

# KHAASBAAT

A PUBLICATION FOR INDIAN AMERICANS IN FLORIDA

APRIL 2026

WWW.KHAASBAAT.COM

EDITOR@KHAASBAAT.COM

813-758-1786

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## A GRAND HOMECOMING IN THE HEART OF FLORIDA:

### 2026 UNITED GUJARATI CONVENTION MAY 22-25 IN ORLANDO

The Gujarati diaspora across North America is preparing for a historic gathering. This Memorial Day weekend, from May 22-25, the city of Orlando will transform into a "Mini Gujarat." The Federation of Gujarati Associations of USA (FOGAUSA) has opened registration ([www.FOGAUSA.org](http://www.FOGAUSA.org)) for the highly anticipated 2026 United Gujarati Convention, promising a four-day extravaganza of culture, commerce and community. *Cont'd on page 10*



### 'ECHOES OF US'

SWEEPS ALL 3 MAJOR SHORT FILM AWARDS

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# WHO'S WHO

Khaas Baat is a monthly publication that has been in circulation since August 2004. Issues are direct mailed to subscribers and also are available at South Asian grocery stores and restaurants. It presents exclusive, informative and relevant news about the Indian American community in Florida to its readers.

**EDITOR/PUBLISHER: NITISH S. RELE, M.A. IN JOURNALISM**  
**ASSOCIATE EDITOR: SHEPHALI J. RELE, M.A. IN JOURNALISM**  
**CREATIVE DIRECTOR: TIM LANCASTER**

**Khaas Baat, 8312 Windsor Bluff Drive, Tampa, FL 33647**  
**Phone: 813-758-0518 • e-mail: editor@khaasbaat.com**

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## E V E N T S

### EVENTS

#### TAMPA/SEFFNER/ST. PETERSBURG/CLEARWATER

**APRIL 1: GSTB SENIOR DAY;** organized by Gujarati Samaj of Tampa Bay; India Cultural Center, 5511 Lynn Road, Tampa; 10:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; \$10 for GSTB members, \$15 for non-members; lunch and entertainment; for any questions, text (813) 476-1867.

**APRIL 4: BAISAKHI MELA;** evening of dinner, dance, music, entertainment organized by Punjabi Association of America, Tampa Bay area; 6:30 p.m.; India Cultural Center, 5511 Lynn Road, Tampa; \$108 per person; email punjabitampa@gmail.com

**APRIL 4: GRAND CARNATIC VOCAL CONCERT;** presented by Swaralaya; singer Vidushi Spoorthi Rao will be accompanied by S. Hariharan on mridangam and Vishwas Hari on mandolin; Hindu Temple of Florida Community Hall, 5509 Lynn Road, Tampa; 10:30 a.m.; for more information, email swaralayaoftampa@gmail.com

**APRIL 4: DR. PAL'S ENGLISH COMEDY "MEDCOM;"** Leto High School, 4409 W. Sligh Ave., Tampa; 6 p.m.; for tickets, other information, email sakthiyogalaya@gmail.com

**APRIL 11: "CHANDU CHAKDOLE CHADYO;"** Gujarati comedy play presented by Jalsa Beats and VIP Circle; Leto High School, 4409 W. Sligh Ave., Tampa; tickets start at \$30; 5:30 p.m.; call Mahesh Patel at (321) 347-7781.

**APRIL 11: "DANCE FLORIDA DANCE;"** presented by Srigandha Kannada Koota Florida; open to all dance competition and community festival; India Cultural Center, 5511 Lynn Road, Tampa; 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; \$10 entry; email communication@srigandhafl.org

**APRIL 12: "HALLO PATEL BHAI NI JAAN MA;"** comedy play presented by Gujarati Samaj of Tampa Bay; India Cultural Center, 5511 Lynn Road, Tampa; 7:30 p.m.; free for samaj members, \$25 non-members; for information, visit www.gujaratisamajtampabay.com

### SIGNIFICANT DATE

#### APRIL 14: BAISAKHI

**APRIL 12: GUDI PADWA – MAHARASHTRIAN NEW YEAR;** organized by Maayboli Melawa Tampa Bay (MMTB); cultural and Marathi shala (school) student performances, Bollywood Mirch Masala dance presentation by Manasi Arts, N.J., Maharashtrian lunch; HCC Auditorium, Brandon, 10451 Nancy Watkins Drive, Tampa; 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.; to register, visit <https://www.mmtbusa.org/>

**APRIL 14: HANUMAN CHALISA;** second Tuesday of month; Vishnu Mandir Tampa, 5803 Lynn Road; 7 to 9 p.m.; for information, call Deo Gajadhar at (813) 817-9714.

**APRIL 15: ICC SENIORS GET-TOGETHER;** India Cultural Center, 5511 Lynn Road, Tampa; 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.; free seminar, lunch and entertainment; only for 65 years and older; for information, text email address along with your name to Bhikhu Nayi at (631) 560-2718 to receive details about seniors gathering every month; or call Mahesh Modha at (813) 476-1540.

**APRIL 19: "BAD BOYS;"** Record A Hit Entertainment presents Chunky Panday, Shakti Kapoor and Gulshan Grover live on stage; Chamberlain High School, 9401 N. Blvd., Tampa; 6 p.m.; tickets start at \$49; call Bhavik Modi at (813) 557-4555.

**APRIL 19: CELEBRATING MOHANLAL WITH STEPHEN DEVASSY;** Sacred Heart Knanya Catholic Community Center, 2620 Washington Road, Valrico; 5:30 p.m.; call Tomy at (813) 750-5008.

#### BARTOW/LAKELAND/WINTER HAVEN

**APRIL 5: 17TH ANNUAL PICNIC;** organized by Charotar Patidar of Florida; Mary Holland Park, 2015 Shumate Drive, Bartow; starts at 10 a.m.; food, games, live, music; call Jayesh Patel at (407) 460-2020.

