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Logic Over Love

A Sensible Compact Crossover That Wins With Practicality

By Derek Price
CARGAZING.COM

The 2026 Toyota Corolla Cross makes its case within the first few miles. It is easy to drive, unimposing and immediately familiar.

Nothing about it demands attention, but nothing trips you up either. That, in many ways, defines the experience.

On the road, the Corolla Cross behaves exactly like what it is: a Corolla raised a few inches off the ground. Steering is light and predictable, the suspension tuned for comfort over involvement. It feels calm around town and steady on the highway, even if it never feels eager.

The 2.0-liter four-cylinder engine does the job without



The 2026 Toyota Corolla Cross blends compact proportions with a simple, approachable crossover design.

AT A GLANCE

WHAT WAS TESTED?
2026 Toyota Corolla Cross XLE AWD (\$31,010). Options: Convenience package (\$1,250), JBL premium audio (\$800), premium paint (\$475), key gloves (\$20), alloy wheel locks (\$90), carpet floor mat and cargo mat (\$309). Price as tested (including \$1,350 destination charge): \$35,404

BY THE NUMBERS
Wheelbase: 103.9 in.
Length: 176.1 in.
Width: 71.9 in.
Height: 64.8 in.
Engine: 2.0-liter four cylinder (169 hp, 151 ft. lbs.)
Transmission: Continuously variable
MPG: 29 city, 31 highway

RATINGS

Style: 8
Performance: 5
Price: 9
Handling: 6
Ride: 6
Comfort: 6
Quality: 9
Overall: 7

WHY BUY IT?

The Corolla Cross delivers Toyota reliability, strong safety tech and useful cargo space at a price that makes long-term sense.

offers useful space for groceries, luggage or weekend gear. The wide opening and simple load floor make it easy to live with, which matters more than raw volume numbers.

Toyota's safety technology remains a standout. The Corolla Cross comes loaded with driver aids and active safety features that many competitors still charge extra for. It is a reassuring amount of tech for the money, especially for buyers prioritizing peace of mind.

That value equation is ultimately what defines the Corolla Cross. It is affordable, efficient and backed by Toyota's reputation for reliability. It does not stir emotion, but it inspires confidence.

I struggled to love it, much like the Corolla sedan itself. Yet I have no trouble recommending it. The Corolla Cross makes sense for buyers who want a dependable, easy-to-own small crossover without stretching their budget.

much flair. Acceleration is adequate for daily driving, but the engine note grows coarse when pushed. The continuously variable transmission does it no favors, stretching revs in a way that reminds you this car values efficiency over refinement.

That powertrain character fits the Corolla Cross' roots. This is not a crossover pretending to be sporty. It is honest about being simple and affordable, even if that means sounding a little rough when merging or climbing grades.

Inside, the cabin reinforces that message. The layout is straightforward and familiar, but it does not feel especially roomy. Despite the crossover body style, the space feels closer to a small sedan, just with a higher seating position.

Rear legroom is acceptable rather than generous, and the overall sense of airiness you might expect from an SUV is missing. For couples or small families, it works fine. If you regularly haul adults

in the back seat, there are roomier options in the segment.

Materials are serviceable but unremarkable. Plastics dominate, and soft-touch surfaces are limited to the places your hands rest most often. Nothing feels cheap in a durability sense, but nothing feels premium either. This is a car you buy to save money and headaches, plain and simple.

Where the Corolla Cross does surprise is technology. The large central touchscreen looks modern and responds quickly. Wireless smartphone connectivity works smoothly, and the system never feels laggy.

Some quirks remain. Finding the heated steering wheel button takes effort, tucked awkwardly low on the center console beneath the dash. It is an odd placement for a feature meant to be used quickly on cold mornings.

The cargo area, however, is a strong point. For its size and price, the Corolla Cross

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CARGAZING

Silent Strength

Upscale Three-Row Ioniq 9 Offers Comfort, Space, Surprising Polish

By **Derek Price**
CARGAZING.COM

The 2026 Hyundai Ioniq 9 makes a strong first impression before you even glance at a spec sheet.

