



## Independent Editorial Report

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### FAMILY VIEW

# Toyota RAV4

## TOYOTA'S HIS 'N HERS

Four-wheel drive comes no more fashionably than Toyota's Latest RAV4. June Neary checks it out

### A Family View - Will It Suit?

It's intriguing to consider that Toyota's upwardly mobile statement of urban chic might well be the finest mud-plugging tool yet invented and we wouldn't know it. The trendy townies who snap up the company's latest RAV4 are no more likely to take them to the sludge than the GTi `hot hatches` and small sportscars they probably traded in as part exchange.



### The Practicalities

We both enjoyed the high up driving position which gives a super view of the road (as well as enabling you to look down on other road users). Our nephew has been a four wheel drive fan since the first time he came out with me on a test drive and was impressed with the Toyota's huge boot space which had room to spare for his bicycle, small friend's pushchair - and me - as we went to the park with some friends.

It also fits the bill nicely if, like we do, you keep bottles, newspapers and aluminium cans for recycling. There's loads of room to load up the monthly collection (light on the bottles, I hasten to add) with sacks of fallen leaves, to take to the dump. That's because this latest five-door RAV4 is a very different beast to the original Nineties version.

Break-out the tape measure and you'll find the latest RAV4 is a whopping 145mm longer and a hefty 80mm wider than its predecessor. Couple that with smarter packaging and you end up with a car that's way bigger on the inside, offering some 25 per cent more luggage space. If you're worried that this will make it a nightmare to park, be reassured by the fact that it's still shorter than something like a Honda CR-V or a Land Rover Freelander.

The cabin is smartly-styled with an unusually curvaceous fascia that's quite unlike any other production car in its execution. While the main instruments are quite conventional, the centre console features a twin tiered design with metallic inserts and a circular theme for the minor controls. Higher quality plastics are used than is the compact 4x4 norm and a start button is included.

Rear seats that fold flat to the floor with one pull of a lever are one reason why the RAV4's load capacity has risen so dramatically and it also helps that the rear seats can be slid backwards and forwards over a range of 165mm, optimising either luggage space or rear passenger leg room. The seat folding action is particularly slick. Whereas some rivals may also claim flat folding rear seats, the reality is that you will often have to spend time dismantling the head restraints or risk a hernia from flipping seat bases up before the operation can be completed. There's none of that palaver in the RAV4, a one-handed operation seeing the seat vanish flush with the load bay floor.

### Behind the Wheel

On the move, the RAV4 is surprisingly comfortable. Perhaps Toyota have decided to acknowledge that most owners don't buy an off-roader to drive off the road and have adjusted the suspension accordingly. It's also faster than other four wheel drives in the sector, so I'm told. Certainly, the latest 150bhp 16 valve 2.0-litre engine should suit those who favour frantic lifestyles. There's also a choice of 134 and 175bhp diesels.

As with the original RAV4, the handling is impressive. No, it isn't as sharp as the GTi my other half used to drive in his carefree younger days (he said), but the RAV4 came surprisingly close. Cornering roll in other 4x4s is such that they require an entirely different driving technique. That isn't the case here. "It's just like driving a car," was his verdict.

It's less manoeuvrable in the supermarket car park, even with power steering, than a car would be, but given the



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size and weight of the vehicle, this is a very minor point.

### **Value for money**

Three specification levels – XT3, XT4 and XT5 - are being offered in the UK and all variants get a compact disc stereo, alloy wheels, air conditioning plus no fewer than seven airbags including curtain and driver's knee bags. The range-topping XT5 also comes furnished with leather upholstery, climate controlled air conditioning and satellite navigation. The RAV4 has long had a reputation for being impeccably built and the latest model bolsters that reputation with class-topping equipment levels.

There are thoughtful design features, too. These include handy drinks holders, net-type seat-back pockets behind the front seats, coin holders and a deckside storage compartment in the rear for extra storage space. You can also adjust the headlamps from the inside and shut off the rear electric windows to stop the kids playing with them in the back.

All this for around the £19,000 mark is pretty impressive. Equally so is the range of accessories on offer at local dealers. Depending on your chosen lifestyle, you can bolt on holders for, amongst other things, bicycles, skis and surfboards. There are also roof rails for your windsurfer and of course, a towing hitch for the pony club caravan. As usual with Toyota, the standard aftersales package is thorough. You get a three year or 60,000 mile warranty, plus a year's free membership of `Club Toyota`, which includes a roadside assistance service in UK and Europe.

### **Could I Live With One?**

The fact that the man in my life could quite happily live with a RAV4 certainly makes it a viable option for me. Where the previous version was very much a second - or third - car, in my view, this larger model could feasibly be the main family car.