Navigating the Great Outdoors: Celebrating Forty Years of the Toyota 4Runner

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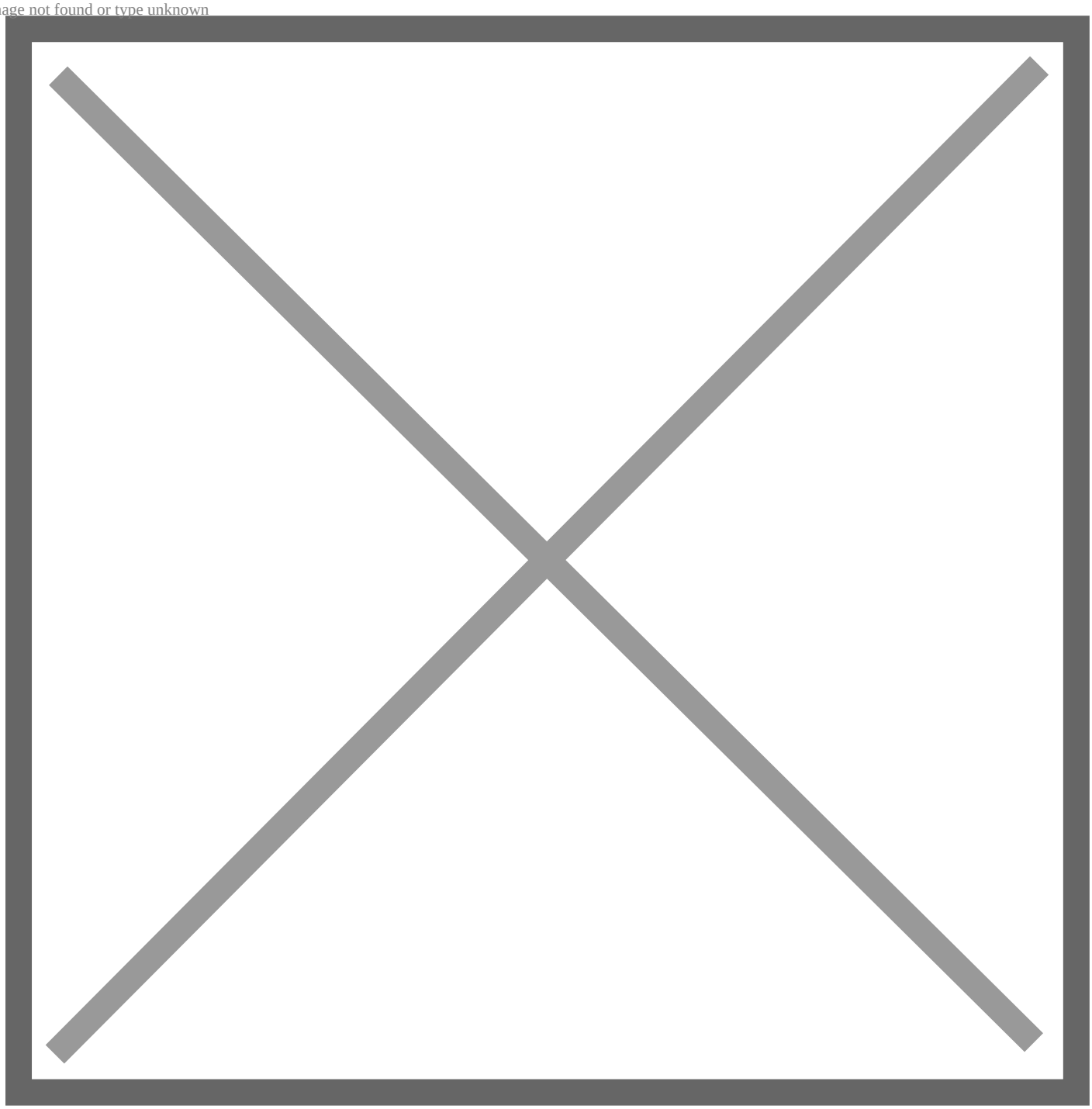

