

Kia adds power and SX appeal

BY JOE SAGE

The Japanese spent decades mastering the intricacies of what the US market expected—in quality, price, features—in our vehicles, electronics, optics, you name it. And they did it well, creating what was for a long time the world's second-largest economy. When the Koreans began sending us their cars in the '80s, they were largely an unknown entity here, which they mitigated by offering confidence-building long warranties to prime the pump and interest buyers. And they've paid close attention to the desires of the US market. Quality, style and feature sets have grown by leaps and bounds, while prices have stayed low and value has risen. We have been struck by how closely they study, how well they respond and how quickly they do it.

Long delivering considerable bang for the buck, while developing increasingly nice road presence, Kia rates very high in owner satisfaction. But they spotted one more stratum they hadn't specifically addressed: the affluent buyer with a lust for power. Enter the Kia SX lineup, bringing a higher degree of performance and handling, along with subtly more aggressive styling. New for 2011 are the Kia Optima SX, Forte 5-Door SX, Sorento SX and Sportage SX. The Sportage SX and Optima SX also introduce Kia's first turbocharged engine.

SINCE SOUL

Kia has particularly ramped up its styling and overall lineup in the past couple of years. One benchmark they refer to frequently is the introduction of the Kia Soul, introduced at the 2008 Paris Motor Show and put into production, largely unchanged from the concept, for the 2010 model year. Sales have



(Left) Kia Optima SX with twincscroll TGDl turbo. (Above) Kia Sportage SX with twincscroll turbo, Forte 5-Door SX with 2.4-liter CVVT and Sorento SX with 3.5-liter V6.

been strong for the Soul, but the real magic has been in an increased awareness of the brand overall. "Since Soul" is the company's mantra as they review recent successes: market share for the Kia brand was up 6.9 percent for 2010 over 2009, and a whopping 48 percent over 2009. The Kia Sorento midsize SUV (see our review in this issue), with new features and improved styling (including the new company-wide "tiger grille" and overall freshening) sold 108,000 units in its first year. Its popularity is substantiated every day in traffic. Total brand sales for 2010 were over 356,000, and by February 2011, sales were 31 percent higher year-to-date than 2010. R. L. Polk & Co. recorded Kia as the "most improved in customer loyalty," and ALG Industry Report named it the "most improved mainstream brand."

Kia has focused on the following attributes to achieve these heights: fuel, technology, safety, quality, value and design. What next?

In 2010, Kia entered motorsports for the first time, with two Forte Koups. The racing Koup placed number 5 out of all OEMs for the season, and a Kia Forte Koup podiumed at Daytona for the first time (in second place).

Reaching deeper into their customer base, they have sponsored the LPGA Kia Classic, definitely moving up in target markets—their first time involved with golf, and seeking customers new to the Kia brand.

Kia was a Super Bowl sponsor for the first time last year (with the Sorento) and repeated this year (with the Optima). Awareness of the brand, and consideration of purchase, are accordingly up, measured for one thing by 25,000 test drive downloads after that exposure.

Kia has also plugged in with 13 NBA partners, including the Phoenix Suns, and generated considerable buzz with their Slam Dunk Contest this year, in which Blake Griffing took the gold, leaping and dunking over a Kia Optima on the court. Impressive and attention-grabbing.

What does all this bring into the showroom and into your garage? Plenty.

TGDI ON TWO, UPGRADES ON ALL

There are really two things in play as we digest the enhanced end of the Kia lineup: the model designation and the engine. They do not go hand-in-hand. Each SX model comes with a full complement of overall upgrades, and each with an engine upgrade, but two stand out in particular. The SX name applies to all four, but for the turbocharged Sportage SX and Optima SX, a TGDI badge does the talking. GDI stands for gasoline direct injection, and these two add T for turbo.

In the Optima SX and Sportage SX, a 2.0-liter DOHC four-cylinder twin-scroll turbo replaces the 2.4-liter four

that powers the LX and EX models.

In the Optima lineup, the 2.0-liter TGDI engine is also available on an EX 2.0T. The standard 2.4-liter four delivers 200 horsepower and 186 lb-ft of torque. The 2.0T boosts these to 274 hp and 269 lb-ft. While promising V6 power from a four, the Optima SX with TGDI engine still delivers 34 mpg and runs on regular gas (highway mileage is the same as the base engine, though city mileage drops from estimated 24 to 22 mpg, all of these with automatic; manual base engine varies).