*Cont'd on page 6*

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### April 2026 Events

**Wednesday, April 1 (6:00-8:00 PM)**  
Hanuman Jayanti  
Group Hanuman Chalisa Path

**Sunday, April 5 (6:00-8:00 PM)**  
Sankashti Chaturthi  
Group Ganesh Havan  
(Only if minimum 5 sponsors)

**Sunday, April 5 (4:00-6:00 PM)**  
Gujarati Bhajan  
(Prasad will be served after Aarti)

**Monday, April 13 (8:00 PM)**  
Varudhini Ekadashi  
Pooja & Aarti

**Tuesday, April 14 (6:30-8:00 PM)**  
Pradosh Pooja  
Group Shiv Pooja

**Sunday, April 19 (11:00 AM-1:00 PM)**  
Akshay Triliya  
Shree Jagannath Bhajan &  
Shree Jagannath Ratha Pujan  
(Prasad will be served after Aarti)

**Sunday, April 26 (5:00-6:00 PM)**  
Shree Jhulelal Bhajan Kirtan Aarti

**Monday, April 27 (8:00 PM)**  
Mohini Ekadashi  
Pooja & Aarti

### Weekly Events

**EVERY MONDAY - 6:30 PM**  
• SHIV ABHISHEK AND PUJA

**EVERY TUESDAY - 7:00 PM**  
• SUNDERKAND PATH  
• HANUMAN CHALISA

**EVERY THURSDAY - 7:00 PM**  
• ALL SADGURU & SHIRDI SAI BABA  
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## IS AGING PROGRAM DRIVEN OR DAMAGE DRIVEN?

By DR. VENKIT IYER, MD, FACS



This debate has been central to gerontology for many years. Is aging destiny and God's will or is it something we can control and modify?

Program-driven theory suggests that aging follows a biological timetable, possibly regulated by genes, much like growth and development. It says that all living creatures have preprogrammed DNA with pre-determined timeline. Even epic stories with reincarnations of God state that it is time for them to leave, having accomplished their mission.

In contrast, the damage-driven theory posits that aging results from the gradual accumulation of cellular and molecular damage over time, caused by environmental factors, metabolic processes, and imperfect repair mechanisms. Much of this is our own doing and by modifying our lifestyle we can live longer and healthier.

Program-driven theory opine that lifespan is already etched in the genes as we are born. A house fly lives only 35 days, dogs live for 15-20 years, horses live for 30-40 years, a sequoia tree lives for 2000 years. No human has lived beyond 122 years. Everyone is destined to die. There appears to be biological constraints beyond these age limits, even with maximum care and support.

One consideration is their reproductive ages. Innate biology of all living beings is that they reproduce. Once the reproductive function is over, the purpose of existence is completed and slowly the DNA starts to deteriorate. One can observe this in plants, insects and animals also. In other words, if humans are to live longer than 120 years, their reproductive capacity should be extended to 60 or 70 years of age, as is noted among whales that live for 200 years.

Damage-driven theory has much more evidence to show, as science has progressed. People are living longer. Life expectancy of all humans has doubled in last 100 years. This has to do with control of infections, tests for early diagnosis of medical problems, wonderful medications and advanced surgical or interventional procedures. Many disorders that were considered as fatal in the past are now being cured. We have better public health measures, vaccinations, and environmental control. Humans with their intellect are better protecting themselves from variety of damages compared to all other animals.

But damages are happening constantly inside the cells at molecular level and repairs are also being carried out. As the damages are overwhelming the system, toxins accumulate slowly, DNA damages occur and apoptosis and cell death occurs.

Studies of cellular function have given us better information about ways to increase longevity and reduce chronic illnesses.

Mitochondria are the power houses that control energy mechanism. It converts glucose to ATP providing energy for the body. Too much supply of glucose overburdens and strains the mitochondria. This leads to conversion of excess glucose to fats, and excess secretion of ineffective insulin or insulin resistance, resulting in type 2 diabetes mellitus, obesity, atherosclerosis, liver and heart problems. Certain diet components can support or strain the mitochondria. Hence, a healthy diet is necessary for longevity and good health.

Mitochondria in certain organs such as heart and brain are healthier since they are made to work constantly. Same should apply to the skeletal muscles also. In other words, regular exercise wards off various disorders and increases longevity. Other lifestyle measures such as adequate sleep, stress reduction and avoidance of risky substances are useful measures.

Besides mitochondria, there are several other organelles in the cells that affect cellular longevity. One such factor inside the cell is the telomere. It is the very end of the double stranded DNA molecule, which replicates itself to keep the strand alive and active. When the last molecule fails to replicate, the entire DNA strand tends to break up and leads to cell death. Telomerase is an enzyme that keeps the telomere active. Other agents affecting the longevity are stem cell renewal, lysosomes and autophagy, proteo-stasis machinery and immune regulation.

Lifestyle habits of exercise, meditation, happiness, stress reduction and diet can promote cellular health in various ways. All the intracellular functions are interconnected, which explains why one physical or mental health issue can affect the whole body.

Most scientists now believe that aging is influenced by a combination of both programmed genetic factors and the cumulative effects of damage, making it a complex interplay rather than a process governed solely by one mechanism. The old aphorisms are valid still – God helps those who help themselves or half of it is your efforts and the other half is God's will.

**Dr. Venkit S. Iyer, MD, FACS, is a retired general and vascular surgeon. He has authored six books: "Decision making in clinical surgery" first and second editions; "Aging well and reaching beyond," "The Clinic," "Geriatrics Handbook" and "Iyer's story book for children." They are available through Amazon or from the author. His website [venkitiyer.com](http://venkitiyer.com) has necessary links and contact information.**

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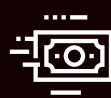
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## MAJOR PROGRESS FOR INDIAN EB-2 AND EB-3 APPLICANTS: MARCH AND APRIL VISA BULLETINS SIGNAL A TURNING POINT

By **BUCHANAN ATTORNEYS KHUSHBU PATEL and DILIP PATEL**



In a remarkable sequence of developments, the U.S. Department of State's March and April 2026 Visa Bulletin has marked a substantial shift for Indian immigration applicants in the employment-based categories — particularly for those waiting in the EB-2 and EB-3 visa classes. The movement in visa dates over recent months signals a promising trend, bringing renewed hope and strategic opportunities for thousands of Indian professionals seeking permanent residency.

### A Historic Leap in Visa Dates

The March 2026 Visa Bulletin initially stunned the community with an approximately 11-month advancement for EB-2 India, moving the filing dates forward significantly. Traditionally, Indian EB-2 movement has been slow, often progressing just by weeks or months — if at all — making this leap a notable deviation from recent trends.

