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2011 Toyota Avalon

The 2011 Toyota Avalon mixes a new look with new technology and what Toyota calls simple, familiar pleasures.

Re-styled inside and out, the next Avalon will trickle into Toyota's top selling dealerships through the spring, with national availability by midsummer 2010. Toyota's largest sedan benefits from an infusion of practical features, including a standard rearview video monitor and an updated, easier to use navigation system. Yet the company says the guiding design principle was straightforward: The 2011 Avalon remains true to the idea that comfort is honest and uncomplicated.

This Avalon was designed at Toyota's Caltex studio in Newport Beach, California. Its calling card is jewel-like headlamp clusters connected by a wider, meatier grille with thick horizontal slats. The effect is similar to that adapted recently by Ford's styling studios, and particularly the current Ford Fusion. The Avalon's headlights feature separate light pipes for markers, high and low beams. HID lamps will be optional.

The front end flows into a broad, flat hood that widens the Avalon's appearance. In side view, the rocker panels are edgier than before, and there's more chrome trim. The taillights use LED elements, and all models have dual exhaust tips tucked under the bumper. All Avalons come with 17-inch alloy wheels, though those on the up-line Limited have a polished mirror finish.

The 2011 Avalon has been updated as thoroughly inside, with new materials and color combinations. Controls are large and evenly spaced. The new instrument panel uses Toyota's Optitron electro-luminescent gauges, with graduated white illumination and white pointers. They're some of the most readable and attractive dials anywhere. The steering wheel on all models features a full set of redundant controls for air conditioning, audio and communications.

Leather upholstery comes standard for the front seats. Dual-zone climate control is standard, too, with an easy-to-use interface, nine air-flow modes and a dust-pollen filter. The side doors have three stop or lock positions through their travel, as opposed to the conventional two stops. There are niceties such as a pneumatic door damper and bright illumination for the amply sized glovebox.

The new Avalon's rear seat is as roomy as ever, configured for three with standard reclining seatbacks and a rear-glass sunshade. Both features are rare in the Avalon's price range. The sunshade automatically lowers when the driver selects reverse, and lifts again when the shift lever returns to drive.

The standard rearview camera monitor is small, and imbedded in the rearview mirror, though the image projects on the big navigation screen when the Avalon is so equipped. The base audio system has nine speakers, standard XM satellite radio hardware, USB and 1/8-inch auxiliary connections for iPods or other audio devices, and Bluetooth connectivity for hands-free phone operation and music streaming. The audio upgrade is a JBL Premium Synthesis system with 12 speakers, 660 watts of power and a two-coil sub-woofer.

The optional navigation system has been updated with a higher-resolution touch screen and new software intended to simplify operation.

The 2011 Avalon engine-transmission package is unchanged from 2010: Toyota's 24-valve, 3.5-liter V6 with variable valve timing, and a six-speed automatic. Still, the combo delivers 268 horsepower, which is more than lively in this car, and a rational 20 mpg city, 29 highway, according to the EPA. The Avalon is rated as an Ultra Low Emission Vehicle (ULEV).

Avalon comes standard with seven airbags, including a front knee bag for the driver and head-protecting side curtains front and rear. Active safety features include Toyota's Vehicle Stability Control (VSC) and TRAC traction control system, with anti-lock brakes, Electronic Brake force Distribution (EBD) and Brake Assist. The TRAC and VSC functions can be disengaged if a driver needs to free the Avalon from mud or snow.

The 2011 Avalon will be available in two grades: standard (\$32,245 MSRP before destination charge) and Limited (\$35,485). Avalon Limited adds features, including an eight-way front passenger seat with lumbar support, driver's seat cushion extension, rain-sensing wipers, proximity key, ventilated front seats and the JBL audio upgrade.

Options are few beyond the navigation system, though the JBL Premium Synthesis audio is available on the standard Avalon.

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