It drives like a confident, well-sorted family hauler that just happens to be electric, which is exactly what Hyundai was aiming for as it positions this as its premium flagship.

Hyundai's EVs have been good for a while, but this one feels like the company stepping deeper into luxury territory. It pulls away with instant smoothness, and the dual-motor setup delivers the kind of quick, seamless acceleration that makes merging easy.

Around town, it responds immediately to the throttle and feels lighter than it looks. On the highway, it stays impressively quiet, tamping down wind and tire noise to a level that rivals some luxury brands.

Ride quality is another highlight. It's cushy without being floaty, and it manages bumps in a way that keeps everyone content over long trips.

Even driven briskly, it holds its composure and feels secure, traits that matter more in a three-row SUV than outright speed. The 311-mile range on the Performance AWD model is competitive for something this large.

The interior is where



The Ioniq 9's bold, upright shape pairs clean lines with distinctive pixel lighting.

Hyundai's upscale ambitions really show. The materials feel soft and substantial, and the layout avoids the cold minimalism some EVs lean on.

Everything is logical and easy to reach. The center display responds quickly, and the digital cluster is clear and attractive.

Driver-assistance features are just as impressive. Highway Drive Assist centers the vehicle with minimal fuss, and on well-marked roads it can pilot itself with only light supervision.

It reduces fatigue on long drives and feels more natural than some competing systems that tug

at the wheel or ping-pong within lane lines.

Practicality is the Ioniq 9's biggest selling point. Three rows of seats and a wide, open cabin make it feel more like a living room on wheels than a typical crossover.

Adults can ride in the third row without complaint, and there's real cargo room with the seats folded. The flat floor frees up legroom in every direction, and the sliding console helps front-row passengers move around more easily.

This is the rare EV that truly works as a family vehicle instead of a statement piece.

Though the Ioniq 9 aims

at the luxury segment, its pricing pushes the boundary. My test vehicle rang up at \$77,540, and that included \$230 for carpeted floor mats. At that price, those should really be included. Hyundai is far from alone in charging for small items, but it still feels off for a nearly \$80,000 vehicle.

Charging is quick thanks to 800-volt architecture, and the standard NACS port gives it access to Tesla Superchargers. Hyundai building the Ioniq 9 in Georgia adds another advantage: it's positioned to qualify for federal tax incentives if they're ever reinstated, which could help

soften the sting of that sticker price.

Competition in the electric three-row segment is growing, but Hyundai makes its case with comfort, range and ease of use.

Some rivals offer flashier badges or more performance, yet the Ioniq 9's strength is how naturally it fits into daily life. It doesn't ask you to adapt to EV ownership as much as it blends into whatever routine you already have.

The Ioniq 9 feels like a family-first EV with genuine refinement. For buyers who want space, comfort and modern tech, it's one of the most well-rounded electric SUVs available.

AT A GLANCE

WHAT WAS TESTED?

2026 Hyundai Ioniq 9 AWD Performance Calligraphy (\$74,990). Options: Premium paint (\$500), carpeted floor mats (\$230), vehicle load adapter (\$220). Price as tested (including \$1,600 destination charge): \$77,540

BY THE NUMBERS

Wheelbase: 123.2 in.
Length: 199.2 in.
Width: 78 in.
Height: 70.5 in.
Power: Dual electric motors (422 combined hp)
Range: 311 miles
MPGe: 91 city, 79 highway

RATINGS

Style: 9
Performance: 9
Price: 4
Handling: 7
Ride: 8
Comfort: 8
Quality: 8
Overall: 9

WHY BUY IT?

The Ioniq 9 is a quiet, roomy, genuinely premium electric family SUV that feels effortless to live with.



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CARGAZING

Family Hauler Home Run

Hyundai's Big SUV Nails Comfort, Value and Road-Trip Duty

By Derek Price

CARGAZING.COM

The 2026 Hyundai Palisade doesn't try to impress you with gimmicks or grandstanding.