Building on this momentum, the April 2026 Visa Bulletin further accelerated progress. The Dates for Filing chart now shows EB-2 and EB-3 India at Jan. 15, 2015. This is a remarkable increase from the previous filing date of Nov. 1, 2014, in the March bulletin — over two months of movement in just one update. Such a leap is rare and indicates a potential clearing of the backlog, or at least a significant easing, in these categories.

More importantly, the Final Action Dates have also moved forward, with EB-2 India now at July 15, 2014 — a roughly 10-month jump from the previous position of September 2013 in the March 2026 bulletin. This substantial progress suggests that visa availability for Indian EB-2 applicants is improving at a notable pace.

### What Does This Mean for Applicants?

For Indian professionals waiting in these categories, this is a critical moment. The advancement in the Dates for Filing means many eligible applicants can now file their Adjustment of Status (Form I-485) sooner than previously possible. Early filing allows individuals to secure employment authorization (EAD), advance parole travel privileges, and take concrete steps toward permanent residency — all while their applications are pending.

### Why the Sudden Movement?

The acceleration in visa dates results from the same mechanics that have historically influenced Indian EB-2 backlogs — namely, the utilization of unused visa numbers from other categories and countries. When demand in family-based categories declines or visa numbers are reallocated, the spill-over benefits employment-based categories, especially for countries like India with long-standing backlogs.

### Strategic Next Steps

While this progress is encouraging, experts advise applicants to approach with a balanced perspective. Future visa bulletins could slow down again, so preparation is key.

Applicants should gather all necessary documentation — medical exams, employment verification, financial evidence, and dependent paperwork — so they are ready to file as soon as their priority date is current.

Recommendations for Applicants:

- **Check Your Priority Date:** Confirm whether your date is now current or approaching.
- **If the priority date is current, gather documentation:** medical exams, employer letters, financial statements, and dependent information.
- **Consult an Immigration Attorney:** Ensure your application is complete and timely.
- **Stay Informed:** Follow upcoming visa bulletins and official announcements closely.

### Final Thoughts: Progress with Caution

While these developments are promising, they do not mean the backlog has vanished nor that all Indian applicants will receive green cards immediately. However, they do mark a critical momentum — one that offers a tangible window of opportunity for many waiting in line.

The key now is swift action, thorough preparation, and continued vigilance. As the immigration community celebrates this momentum, policymakers and advocates will be watching closely to see if this positive trend sustains.

For Indian EB-2 and EB-3 applicants, this is more than just movement on a chart — it is a sign of progress, and an invitation to act strategically in pursuit of permanent residency.

**Dilip Patel of Buchanan Ingersoll & Rooney PC, a board-certified expert on immigration law, can be reached at (813) 222-1120 or email [dilip.patel@bipc.com](mailto:dilip.patel@bipc.com)**

## EVENTS

*Cont'd from page 2*

### ORLANDO/CASSELBERRY/KISSIMMEE

**APRIL 5: "HALLO PATEL BHAJI NI JAAN MA;"** comedy play presented by Gujarati Society of Central Florida; Olympia High School, 4301 S. Apopka Vineland Road, Orlando; 6 p.m.; \$20 members, \$25 non-members; call Kirit Patel at (689) 222-5185.

**APRIL 18: "DIL SE;"** presented by Lavana School of Dance; Tohopekaliga High School, 3675 Boggy Creek Road, Kissimmee; 5 p.m.; \$15; call (407) 272-2124.

**APRIL 25: INDIAFEST;** organized by the Hindu Society of Central Florida; HSCF grounds, 1994 Lake Drive, Casselberry; 11 a.m. to 6:30 p.m.; free admission, \$10 parking; for information, visit [www.orlandohindutemple.org](http://www.orlandohindutemple.org)

**MAY 22-25: UNITED GUJARATI CONVENTION 2026;** organized by Federation of Gujarati Associations of USA (FOGAUSA) and local Florida Gujarati societies; for more information and to register, [www.FOGAUSA.org](http://www.FOGAUSA.org)

**Disclaimer: Event details are subject to change. Please check with local organizers. Event submissions are free, e-mail information to editor@khaasbaat.com by the 20th.**



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## 2026 BMW M235i IS A FUN, SPIRITED AND EASY-ON-THE-WALLET GRAN COUPE!

Test-drive stories by **NITISH S. RELE** [motoringflorida@gmail.com](mailto:motoringflorida@gmail.com)

Fancy that Bimmer but think it's beyond the reach of your pocket? You need not worry. Take the 2026 M228i (starting at just \$39,600) for a drive or our latest test for a feistier ride, the M235i xDrive Gran Coupe (base-priced at \$49,500). With average new car price lingering at \$50,000, why not get a BMW then if it fits your needs? The compact sport sedan provides enough punch around town, sprinting from 0 to 60 in a mere 4.7 seconds with top speed of 130 mph. Do note that anything coupe-like is a Gran Coupe to BMW though the car is equipped with four doors.

Under the long hood of the sharp-looking M235i sits a 2.0-liter twin-power turbo inline-4-cylinder engine putting out 312 horsepower @ 6500 rpm and 295 pounds-feet of torque @4500 rpm. It is coupled with a slick-shifting 7-speed auto gearbox, which is even more spirited via moves the steering paddle shifters. The standard adaptive M suspension is specially tuned to enhance nimbleness and poise when pushing pedal to the metal. Count on the M Servotronic electric power steering with variable sport to convey a solid and communicative feel, keeping the second-gen car straight and watchful at sharp turns and curves.

That this is a high-performance vehicle is evident from the M (stands for Motorsports) etched in the twin-kidney grille, rear trunk lid, compound sport brakes with gray calipers, shadowline lights and trim. Step into the well-furnished and airy cabin and there are only accolades to shower on this rec-happy ride. BMW's new iDrive 9 operating system is a huge, curved one-



### M235i xDRIVE

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**Web site:** [www.bmw.com](http://www.bmw.com)

piece display of a 10.25-inch infotainment touchscreen and a 10.7-inch digital gauge cluster for the driver. Blue stitches on

the supportive and comfy synthetic leather (animal-free) seats or to use an appropriate BMW term, Veganza, are striking. Say goodbye to the familiar gear selector/shifter. It has been replaced by a distinctive toggle switch in the center console. Splashes of the iconic M colors, light blue, violet and red are visible throughout, especially on front seat backrests, digital cluster and steering wheel. Attractive illuminated aluminum graphite detail on and around the dashboard exude character. Other noteworthy niceties are 10-way power heated front seats, dual auto a/c, 40/20/40 rear seat, Harman Kardon audio, wireless Android Auto and Apple CarPlay, tilt/telescopic steering column.