In celebration of the 40th anniversary of the 4Runner, Toyota delves into the history of the vehicle that has evolved into an off-road machine that many outdoor enthusiasts love. The 4Runner has been the vehicle of choice for four decades of family vacations, off-road adventures and priceless memories. And, after 4 million in total cumulative sales in countries all over the globe, the 4Runner is still going strong. Explore the history of 4Runner below:

Land Cruiser + Trekker = 4Runner

It started with an idea. It was 1979 and Toyota had just announced that the Land Cruiser FJ40 would no longer be imported to the U.S. But in Brookfield, Wisconsin — home of the Jack Safro Toyota dealership — families had a particular need for a vehicle that could facilitate camping and hunting trips which took place, by necessity, off-road. With the Land Cruiser no longer available in the U.S., the company decided to design something new.

Two years later, in 1981, Winnebago Industries partnered with Toyota to begin production on the Toyota Trekker — integrating a camper shell on a Toyota Hilux model. The Trekker met the needs of families looking for a vehicle for their hunting trips and weekend adventures, but — perhaps more importantly — it made the case to Toyota that there was a market for a reliable off-road and more affordable vehicle than a domestic truck. With the Land Cruiser and Trekker as inspiration, Toyota built on those designs and, in 1984, the 4Runner was born.

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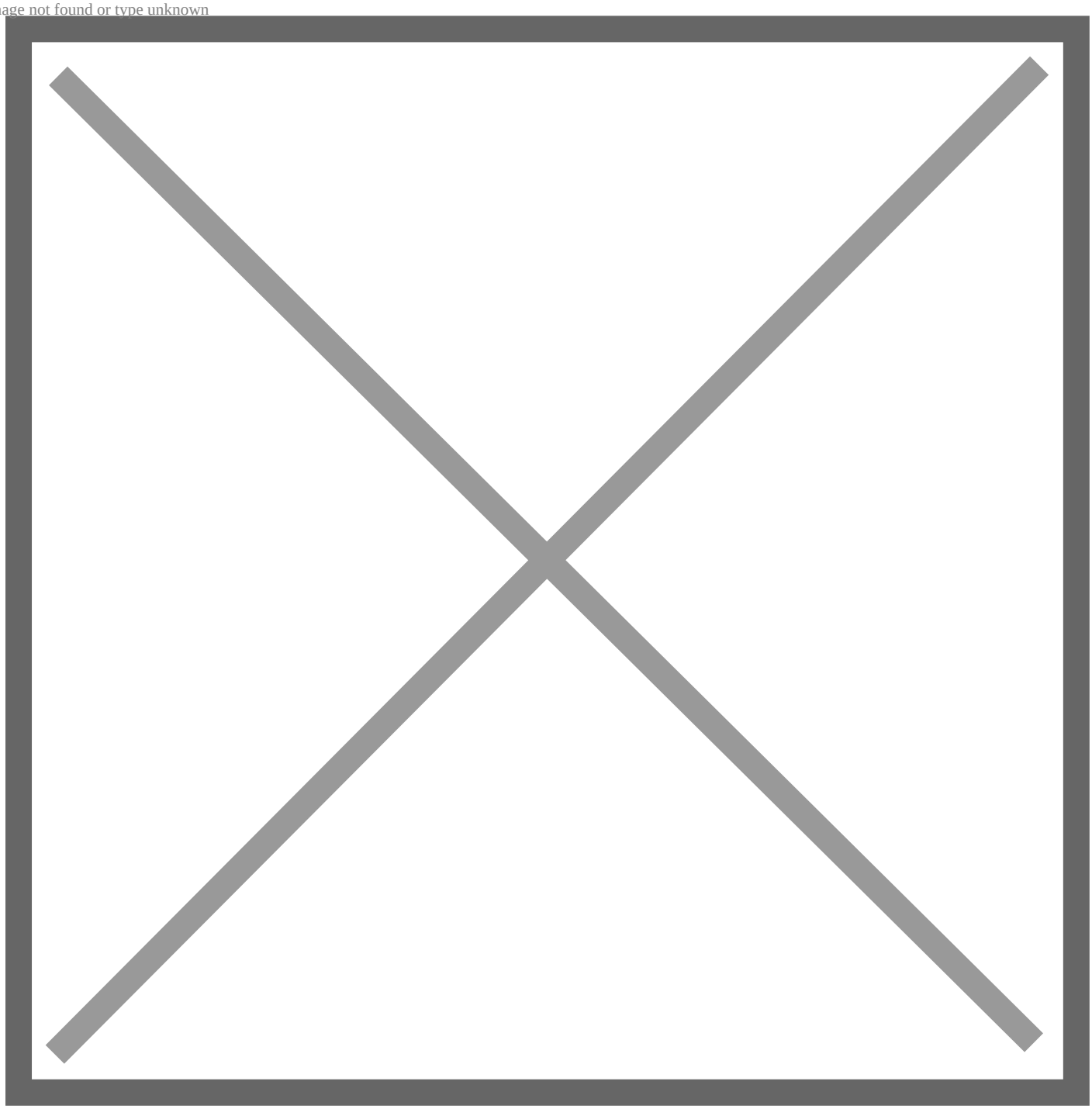


