.

On the outside, the Camry Hybrid has a different face. The near-rectangular chrome grille has been ditched in favour of a simpler one with chunkier chrome slats. You get LED headlights behind a smoked-effect glass. All this is rounded off

THE SPECS
TOYOTA CAMRY HYBRID

THE NUMBERS
2,494cc 4-cyl petrol engine plus 105kw electric motor, FWD, 202bhp, 213Nm (petrol) / 270Nm (electric), eCVT, 1,625kg, 0-100kph in 7.5s*, max speed 240kph*, 19.3kpl (claimed), fuel tank 65 litres, 215/55 R17 tyres

THE COST
₹35 lakh*

THE VERDICT
Efficiency and a better interior make this Camry more likeable, but the value proposition looks obscene at this price. Of course, there is no direct competition, which makes it a very unique choice.

7/10

*estimated

by a massive bumper with a wide air dam sandwiched between round fog lamps. It's still not much of a looker but it's clear that you're not driving a regular Camry.

Scheduled to hit showrooms early in September, there was no official price announcement till the time of going to press. Toyota is hoping for some sops, given that this car brings down emission levels significantly while improving fuel efficiency by almost 50 per cent. Not surprisingly, there's nothing on paper yet from the relevant ministries.

So, expect the Camry Hybrid to cost around ₹35 lakh, which does make it an expensive proposition. It is not an obvious replacement for your German luxury sedan but that shouldn't stop you from taking a more ecologically responsible stand, especially if you can afford it. **VG**