So, there you have it – an athletic, impressively compliant, a smoking jack rabbit of an easy-on-the-pocket Bimmer ride if you so desire. The M235i delivers a level of performance and style unbeatable for the money. The attention-grabber certainly deserves attention, plenty of it!

## EXPLORE THE BACK COUNTRY IN 2026 TOYOTA TACOMA TRD OFFROAD

Best-selling midsize pickup in America for the last 20 years? Point to a domestic and you will be proved wrong because Toyota Tacoma has ruled the roost by keeping its competitors way out of reach. Having sold a record 270,000 units last year, there appears to be no stopping the Japanese carmaker's truck. So understandably we were more than excited to test-drive the TRD Offroad trim recently.

After a major redesign in 2025, the Tacoma continues as is with the I-FORCE MAX hybrid power train, a 2.4-liter inline-4 cylinder turbocharged engine pumping out a healthy 326 horsepower @ 6000 rpm and 465 pounds-feet of torque @ 1700 rpm. Our 4X4 double cab truck came with a 5-foot bed (four adjustable tie-down cleats and fixed cargo tie-down points). Power is put to the road via a smooth and precise 8-speed auto gearbox. An independent coil spring double wishbone front (with Bilstein shocks for smoothing the rough terrain) and a leaf spring rear suspension keep the pickup stable and smooth at all times. The electric power rack-and-pinion steering is thoroughly weighted and delivers good response to the driver. Tow and payload capacity are a commendable 6,500 and 1,705 pounds respectively.

Our edition with a black front Toyota emblem flanked by LEDs and daytime running lights was draped in an all-new and pleasing Heritage Blue color. A front skid plate with underbody transfer case ensures that your ride on tough surfaces will be secure. TACOMA embossed on the rear power tailgate will instantly grab your attention. The thought-out interior is roomy with a clean and



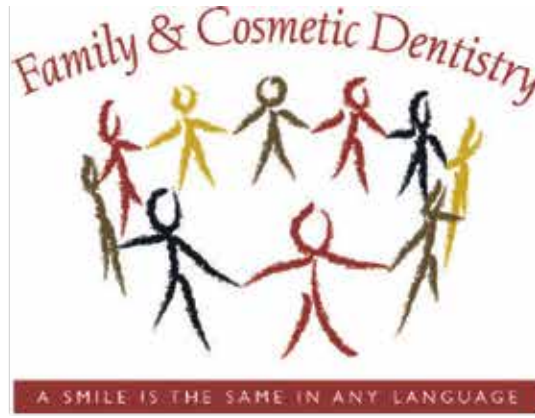
### TACOMA (TRD OFFROAD)

**Tires:** 265/70R18  
**Wheelbase:** 131.9 inches  
**Length:** 213 inches  
**Height:** 73.9 inches  
**Width:** 76.9 inches  
**Weight:** 5,410 pounds  
**Fuel capacity:** 18.2 gallons  
**City/hwy/comb:** 22/24/23 mpg  
**Base price:** \$47,235  
**Price as tested:** \$59,649  
**Web site:** [www.toyota.com](http://www.toyota.com)

attractive dashboard presented in a straightforward manner. Take the 12.3-inch digital cluster for instance. And of course, you have the option of 2WD,

4L and 4H via a dial on the dash. Six-way manual front fabric-trimmed seats in conjunction with a tilt/telescopic steering column should allow most to find an ideal driving position. Auto a/c, push-button start, 60/40 rear seat, wireless phone charger and overhead sunglass holder come at no extra cost. But you would be wise to spend \$8,540 on the TRD Offroad Premium Package, which will fetch power heated/cooled front seats, 14-inch infotainment screen, dual auto a/c, JBL premium audio, moonroof, and more.

Looking to venture out and explore the back roads? No worries, with the part-time 4WD drive, spacious and useful Tacoma at your disposal. Besides, Toyota's reputation for durability and reliability should seal the deal.



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**A GRAND HOMECOMING IN THE HEART OF FLORIDA:  
2026 UNITED GUJARATI CONVENTION MAY 22-25 IN ORLANDO**

Cont'd from page 1

By MALAY SHAH, Web & Social Media Chair, FOGAUSA

Set against the world-class backdrop of the Renaissance Orlando (SeaWorld), this convention is more than just an event; it is a movement. Representing over 1.8 million Gujaratis and more than 100 member associations, FOGAUSA's mission is to provide "one united voice" for the community. Following the massive success of the inaugural 2024 convention in Dallas, the 2026 edition in Orlando is a collaborative effort of all Gujarati associations in Florida to elevate the Gujarati cultural experience, blending traditional heritage with entertainment and the fast-paced innovation of the 21st century.

**A Convergence of Wisdom and Leadership**

The convention will be anchored by a series of keynote sessions. Spiritual leaders from across the globe are slated to provide guidance on maintaining Bhartiya cultural roots in our Western world, while influential political leaders from the United States and India will discuss the growing impact of the Gujarati community on the global stage. These sessions are designed to inspire a sense of pride and purpose, reinforcing the "Gujarati heartbeat" that FOGAUSA strives to keep alive.



**Fueling the Gujarati Entrepreneurial Spirit**

Gujaratis are renowned worldwide for their business acumen, and the 2026 convention puts this legacy front and center. **The Business Summit and General Sessions** will feature industry titans sharing insights on emerging markets, technology and investment strategies.

For those looking to expand their professional footprint, the Trade Show and Expo will host hundreds of booths showcasing products and services ranging from real estate and finance to boutique fashion. The **Gujarati-to-Gujarati Networking** sessions are a cornerstone of the event, offering a dedicated space for entrepreneurs to forge partnerships, mentor the next generation of business leaders and industry leaders in technology.



**Preserving Heritage Across Generations**

The agenda for 2026 is meticulously curated to ensure that every member of the family, from toddlers to seniors, finds a home at the convention.