The SUV Sunrise

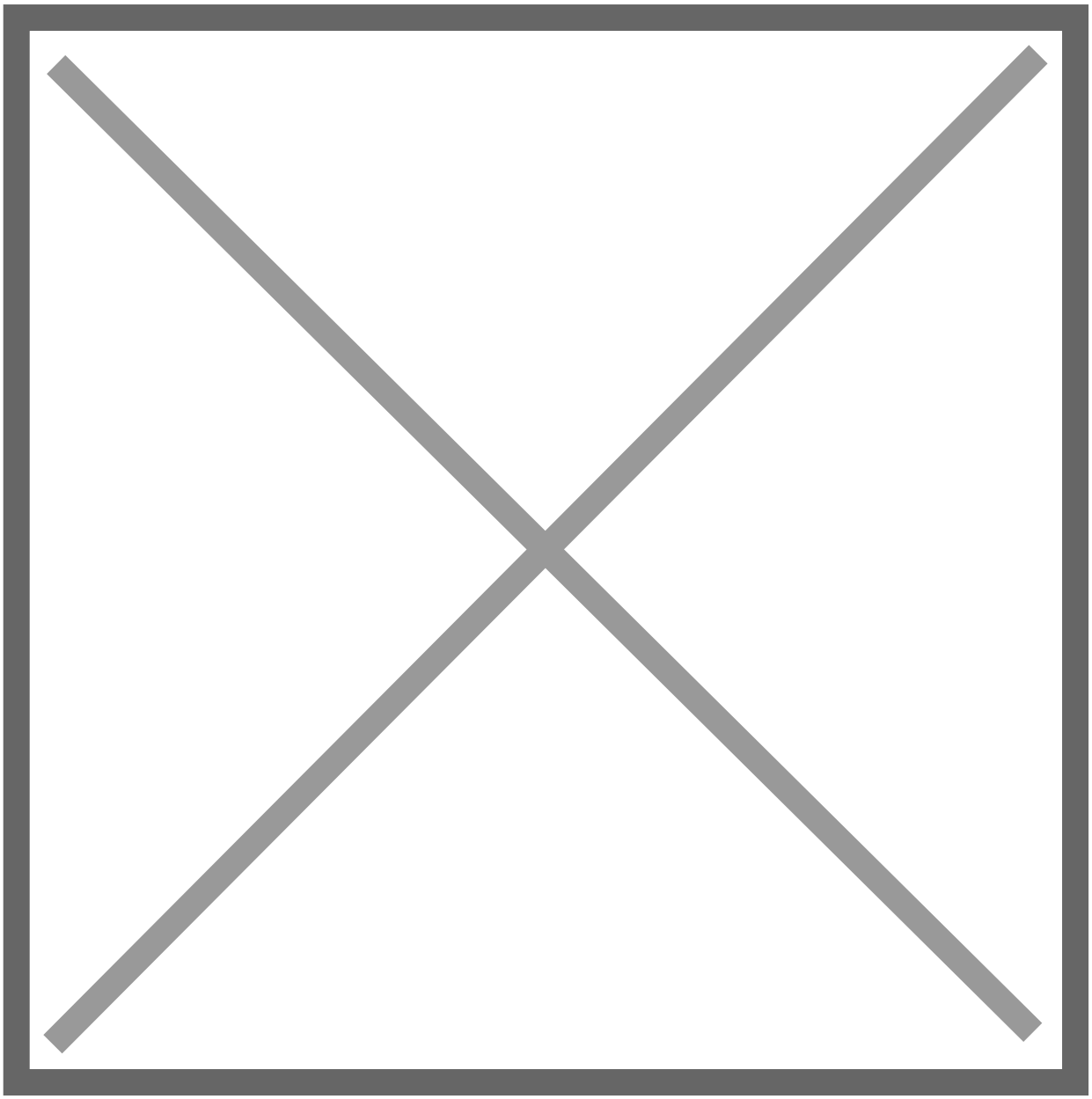
The SUV market was still young. In part, the name “4Runner” indicated its role as a harbinger of a new vehicle style. It was one that would combine the go-anywhere versatility of four-wheel drive with the comforts of a passenger car. At first there were only two seats in the front, none in the back, and the fiberglass top over the cargo area was easily removed for utility. The first iteration was thought of as little more than a pickup truck.

