

2014 Toyota Camry SE



Here it is, folks, the last of John's car stories. There is something about cars that makes them ideally suited to represent phases of life, like the songs that form the background to our youths. Behind this might be how the car's external form changes with the style of the day and, as Robert Persig put it, the "underlying form" of the evolving technology under the hood. These help us to mark time's passage. The last car of this story officially marks my passage into a middle-aged middle-class (lower end, for sure) guy: the 2014 Toyota Camry Sport Edition. This is the best car I have ever owned, and one of the few new cars I would recommend to anyone seeking an all-around good car for about any purpose.

Before I get into my obnoxious lovefest over the Camry, here are the things that could use some improvement. At risk of sounding like the Top Gear guys, the flappy paddle gearbox is useless. The hand paddles move along with the steering wheel which, combined with the leisurely steering ratio, quickly takes shifting control away from your hands during all but the most gentle of bends. If you want what Toyota calls "a sportier feel", use the manual gear change capability at the shifter. (Additionally, the computer will not let you screw up and shift too low.) Next comes the relatively minor irritation that the sound systems inputs are only set up for Apple devices and one cannot simply pop a generic mp3 player or Android into the USB port (so far as I know). I know, first world problems. Neither of these are the real problem with the Camry, though. The real annoying problem is the local Toyota service center. When I went from a brand new Prius to a certified pre-owned Camry, the reduction in social class was palpable. I'll save the story for another time (perhaps a car maintenance nightmare series), but in short my local service guys became condescending a-holes. Seriously, if you are on a warranty that requires periodic preventive maintenance to keep valid, read the fine print. In most cases your only requirement is to use Toyota parts. Otherwise, the upkeep can be done by you or a mechanic of your choice without invalidating the warranty.

Now for the good stuff. This Camry's body is a perfect combination of attractive and understated. I can drive it to high-end customer consultation without feeling like I showed up in a garbage truck. Just as easily, I can roll up to a Wendy's drive through without looking like an ascot-wearing douche. Appearances aside, this thing develops 178hp and 170ft-lbs of torque from a friggan 4-cylinder! That's more of both than came from my first piece of Detroit steel 8-cylinder. Despite the ample get up and go, there is surprisingly little torque steer unless you have one of the front wheels off the ground while accelerating strongly. (Don't ask how I know that.) The traction control system (which they finally gave an off switch to for getting out of snow drifts) allows me to corner like an insane person. On dry pavement, I took a 90 degree corner at 45 mph without touching the brakes, and stayed in my lane no problem. I suspect it could do it through about 60 mph without tragedy. On snow, I TRIED to drift it around a corner at 35 mph and it would not let me. I could feel the car brake the appropriate

wheel, gently nudging me through the corner with the front and back bumpers in the proper order whether I wanted to or not. The SE's ride isn't as bad as some people have said either, with the added bonus of Toyota's having removed the stupid body-stiffening struts that obstructed the trunk in earlier models.

I could go on about the great interior, terrific all-around view, road trip comfort, or legendary reliability of the Camry – but I'm running out of space here.