**For Adults and Seniors:**

The evenings will be a celebration of the arts. Attendees can look forward to soul-stirring **Concerts of Gujarati and Hindi Songs**, high-energy **Garba Nights**, and thought-provoking **Natak (Drama)**. For the seniors, special events including **Karaoke/Antakshari** sessions have been organized to foster nostalgia and joy. Even the quieter moments are honored, with **Rangoli Prep Time** and specialized Yoga and Stress Relief sessions.

high-energy **Garba Nights**, and thought-provoking **Natak (Drama)**. For the seniors, special events including **Karaoke/Antakshari** sessions have been organized to foster nostalgia and joy. Even the quieter moments are honored, with **Rangoli Prep Time** and specialized Yoga and Stress Relief sessions.

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Summer at Shorecrest



**For Youth and Young Adults (Ages 20-45):** FOGAUSA recognizes that the future of the community lies in its youth. The convention features a Golf Tournament for those looking for friendly competition on Florida's world-renowned courses. Most notably, the convention will host a dedicated Matrimonial Meet. Understanding the challenges of finding life



Meet Captain Mo The AI Robot!

partners within the community in the digital age, this session provides a dignified and culturally rooted platform for young professionals to meet.

### For the Leaders of Tomorrow (Kids and Students):

The youth programming is robust. To encourage intellectual growth and cultural pride, the convention will host:

- **The National Gujarati Competition:** Featuring Public Speaking, Essay writing and Poetry recitation in the Gujarati language.
- **Technology and Innovation:** sessions for **Lego Room, Robotics & Science,** and a **Science Exhibition** to showcase young brilliance.
- **Fun and Games:** A high-stakes **Chess Tournament,** Art and Canvas sessions, a glamorous **Fashion Show,** movie screenings.

### Logistics and Registration: Act Fast for Early Bird Rates

The convention organizing committee, led by Convention Chair Jayesh Patel,



has worked tirelessly to make this event accessible.

- **Venue:** Renaissance Orlando (SeaWorld), 6677 Sea Harbor Drive, Orlando, FL 32821.
- **Dates:** May 22-25 (Memorial Day Weekend).
- **Registration fees:** \$200 per person. This fee is all-inclusive, covering all program sessions and gourmet Gujarati meals throughout the four days.
- **Hotel:** Registered participants gain exclusive access to deeply discounted room rates at the Renaissance Orlando, though organizers warn that these blocks are expected to sell out rapidly.

### Don't wait—secure your spot today.

Visit [www.fogausa.org](http://www.fogausa.org) to register, view the full agenda, and learn more about sponsorship and booth opportunities. Let's make history together in Orlando!

**Photos are AI generated and for illustrative purposes only.**

## 'ECHOES OF US' SWEEPS ALL 3 MAJOR SHORT FILM AWARDS AT SAIFFF 2026 IN TAMPA

STORY PROVIDED BY SAIFFF



Pooja Batra is flanked by award winners Shane Shakeeb Ali of Tampa and Angela Page of New York City.

truly special. The sweeping success of 'Echoes of Us' reflects the power of authentic storytelling and the global reach of South Asian cinema."

The South Asian International Film Festival Florida (SAIFFF) is a volunteer-driven nonprofit organization dedicated to showcasing independent South Asian cinema and fostering cultural exchange through film. It serves as a global platform for emerging and established filmmakers while strengthening community connections through storytelling. **For information, visit [www.saifff.org](http://www.saifff.org)**

The South Asian International Film Festival Florida (SAIFFF) successfully concluded its 2026 edition on Feb. 23 in Tampa, marking a historic moment as the short film "Echoes of Us" emerged as the festival's most celebrated entry, winning all three top Short Film awards.

The English-language drama from India dominated the Short Film category, earning:

- **Best Short Film**
- **Best Actor (Short Film) – Deepak Tijori**
- **Best Actress (Short Film) – Iulia Vantur**

Produced by Pooja Batra and directed by Joe Rajan, "Echoes of Us" received a standing ovation at the SAIFFF screening for its emotionally resonant storytelling and powerful performances.

Held at NCG Cinema, the festival showcased over 50 films selected from more than 200 international submissions, representing South Asian storytellers from Australia, United Kingdom, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Nepal, Canada, India and the United States.

The festival opened with a sold-out red-carpet gala attended by acclaimed Bollywood actors Pooja Batra and Omi Vaidya, alongside filmmakers and industry professionals.

Speaking on the festival's success, SAIFFF Director Hemant Dinkar said: "Receiving over 200 submissions from across the globe and welcoming filmmakers who traveled to Tampa to share their stories made this year



Priyanka Verma chats with actor Omi Vaidya.



Actors Omi Vaidya and Pooja Batra, right.

## INDIA IN FULL COLOR: VICAS SHINES AT SPIFFS FOLK FESTIVAL 2026

Story provided by Rajiv Sahay

The 50th Annual International Folk Fair, organized by the St. Petersburg International Folk Fair Society (SPIFFS), turned England Brothers Park into a vibrant global village from March 5-7, drawing thousands from across Tampa Bay. Among the standout participants was VICAS (Volunteers of India Culture, Art and Science Society), which brought India's rich cultural diversity to life.

Representing more than just a single culture, VICAS showcased the many traditions within India. Visitors enjoyed traditional games, colorful displays of regional attire, and the festive spirit of Holi. Live dance demonstrations and the ever-popular henna (mehndi) art attracted large crowds. A live cricket demonstration on also sparked strong interest among local attendees. Adding to the cultural experience, Kathputli dance — India's traditional string



puppetry — presented in the Indian village area, emerged as a unique folk attraction, delighting audiences of all ages.

Adding to the experience, the aroma of freshly prepared Indian cuisine drew visitors eager to sample authentic dishes — many for the first time — making the pavilion a hub of cultural exchange.

VICAS also delivered one of the festival's most memorable stage performances, blending the classical elegance of Bharatanatyam with an energetic Bollywood medley.

Beyond the festival, VICAS continues to promote Indian heritage year-round through educational and cultural programs in the Tampa Bay community, fostering cross-cultural understanding.