It wasn’t until the second generation, when three more seats and additional interior comforts were added, that the vehicle began to distinguish itself as the ideal choice for those seeking something between a car and a truck.

Through the 1989 model year, several other upgrades refined the 4Runner’s character — like more ground clearance and ride quality with Hi-Trac independent front suspension, a turbocharged engine on the SR5 models and changes to the headlights and striping. And then, in 1990, Toyota realized the 4Runner’s potential as something much more than a pickup truck, eliminating the removable top altogether and embracing a muscular and aggressive exterior style that would remain for years to come.

“They were simple, reliable and so easy to work on,” said Matt Hardesty, Toyota consultant. “Forty years later, the 4Runner is an iconic nameplate, just like Corolla and Land Cruiser.”

Through the year 2000, 4Runner experienced upgrades to safety features, such as side-impact protection, a third brake light and antilock brakes, as well as design and mechanical enhancements, such as a redesigned front bumper, valence cover, grille, a stiffer and longer chassis, and multiple engine options. But, as the new millennium turned, Toyota saw a need to push the technological boundaries even further.



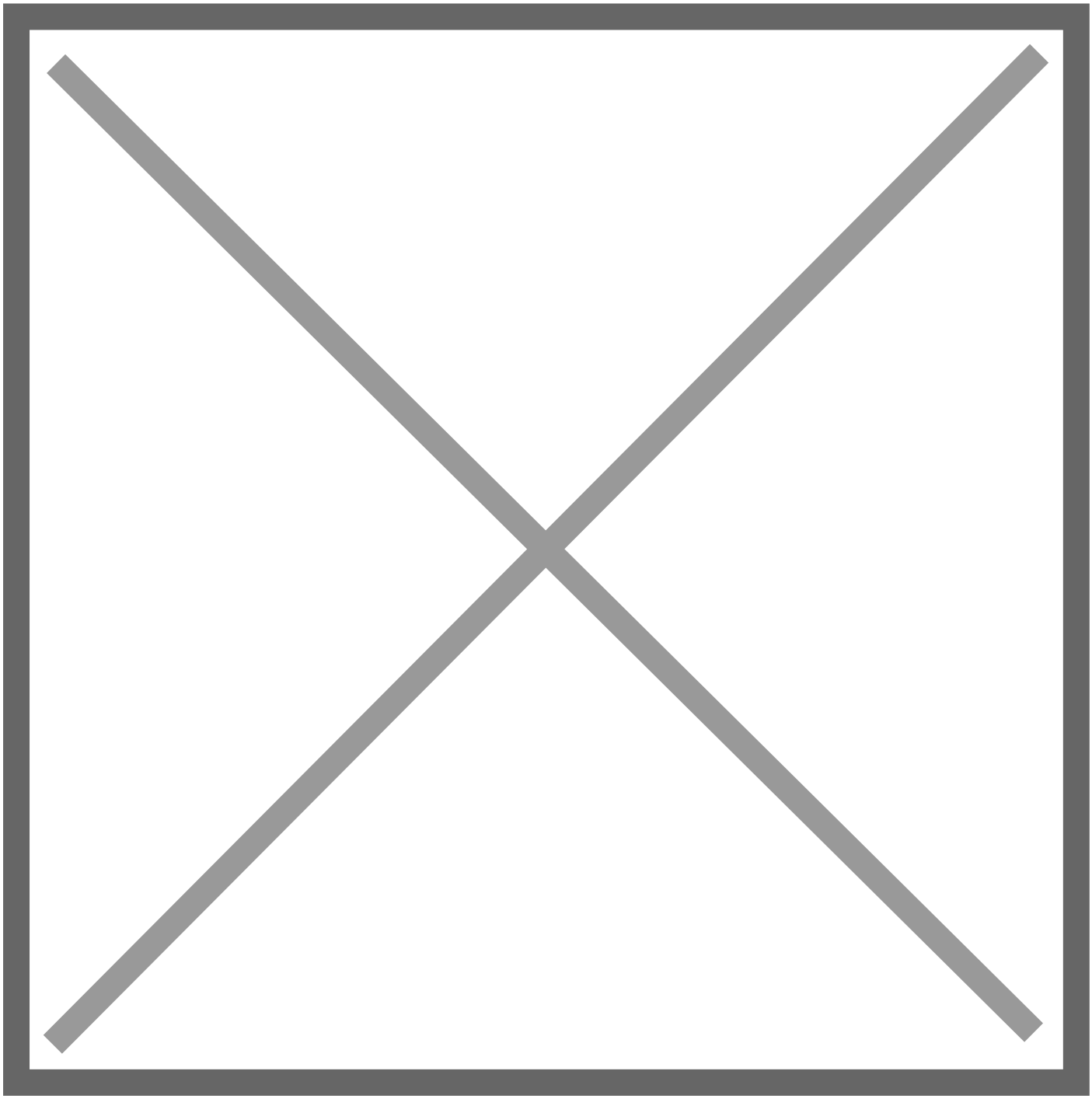
A New Breed 4 a New Era

