



Honda Pilot tops shootout among seven 3-row SUVs

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By James R. Healey, USA TODAY

CHICAGO — The family-size SUV market is an action movie.

New and freshened entries. Rising fuel economy. Zooming technology. Flashier styling. All of which would mean nothing if buyers weren't impressed. But they are.

Ford Explorers, Chevrolet Traverses, Honda Pilots and other three-row, family SUVs account for one of every seven new vehicles sold, reports J.D. Power and Associates, and buyers are paying a segment-record average transaction price of about \$33,000.

Our latest Shootout comparison is a face-off among seven vehicles in the heart of that family SUV market: 2012 [Chevrolet Traverse](#), [Dodge Durango](#), [Ford Explorer](#), [Honda Pilot](#) and [Kia Sorento](#) and the 2011 [Mazda CX-9](#) and [Toyota Highlander](#).

Our experts, plus the Koch family of [Hoffman Estates](#), Ill., tested and rated them for the **Cars.com/USA TODAY/MotorWeek \$37,000 Three-row SUV Shootout**— a mouthful that signifies we set a size range and sticker-price cap judged most relevant to the most buyers.

The top overall scorer in a close competition: Honda Pilot. Complete model-by-model ranking, scores, features, judges' reactions and some reasons why each one finished as it did, are above.

But here are some broad, overall impressions:

- \$37,000 doesn't go far in this crowd.

All the test SUVs were more than presentable, but not all had leather upholstery, for instance, or backup cameras. Only two had navigation systems (Explorer and Sorento). Only one (Pilot) had a rear entertainment system.

And none had all-wheel drive, which buyers in some regions would consider necessary. All could be equipped with all-wheel drive for a price: \$1,600 for the Pilot, for example.

The automakers supplied the test vehicles (except for Ford) and picked the combination of features and options they hoped would get the best mileage (10% of the total score) and make the

best impressions on the expert judges and the Kochs (pronounced "Cooks") — Tarek and Heather and their two children — picked to leaven the tests with a real family's input.

- Despite differences in size, weight and government fuel-economy ratings, all got about 24 miles per gallon on the highway in our real-world gas mileage test.

The results from our 230-mile open-road jaunt, in which each vehicle was rotated among the expert judges, were in a range from 23.5 mpg (Chevy Traverse) to 25.4 mpg (Kia Sorento).

The results are somewhat surprising. The mpg-winner Kia's vigorous V-6 encouraged heavy-footed driving.

The Chevy's large size and weight made it less frisky and provided no incentive for hard driving.

- Being new wasn't necessarily a trump card. Ford's redesigned Explorer rolled out in late 2010 as a 2011 model with new styling, features and drivetrain, yet tied the Sorento for lowest score.

Ford is selling Explorers two to three times as fast as a year ago, so buyers might dispute our ranking.

Honda Pilot, meanwhile, just got a very mild update — the exterior's hard to distinguish from the previous version unless they're side-by-side — and it finished first.

An aging member of the group, the Mazda CX-9 launched in 2007 and little changed since, came in at a respectable third.

- Though these family SUVs were similar in concept, there were significant differences in how they drove, how much cargo space they had, how many passengers they carried and how comfortably they did so.

Not one of the tested vehicles had the best of everything — no surprise to serious car shoppers. Buying one would be a heavy exercise in priorities and compromise.

The Koch family was a real find for this Shootout. They recently went through the hand-wringing shopping process and got a Buick Enclave SUV, mechanically similar to, and the same size as, the Chevy Traverse in the Shootout.

They were replacing a [Jeep Grand Cherokee](#) and, in addition to the Buick, they considered a [GMC Acadia](#), also a sibling of the Traverse, and the Toyota Highlander.

The recent shopping adventure meant they were past being wowed by new gadgetry or exotic options and could focus on roominess, key features and price. Almost.

Tarek Koch, 38, who works as an estimator for a big-job concrete contractor, kept remarking on the looks, leather and layout of the Durango.

And while he appreciated the value price of the Traverse, he said he had no second thoughts about having bought its upscale cousin, the Enclave, because "it's a lot quieter."

His wife, Heather, 38, works three days a week as an account executive at a finance company and is the shuttle service for the kids, McKenna, 8, and Bryson, 5.

She lasered in on how easy or difficult it was for the kids to use the second and third rows.

The family's ratings counted for 25% of a vehicle's total score. The combined votes of the auto journalists from USA TODAY, Cars.com and *MotorWeek* made up 65%. Fuel economy was the other 10%.

The 14.1% share of new vehicle sales this year by this group of large and midsize mainstream SUVs, most of them crossovers and not truck-based, is the highest since 14.2% in pre-recession 2007, says J.D. Power and Associates. And sales are gaining steam, so the group easily could overtake the 2007 share.

The average of \$32,833 that buyers are paying for large and midsize SUVs this year is not only a record, says J.D. Power, but well above the overall average for all vehicles of \$28,029.

MORE: [How the 7 SUVs stacked up](#)

Note: Two vehicles in this market, but not in the Shootout, are the Hyundai Veracruz (model being updated; Hyundai said the new one would not be ready in time) and Subaru Tribeca (Subaru said it had no Tribeca that fit the criteria in its fleet).