**Community members interested in joining or volunteering with VICAS may contact Dr. Rajiv Sahay at (727) 488-4001.**



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**Venue:** Leto High School | 4409 W Sligh Ave, Tampa, FL 33614



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# ASTROLOGY

## APRIL FORECAST

By PANKAJ KOHLI



**ARIES / Mesha (Fire sign, ruling planet is Mars) - (March 21-April 20) Mars Sign – Stars covered Ashwini, Bharani, Krittika (1st Part)** April marks a period of renewed energy and personal momentum as the Sun transits into your sign. This brings confidence, clarity and a strong desire to initiate new ventures. Professional growth is for the ones who take mindful decisions. Financial matters may improve when risks are calculated wisely. Saturn pushes one towards introspection and clearing mental burdens. The month supports fresh beginnings, leadership and self-driven progress.

**TAURUS / Vrushabha (Earthen sign, ruling planet is Venus) - (April 21-May 21) Venus Sign - Stars covered Krittika (last 3 parts), Rohini, Mrigashira (first 2 parts)** Planetary shifts highlight needs to relook at your goals and release unnecessary burdens. Professionally, working behind the scenes brings long-term benefits. Financial stability shows improvement through cautious planning. Rest and mental relaxation are a must for healthy balance. April confirms inner clarity, healing and emotional fulfillment.

**GEMINI / Mithuna (Air sign, ruling planet is Mercury) - (May 22-June 21) Mercury Sign - Stars covered Mrigashira (last 2 parts), Ardra & Punarvasu (first 3 parts)** Mercury's movement may create moments of confusion followed by clarity at the end. Professional growth is seen for those who work on new ideas. Financial gains are possible through group efforts or shared ventures. Relationships benefit from open dialogue and mutual support. The month supports inner learning and spiritual growth, as well as aligning with like-minded individuals.

**CANCER / Kataka (Watery sign, ruling planet is Moon) - (June 22-July 22) Moon Sign – Stars covered Punarvasu (4th part), Pushya, Aslesha** April places strong focus on career and public responsibilities. Planetary influences demand emotional balance while handling professional expectations. Recognition is possible through consistent effort. Financial matters may improve with disciplined planning. Family life requires patience and understanding. The month supports ambition, emotional maturity and maintaining balance between personal and professional life.

**LEO / Simha (Fire sign, ruling planet is Sun) - (July 23-Aug. 22) Sun Sign – Stars covered Magha, Purva Phalguni, Uttara Phalguni (1st part)** The month expands vision and encourages growth through learning and exploration. The Sun's movement supports confidence in pursuing higher goals. Professional opportunities may arise through travel or new knowledge. Financial prospects improve when supported by proper research and analysis. Relationships benefit from shared values and mutual respect. The month supports expanding horizons toward life and being optimistic even in challenging times.

**VIRGO / Kanya (Earthen sign, ruling planet is Mercury) (Aug. 23-Sept. 22) Mercury Sign – Stars covered Uttara Phalguni (last 3 parts), Hasta, Chitra (first 2 parts)** Transformation for betterment as well as seeking deeper introspection in life and letting go of outdated thinking that revolves around negativity is on the cards. Think strategically when it comes to growing in professional setup. Financial matters require careful assessment, especially regarding shared resources. Emotional connections deepen through trust and honesty. Health improves with outdoor activities and letting go of negative thinking that brings stress. The month supports those who take charge of their lives.

**LIBRA / Tula (Air sign, ruling planet is Venus) - (Sept. 23-Oct. 23) Venus Sign – Stars covered Chitra (last 2 parts), Swati, Vishakha (first 3 parts)** Venus supports harmony, but planetary shifts may test balance and compromise. Professional collaborations bring growth when handled diplomatically. Financial decisions benefit from joint planning. Personal relationships require open communication and fairness. The month highlights cooperation, emotional intellect and meaningful bonds.

**SCORPIO / Vruschika (Water sign, ruling planet is Mars) - (Oct. 24-Nov. 22) Mars Sign – Stars covered Vishakha (4th part), Anuradha, Jyestha** Focus on

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## **APRIL FORECAST**

*Cont'd from page 12*

removing lethargy and bringing more discipline into your routine life. Planetary influences encourage bringing more happiness whether at work or home. Focus more on health. Professionally, steady efforts may lead to favourable results. Financial matters may improve with organized planning and in-depth analysis before you venture out. Relationships require patience and understanding.

**SAGITTARIUS / Dhanush (Fire sign, ruling planet is Jupiter) - (Nov. 23-Dec. 21) Jupiter Sign – Stars covered Moola, Purva Shada, Uttara Shada (first part)** April brings creativity, joy and renewed enthusiasm. Jupiter's influence supports growth through self-learning. Professional opportunities arise through persistent follow-up. Financial gains are possible but require mindful spending. Relationships flourish with warmth and positivity. The month supports inspiration, creativity and emotional expansion.

**CAPRICORN / Makara (Earthen sign, ruling planet is Saturn) - (Dec. 22-Jan. 20) Saturn Sign – Stars covered Uttara Shada (last 3 parts) Shravana, Dhanistha (first 2 parts)** The month focuses on home, family and bonding with loved ones. Saturn brings greater responsibility in family matters. Professional life may require balancing domestic and office responsibilities. Domestic and family life deepens when you share responsibilities. The month supports stability, emotional grounding and strengthening personal foundations.

**AQUARIUS / Kumbha (Air sign, ruling planet is Saturn) – (Jan. 21-Feb. 19) Saturn Sign – Stars covered: Dhanishta (last 2 parts) Satabhisha, Purva Bhadra Pada (1st 3 parts)** April enhances communication, learning and short-term planning. Planetary shifts support clarity in expression and decision-making. Professional progress comes through skill development and networking. Financial matters may improve with persistent follow-ups and practical ideas. Relationships benefit from honest conversations. The month supports intellectual growth, communication and adaptability.

**PISCES / Meena (Water sign, ruling planet is Jupiter) - (Feb. 20-March 20) Jupiter Sign - Stars covered: Purva Bhadra Pada (last part) Uttara Bhadra Pada, Revathi** Jupiter supports steady growth as this is a karmically significant period. Professional stability may improve with consistent effort and follow-up.

Financial gains are possible through disciplined management. Relationships strengthen through emotional security and understanding. The month supports building long-term security and emotional transformation.

**For detailed horoscope analysis and chart reading, courtesy Pankaj-Astro Jyotish, call Pankaj Kohli at (905) 910-1441 or e-mail Pathofastrology@gmail.com**



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**MEDICAL SCHOOL APPLICATIONS: WHAT MOST PEOPLE GET WRONG**

By **ROBERT A.G. LEVINE**



The dreaded medical school application process. The chances are slim, they say. The process is grueling, they say. Some even try to avoid the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) by pursuing a BS/MD, which frankly is even harder to obtain.