The year 2000 came and went without a hiccup and the world understood that technology — in all its forms — would become increasingly more profound. The 4Runner entered the decade with a 2001 model that hosted a plethora of upgrades. All models would be equipped with an automatic transmission. Vehicle Skid Control with traction control was added. And, multi-mode 4WD and a 2WD/4WD selector switch also came aboard.

The next year, Toyota introduced its first all-aluminum engine, which delivered better-than-ever power output with much less weight. And, in 2003, 4Runner began incorporating Torsen® torque-sensing limited-slip differential, which helps provide additional traction, when needed, during off-road driving. Hill-Start Assist Control and Downhill Assist Control were next, also included as standard.

By 2009, 4Runner was being offered in two new packages: the Trail Edition and the Urban Runner, both with unique offerings. Enhanced performance with Active Traction Control and Bilstein® shock absorbers — for bumpy terrain — was accompanied by a digitized interior that featured iPod® capability, Bluetooth® connectivity and a detachable TomTom® personal navigation unit.

Despite the tech advances, 4Runner kept its soul as an off-road champ. And that year, in 2009, it would be put to the ultimate endurance test.



A Real Challenge

The “4Runner” name wasn’t only a reference to its role at the dawn of the SUV era. It also resembles a word used by desert racers of the legendary Baja 500 and Baja 1000. “Pre-runners” were the more comfortable, modified trucks racers used to scout the 500-plus-mile races through rough Mexican terrain.