It simply goes about its business of being extremely good at almost everything a family SUV is supposed to do, and it does it so effortlessly that you barely notice how much ground it's covering.

It's quiet, relaxed and confidence-inspiring in a way that makes long drives feel shorter and daily errands feel easier. After a week with it over the holiday break, I found myself inventing reasons to go places.

Hyundai clearly understood the assignment with this redesign. The Palisade was already a sales hit, but this new version feels more self-assured, more premium and more polished.

It drives like a vehicle that knows it's good at its job and doesn't feel the need to prove anything.

On the road, the Palisade Hybrid Calligraphy is smooth and unbothered. The hybrid powertrain delivers plenty of low-end torque, which is what matters when you're merging onto highways or pulling away from stoplights with a full load of people and cargo.

No, it doesn't snap your



The all-new 2026 Hyundai Palisade features bold styling and a confident stance that signals its flagship status.

head back, and that's fine.

This is not a drag-strip SUV. It's a family transporter that prioritizes calm progress and efficiency.

The hybrid system feels well integrated, and the six-speed automatic fades into the background, which is the highest compliment I can give a transmission.

Fuel economy numbers in the high 20s are impressive for something this large, and they matter far more here than bragging rights about 0-to-60 times. Complaining about acceleration in a three-row family SUV feels like missing the point entirely.

Where the Palisade really shines is ride comfort. It's composed over rough pavement and settles into a relaxed highway rhythm

that makes it one of the best road-trip vehicles you can buy from a non-luxury brand.

Wind and road noise are minimal, and the overall driving experience feels expensive.

Inside, the Calligraphy trim delivers a cabin that genuinely feels upscale. The materials are excellent. The design is clean and modern, and everything feels thoughtfully laid out.

It's the kind of interior that makes passengers ask what brand it is, then raise an eyebrow when you say Hyundai.

The seats are supportive and comfortable, though if I'm being extremely picky, I'd ask for slightly softer padding. This is a minor nitpick in an otherwise

outstanding cabin, and most buyers will never give it a second thought.

Design-wise, the Palisade takes a few chances. The massive turn signals integrated into the front corners are bold and, at first glance, a little strange. I wasn't sure about them initially, but they grew on me quickly.

They're distinctive, work with the overall look and make the Palisade instantly recognizable. Looks are subjective, and in this case, I'm on board.

Technology is plentiful without feeling overwhelming. Controls are intuitive. Screens are clear and Hyundai continues to do a good job balancing touchscreens with physical buttons. This is a vehicle

designed to be used by real people in real life, not just admired in a showroom.

What really seals the deal is the value proposition. With transaction prices creeping north of \$50,000 across the market, a fully loaded hybrid Palisade at around \$60,000 feels almost reasonable.

Lower trims offer even stronger value, packing in features that would cost thousands more on luxury-brand competitors.

This redesign matters for Hyundai. The Palisade has cemented its place as far more than a bargain alternative.

It's a legitimate choice based on comfort, quality and execution, and it stands tall among the best vehicles in its class.

AT A GLANCE

WHAT WAS TESTED?

2026 Hyundai Palisade Hybrid Calligraphy AWD (\$58,780).
Options: Carpeted floor mats (\$245).
Price as tested (including \$1,600 destination charge): \$60,625

BY THE NUMBERS

Wheelbase: 116.9 in.
Length: 199.4 in.
Width: 78 in.
Height: 69.5 in.
Power: 2.5-liter four cylinder plus electric motors (total system output 329 hp, 339 ft. lbs.)
Transmission: Six-speed automatic
MPG: 29 city, 30 highway

RATINGS

Style: 9
Performance: 8
Price: 8
Handling: 7
Ride: 9
Comfort: 9
Quality: 8
Overall: 9

WHY BUY IT?

The redesigned Palisade delivers luxury-level comfort, excellent efficiency and standout value in a family-friendly package that makes everyday driving and long trips enjoyable.