Yet at the core of this dystopian logic, a misunderstanding accelerates the fervor and the fever. Most make a critical mistake.

To be highly successful in applying for a medical degree, you should understand the fit between student and prospective school. Understand what kind of doctor you wish to be and also understand how the school “does what it does.”

Certainly, great grades in core college classes make a difference. No doubt, a near-perfect MCAT score gives you an advantage over an acceptable one.

Great recommendation letters? Yes, those are important. A profound resume of healthcare experience really helps.

But that “stuff” will be submitted to a lot of schools, and only a few are likely to seriously consider you. What makes the difference?

It’s not necessarily the pieces that matter. Rather, the foundation of a successful application effort is a simple two-part philosophy: know thyself and love the neighbor you wish to learn from.

In an effort to maximize everything else, self-reflection can be lost. The cyber world tells you that you must do research, but if you’re going to treat people – not work in a lab – does research really matter? While trying to dress for success, are you wearing clothes that don’t fit?

Slow down and think about what kind of practitioner you want to be. Do you prefer to be a clinician, a surgeon, or a researcher? Do you want to be on staff at a hospital, part of a medical group, or create your own professional environment? Do you know what discipline you wish to practice, and why (or, do you know what you do not wish to do)?

Somewhere deep inside of you, your reason for becoming a doctor is driving you forward. Unfortunately, most do not understand their own drives.

If you want to embrace alternative modalities, why not pursue Osteopathy instead of Medicine? If you want to do research, why aren’t you pursuing an MD-PhD? By the way – what is research, in your eyes? Wet lab and bench work? Epidemiological studies?

This stuff matters, not only because it’s what you really want to do, but also because each medical school has strengths and weaknesses. Sometimes the school develops because of a certain philosophy, while other times it grows by virtue of its history, perhaps a strong specialist or faculty leader, a generous grant by a donor who had certain goals, even by reason of marketing for reputation and money.

But usually, prospective doctors don’t pay good attention to either themselves or the schools to which they’re applying. Like the proverbial square pegs and round holes, they don’t fit together. And the admissions committees can tell.

Usually, people look at acceptance rates to blend their list. Often, they apply to medical schools that are statistically “easier” to obtain. But they seldom pay attention to fit.

For example, most students apply to medical schools at public universities as part of their pursuit. However, public universities are funded by taxpayers of that state and (usually) want future doctors who will stay and treat their citizens after graduation. Ask yourself: do I have any real connection to the State? If not, why would they want to train you, knowing that you won’t use their resources for the good of their people?

(Of course, for every rule, there are exceptions. Some public medical schools intentionally seek out-of-staters, for purpose of raising their reputation.)

All medical schools want to know that you understand and appreciate their strengths. If you want to practice with other professionals, does the school believe in and promote that method? Within the concept of medical practice, try to research the words “interdisciplinary,” “integrated,” “interprofessional” and other sound-alike terms and note the dramatic differences in those approaches. Are their interactions vertical or horizontal? Is it about patient-physician interaction, physician-physician interaction, or physician-professional interaction? Take a close look at how each school teaches, and why.

You will likely write dozens, even hundreds of secondary essays. The schools design their essay prompts to understand you and whether you are a good fit for them. If you understand both “you” and “them,” not only will your work be easier and more intelligent, but your results will be much better than if you don’t.

**Robert Levine is the founder and CEO of University Consultants of America, an independent educational consultancy assisting students around the world with applications to colleges, universities and graduate schools. For more information, call University Consultants of America, Inc. at 1-800-465-5890 or visit [www.universitycoa.com](http://www.universitycoa.com)**



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## IRS EXPANDS DIGITAL ASSET REPORTING WITH NEW FORM 1099-DA



By **TEJAL DHRUVE, CPA**

If you buy, sell or trade digital assets, such as cryptocurrency or certain nonfungible tokens (NFTs), new reporting requirements will likely affect how your transactions are reported to and reviewed by the IRS. While these rules don't change how digital assets are taxed, they significantly impact information reporting, increasing transparency and scrutiny.

### Tax Treatment

For federal tax purposes, digital assets continue to be treated as property, not currency. This means you must recognize a capital gain or loss when you sell,

exchange or otherwise dispose of a digital asset.

The gain or loss is generally the difference between your cost basis (what you paid for the asset) and the amount you receive upon disposal. Depending on whether you held the asset more than one year, the gain or loss may be short-term or long-term.

### What Investors Should Know

To facilitate reporting, the IRS created Form 1099-DA, "Digital Asset Proceeds From Broker Transactions." This form is designed specifically for digital assets and is now used by brokers — including many cryptocurrency exchanges and digital asset platforms — to report transaction activity directly to investors and the IRS.

Initially, Form 1099-DA is being used by brokers to report gross proceeds from the sale or exchange of digital assets occurring on or after Jan. 1, 2025. Beginning with transactions on or after Jan. 1, 2026, Form 1099-DA will also require brokers to report the adjusted basis of certain digital assets.

For investors, this means a couple of things:

Starting with the 2025 tax year, you're likely to receive Form 1099-DA for reportable digital asset transactions.

The IRS will receive the same information, making mismatches between reported income and tax returns more likely to trigger IRS notices.

Accurate recordkeeping remains essential, particularly for tracking cost basis. Decentralized Finance (DeFi) brokers and some foreign brokers aren't required to issue Form 1099-DA or report transactions to the IRS. As a result, you're responsible for understanding and reporting your digital asset tax obligations, even if you don't receive a reporting statement covering all activity.

### Enforcement Shift

Digital asset taxation has been in place for years, but the new reporting rules mark a notable shift in enforcement. Contact the office for help understanding your reporting obligations and staying in compliance.

### Don't Let the AMT Catch You Off Guard

Are you subject to the alternative minimum tax (AMT)? In general, this tax applies if your "tentative minimum tax" exceeds your regular income tax liability. Significant long-term capital gains and dividend income or recently exercised incentive stock options can trigger the AMT. Although the 2025 tax legislation, commonly known as the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, makes higher AMT exemptions permanent, it phases them out twice as fast beginning in 2026. Also, the legislation quadrupled the limit for the state and local tax deduction, which isn't deductible for AMT purposes. So that item may become an AMT Achilles' heel for more taxpayers. If you're concerned about the AMT, contact the office. Good planning may help you avoid it.