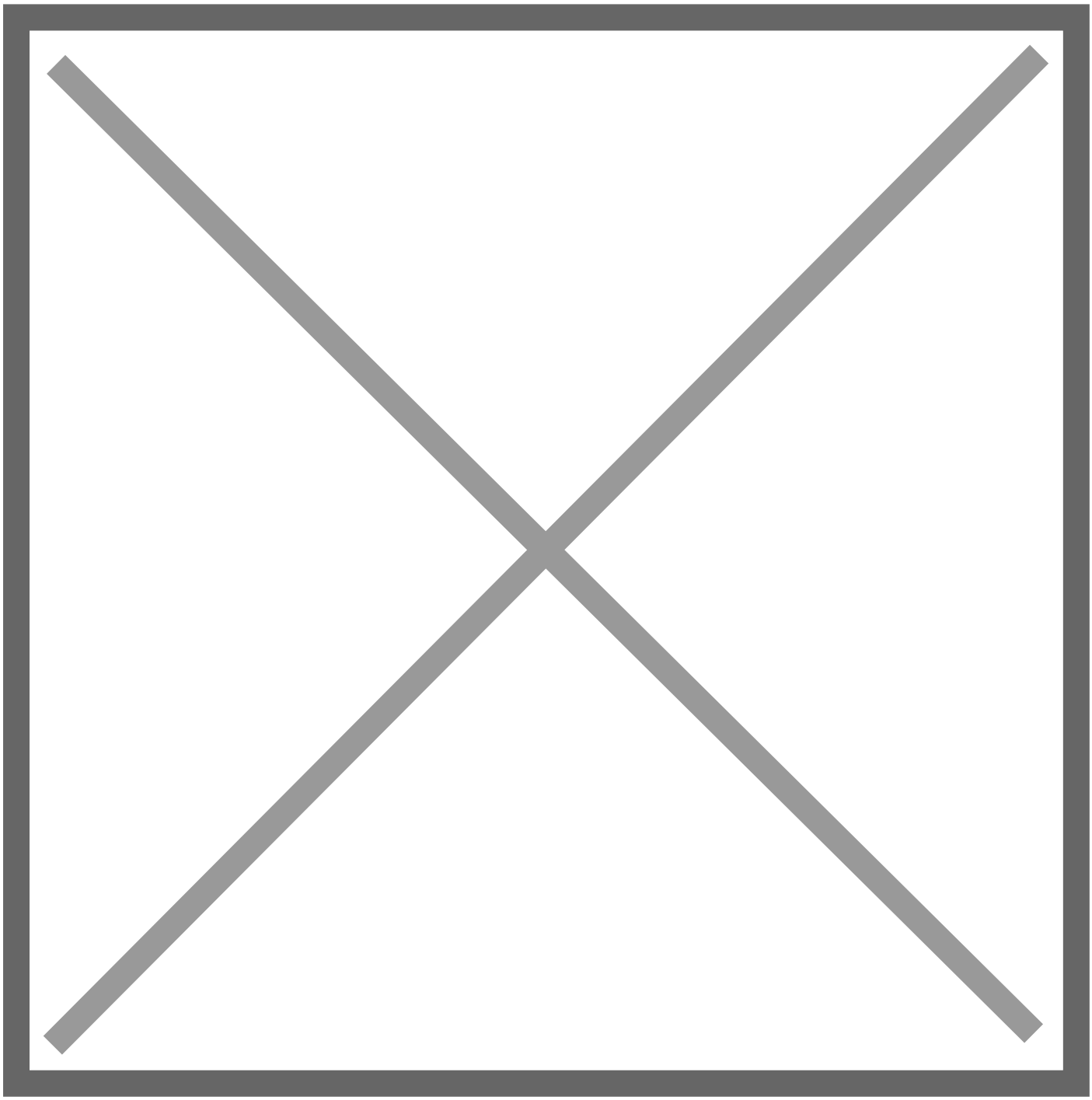
“Race organizers usually released a new course map a few weeks before each year’s race,” says Paul Williamsen, product education manager at Lexus College, “and the top racers wanted to be able to pre-run the whole course in a truck that was more comfortable, more reliable and less expensive than their race truck.”