CARGAZING

Rugged Utility Refined

Subaru's 2026 Forester Wilderness Balances Practicality With Adventure

By Derek Price
CARGAZING.COM

The Subaru Forester has long been a practical favorite. It's roomy, easy to see out of and confident in bad weather.

The new 2026 Forester Wilderness keeps all of that and adds a fresh layer of refinement and capability that makes it one of the most well-rounded small SUVs on sale.

After a week behind the wheel, it's clear Subaru hasn't tried to reinvent the Forester. Instead, it focused on making it a better version of itself.

The sixth-generation model feels sturdier, quieter and more cohesive, but it's still unmistakably a Forester: boxy, honest and built for real-world usefulness.

The Wilderness trim remains the most distinctive version, wearing black cladding, copper accents and all-terrain tires that lend it instant trail credibility.

With 9.3 inches of ground clearance, upgraded suspension tuning and Subaru's dual-mode X-MODE all-wheel-drive system, it's genuinely more capable off pavement than rivals like the Honda CR-V or Toyota RAV4 Adventure. It's not a hardcore off-roader, but it'll happily take on muddy access roads or snowed-in campsites.

On the road, the Forester



The 2026 Subaru Forester Wilderness stands taller with rugged tires, copper accents and 9.3 inches of ground clearance.

Wilderness is easygoing and composed. The suspension soaks up rough pavement gracefully, and the steering feels light yet accurate.

There's a reassuring solidity to the chassis, thanks to the latest Subaru Global Platform, which improves rigidity and keeps body motions well-controlled. Ride comfort is excellent, and road noise is low for a vehicle with aggressive tires.

The 2.5-liter four-cylinder engine delivers 180 horsepower and 178 pound-feet of torque, routed through a continuously variable trans-

mission (CVT). It's smooth and efficient but not quick.

Around town, it feels fine, but freeway merges and uphill passes reveal the powertrain's limits. The CVT simulates gear steps in its "Sport" mode, yet the lack of a traditional automatic transmission leaves the Wilderness feeling less responsive than it could be. A bit more power would unlock the chassis' full potential.

Fuel economy lands at 24 mpg in the city and 28 on the highway, fair numbers given its off-road gear and

higher stance.

Subaru's safety suite remains among the best in the business, with standard adaptive cruise control, lane centering, and automatic emergency steering. Visibility is exceptional, aided by generous glass and thin pillars — a rarity in modern SUVs.

Inside, the Wilderness trim features durable StarTex upholstery with copper stitching, easy-to-clean materials and an upright dashboard dominated by an 11.6-inch touchscreen.

Pricing for the Forester

Wilderness starts at \$38,385, and the tested example — optioned with navigation, a Harman Kardon audio system and a power tailgate — came to \$42,035. That's competitive for a fully equipped all-wheel-drive SUV that can tow up to 3,500 pounds and tackle genuine trails.

Subaru knows its audience well, and this latest Forester Wilderness hits the sweet spot between everyday comfort and outdoorsy confidence. It's not flashy, but it's deeply satisfying in how well it performs the tasks owners actually need it to do.

AT A GLANCE

WHAT WAS TESTED?

2026 Subaru Forester Wilderness (\$38,385). Options: Option Package 33 (\$2,200). Price as tested (including \$1,450 destination charge): \$42,035

BY THE NUMBERS

Wheelbase: 104.9 in.
Length: 182.9 in.
Width: 81.2 in.
Height: 69.3 in.
Engine: 2.5-liter four cylinder (180 hp, 178 lbs.-ft.)
Transmission: Continuously variable
MPG: 24 city, 28 highway

RATINGS

Style: 8
Performance: 7
Price: 8
Handling: 8
Ride: 6
Comfort: 7
Quality: 8
Overall: 7

WHY BUY IT?

The 2026 Forester delivers real-world versatility, unmatched visibility and authentic off-road capability in a comfortable, everyday-friendly package.



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