**Tejal Dhruve, CPA, LLC, a full-service tax and wealth management firm with offices in Wesley Chapel, Florida, and Dublin, Ohio, can be reached at (614) 742-7158 or email [info@dhruvecpa.com](mailto:info@dhruvecpa.com)**

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## 2026 CHRYSLER PACIFICA IS THE PERFECT FIT FOR FAMILIES

Test-drive stories by NITISH S. RELE [motoringflorida@gmail.com](mailto:motoringflorida@gmail.com)

The only minivan on the road available both as a gasoline engine and a plug-in hybrid (PHEV)? Now that would be the Pacifica from the Chrysler division, founder of the minivan segment with ‘grand’ successes like the Town & Country and the (Dodge) Grand Caravan. After testing the PHEV trim in 2023, we were delighted to check out the gas-only Pacifica recently.

Under the hood of the steel unibody structure sits a 3.5-liter V-6 Pentastar gas engine putting out 287 horsepower @ 6400 rpm and 262 pounds-feet of torque @ 4000 rpm. Getting power to the ground in the all-wheel-drive ride is a seamless 9-speed auto gearbox. The MacPherson strut front and a twist-blade rear suspension work well to absorb unpleasant bumps and rough surfaces on the road. Returning a weighted, linear response to the driver’s input is an electric rack-and-pinion steering.

Up front, bi-functional LED projector head/daytime running lights surround a black grille with platinum chrome-surround. Of course, buyers don’t purchase the Pacifica for its outward appearance but for the vast cabin room and endless amenities. Fold down both the rear rows (thank you, Stow ‘n Go) and make use of 140.5 cubic feet of space or there are always 32.3 cubic feet behind the third row. For easy ingress/egress, especially when hauling kids into the minivan, driver and passenger side power-sliding doors will come in handy. Two 10.1-inch touch screens (plus a nifty FamCam with a bird’s eye view) will keep the tiny tots in the rear seat glued



### PACIFICA (PINNACLE)

**Tires:** P245/50R20 all-season  
**Wheelbase:** 121.6 inches  
**Length:** 204.3 inches  
**Width:** 79.6 inches  
**Height:** 69.9 inches  
**Weight:** 4,883 pounds  
**Fuel capacity:** 19 gallons  
**City/hwy/comb:** 17/25/20  
**Base price:** \$59,440  
**Price as tested:** \$62,025  
**Web site:** [www.stellantis.com](http://www.stellantis.com)

to the TVs. Premium quilted sepia Nappa leather seats with second-row lumbar pillows are plush. Well-placed storage cubbies and crannies are everywhere, plus in the unified/flowing floor console. Eight-way power front heated/cooled seats, tilt/telescopic leather steering column, dual panoramic sun roof, suede headliner, tri-zone auto a/c, power lift gate, 19-speaker Harman Kardon sound system, wireless phone charger and in-vehicle vacuum cleaner are some of the fine conveniences.

The Pacifica is an extremely convenient package for families. It offers passenger- and cargo-carrying practicality, sufficient performance and respectable gas mileage (though the hybrid version ensures more fuel savings). Those long summer trips can only be more fun and relaxing in this Chrysler minivan.

## OVERLOOKED 2026 MITSUBISHI OUTLANDER IS AN ATTRACTIVE PROPOSITION

The most underrated and neglected compact SUV on the road? Hands down the Mitsubishi Outlander! And sadly, it’s been the case for several years now. That could very well change soon with the 2026 version, which gets a 1.5-liter four-cylinder turbocharged engine to replace the previous 2.5 liter. Basically, it is a mild hybrid with 48-volt starter-generator battery for substantial fuel savings and quick acceleration. The seven-seater puts out an adequate 174 horsepower @ 5000 rpm and 206 pounds-feet of torque @ 3000 rpm. A continuous variable transmission results in a drivetrain that is quiet and responsive.

A MacPherson strut front and a multilink rear suspension navigate sharp corners and turns with confidence and poise. The electric power rack-and-pinion steering calibration is spot-on, with superb on-center feel and excellent feedback. Lest we forget, Mitsubishi’s all-wheel drive system (Super All-Wheel Control) puts the mind to rest in any untoward road/driving conditions. And if you venture off the beaten path, be rest assured that ground clearance is high enough at 8.4 inches in the 2,000-tow capacity vehicle. A knob in the center console allows the driver to switch to eco, normal, tarmac, gravel, snow and mud modes.

The front fascia shows off a “dynamic shield” black grille with the recognizable Mitsubishi insignia, surrounded by horizontal LED headlights and fog lamps. Step into the clean and simply designed cabin and find yourself staring at dual 12.3-inch screens: one for infotainment and the other the digital driver display. Eight-way front heated/cooled leather seats are sumptuous to touch. Total passenger space of 120.8 cubic feet



### OUTLANDER SEL

**Tires:** 255/45R20  
**Wheelbase:** 106.5 inches  
**Length:** 185.8 inches  
**Height:** 68.8 inches  
**Width:** 84.4 inches  
**Weight:** 3,942 pounds  
**Fuel capacity:** 14.5 gallons  
**City/hwy/comb:** 26/30/27 mpg  
**Base price:** \$40,845  
**Price as tested:** \$47,235  
**Web site:** [www.mitsubishicars.com](http://www.mitsubishicars.com)

is plentiful though occupants of the third-row 50/50 seat, which folds rearward into a deep well in the floor, may find the room tight. Tri-zone auto a/c, thick-rimmed leather tilt/telescopic steering wheel, power liftgate/sun roof, heated second-row seat, rear door manual sunshades, wireless phone charger/Android Auto/Apple CarPlay are a few numerous amenities. Fancy semi-aniline leather seats or a 12-speaker Yamaha audio system? Then opt for the \$3,050 premium package, which also comes with a 10.8-inch head-up display, digital rearview mirror and a black spoiler.

Though slightly lacking in power, the 1.5-liter, four-cylinder turbo Outlander is a tempting proposition. After all, it makes up for the deficit with considerable cargo and passenger space, decent fuel mileage and a price that isn’t astronomical, so to speak.



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