With comforts like air conditioning and roll-up windows, pre-runners were ideal for getting a feel for the course without the grueling heat and sand. But, in 2009, the 4Runner would become more than a scout for the Baja 1000 when it was entered into the competition itself.

Toyota Chief Engineer Akio Nishimura wanted a real challenge. When he and a team of engineers took the new 4Runner to the Toyota Arizona Proving Ground (TAPG), they came back with no problems to report. But Nishimura knew that no issues meant no improvements, and he left Arizona with a resolve to put 4Runner through the ringer — something the Baja 1000 could surely do. On his insistence and an impossibly tight time frame of just two months, the Toyota team built a 4Runner stripped of unnecessary weight and excess interior features, loaded the vehicle with emergency supplies and readied their driving roster and 40-person support team.

On Friday morning, November 20, 2009, 4Runner started on a brutal 1,000-kilometer (about 621 miles) race that would take more than a day and a half to complete. It conquered thousands of feet in elevation and terrains from the murky and sludgy to the rocky and dry, and it averaged almost 30 miles per hour through the Baja Desert. In the end, 4Runner would finish second in its class by a remarkable eight minutes — and more than half an hour faster than third place. Nishimura got the challenge he wanted – the 2009 4Runner was a success.

The decade that followed saw the 4Runner equipped with available features like Toyota Entune Services, which featured email and text-to-speech, as well as a host of mobile apps like OpenTable® and Pandora®. A major redesign saw Toyota double down on a more rugged exterior (with a new grille and available chrome-finished trims) and a more refined interior (with available SofTex®-trimmed power seats and added space). Today, as 4Runner drivers call on Siri® for GPS directions, they might forget they’re doing it from the same SUV that completed the world’s most notorious desert trail.



40 Years of Reliability

Whether it’s a trip from Long Island to Manhattan or a rugged trek through the Mexican desert, reliability and durability remain the 4Runner’s most notable abilities.

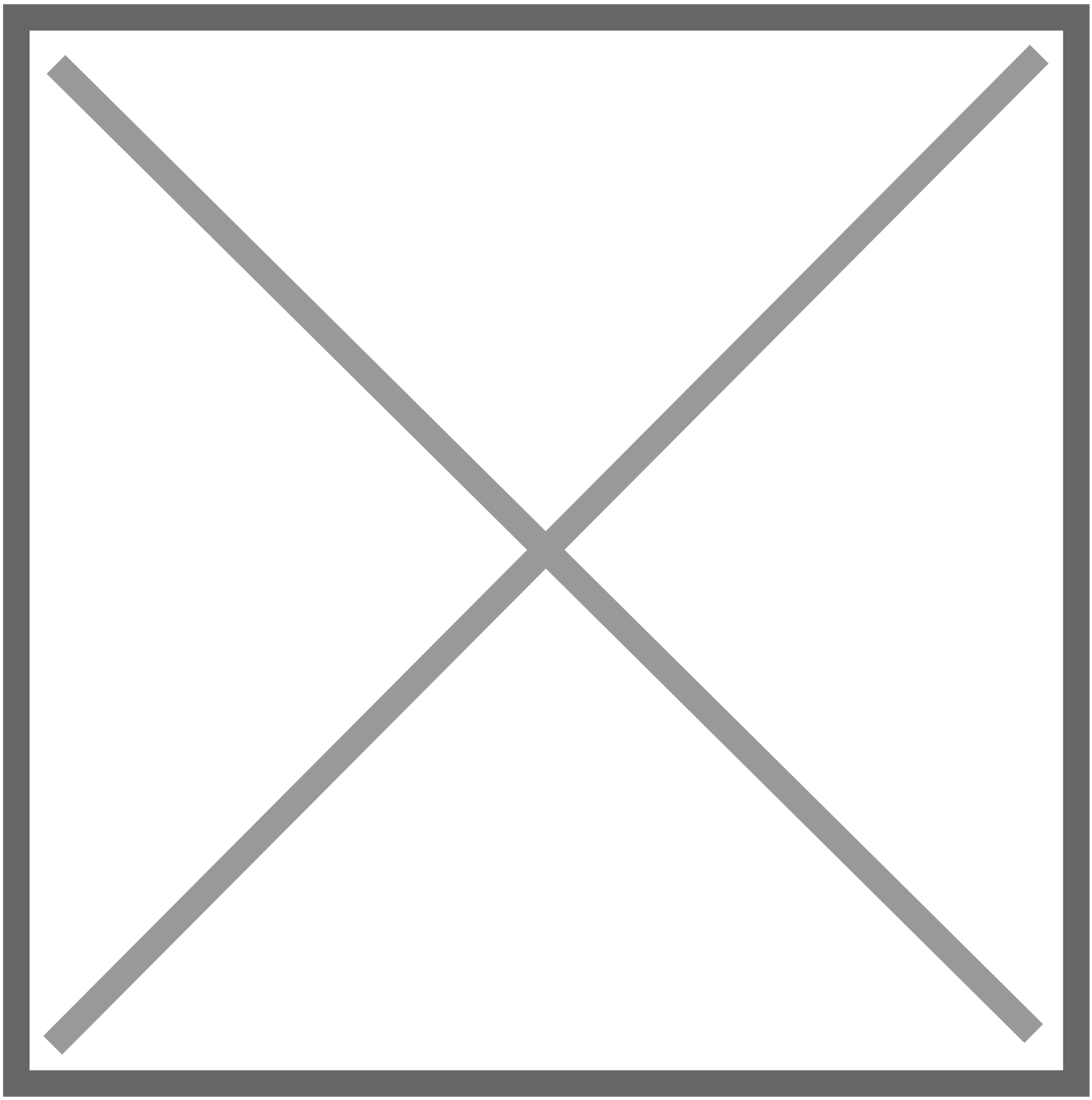
For as much as the 4Runner has changed, in many ways it remains the same. Initial engineering choices, like a strong and rugged frame, help depart it from its competition and maintain the character of the vehicle that so many have come to love. The rigidity of the body and stiffness of the chassis provide stability and give drivers

confidence in their connection to the road.

Along the way, 4Runner won multiple J.D. Power's "Best Compact SUV in Initial Quality" and "Best Compact SUV in Customer Satisfaction" awards. It was recommended by Consumer Guide five times and acknowledged by Kelley Blue Book for "Best Overall Value" and "Best Resale Value." Just last year, it was ranked top five in an iSeeCars.com study of longest-lasting cars, trucks and SUVs.

"A lot of that durability comes from a simple fundamental approach to design and engineering," according to Ryan Bray, vehicle planning senior analyst at Toyota. "Produce something that works well the first time, then continue to improve and perfect it. This is the Japanese fundamental known as *kaizen*."

But while Toyota respects the SUV's storied history, it sets its sights forward. After all, 4Runner is far from done.



4Runner Today and Tomorrow

Even after 40 years, the 4Runner sells more today than it ever has. The current model edition is available in numerous models for various needs. There are the SR5 and SR5 Premium models, which combine the comfort of an urban SUV with the ability to venture onto the trails. The TRD Sport adds X-REAS Sport Enhancement Suspension for more confidence on challenging terrain, and the Trail Special Edition takes trail comfort seriously with a cargo basket and removable 40-quart cooler. For off-road fanatics, the TRD Off-Road and Off-Road Premium add Crawl Control (CRAWL) and locking rear differential. And, for a higher-end interior

experience, the Limited model adds dual-zone climate control and leather-trimmed seats. Finally, the TRD Pro ensures that no terrain is off-limits with TRD FOX® high-performance shocks and TRD-tuned front springs.

A lot has changed in 40 years, but one thing remains the same as day one: The Toyota 4Runner delivers adventure. Drivers of many generations and different experience levels have taken their 4Runners onto the path less traveled, seen something new and experienced the freedom of life outdoors.

Decades in, the future of 4Runner looks as bright as ever. And, as that next 4Runner rolls off the lot — perhaps in Brookfield, Wisconsin — the only sure thing is that new memories yearn to be formed.