Sportage delivers slightly different before-and-after power figures, despite using the same engine, due to backflow pressure from its exhaust routing. The 2.4-liter normally-aspirated four in the Sportage specs out at 176 hp and 168 lb-ft, while the Sportage SX with the 2.0-liter twincscroll turbo achieves 256 hp and 264 lb-ft. Fuel mileage drops a little with the turbo, from 22/31 mpg (city/highway in 2WD) to 22/27 for the turbo. (AWD figures are a mile or three lower across the board.)

Forte turns this displacement difference on its head, with a 2.0-liter CVVT DOHC four in the LX and EX, and a 2.4-liter CVVT DOHC four in the SX. But no turbo, though Kia suggests this will follow in due time. Accordingly, the performance boost in a Forte 5-Door SX is modest: a 156-hp base spec nudges up to 173, while torque increases from 144 to 168 lb-ft. Fuel mileage drops with the larger engine on the Forte SX, from 25/34 mpg (city/highway, with automatic) to 23/31. (Figures for manual transmissions and for the 4-door Forte vary.)

Sorento—Kia's first vehicle to sell 100,000 units—rounds the formula out in yet another way: both the Sorento LX and EX are available with a 2.4-liter CVVT four or a 3.5-liter dual CVVT V6 engine. For the SX, only the V6 is available. Thus the Sorento's power benefit is available across the full range. Despite not applying a turbo to the Sorento's engine upgrade, its power increase is far more dramatic than the non-turbo Forte SX, on a par with the Optima and Sportage: the base Sorento provides 175 hp and 169 lb-ft from its four, while the V6 Sorento puts out 176 hp and 248 lb-ft. It does not, however, have the fuel mileage bragging rights of the turbos: the V6 achieves 19/25 mpg (city/highway) in 4x4 form or 20/26 in 4x2, while the four-cylinder delivers 21/29 as a 4x2 automatic (with slightly different figures for 4x4 auto or 4x2 manual).

Optima and Forte are front-wheel-drive only, including SX models. Sorento and Sportage are available as front-drivers or with AWD.

The base models for Optima and Sportage come with manual transmissions, the rest—including SX—with a six-speed automatic. Forte is again different, with a

manual transmission standard on the 5-Door SX (as on the 5-Door EX) and the automatic available as an option. All Sorentos have an automatic standard, with a manual as an option on just the base LX model.

And what's the price for performance and style?

The Kia Sorento starts as low as \$21,195 and, short of the SX, ranges to \$29,295 in AWD. The SX trim (and TGDI twincscroll turbo) raise it by \$4800, to \$34,095.

Sportage starts at \$18,295. The TGDI turbo and SX trim here add just \$2500 at the high end, capping at \$27,295 for a Sportage SX AWD.

Forte 5-Door, which offers only an EX or an SX, commands a premium of just \$1500 for its admittedly less involved SX level. Top price for the auto-shift Forte 5-Door SX is \$19,395. Perhaps the Forte's SX upgrades were kept modest to keep the whole lineup under \$20k.

Optima? A base-model Optima LX with manual is just \$18,995. Working to the SX at the top, gaining the twincscroll TGDI turbo and perhaps the most distinct cosmetic and feature upgrades of the four, the Optima SX hits just \$25,995. This most directly compares with either the base-engine EX at \$22,495—a \$3500 upgrade—or to the middle model unique to the Optima range, a 2.0T turbo in EX clothing, at \$24,495. In the Optima, you can choose performance alone, or full-blown SX performance and style points.

BEHIND THE WHEEL IN THE KIA SX

We met the Kia SX lineup at the Arizona Grand Resort in Tempe, where we chose our first steed for a drive out US 60 through Miami and Globe, north past Roosevelt Lake to Payson, and back down the Beeline Highway to metro Phoenix. Strictly speaking, we could have driven all four, but realistically, we took one on the drive north and the other on the return trip. Our choices? The two with TGDI twincscroll turbo: the Optima SX northbound and the Sportage SX southbound.

Do they perform? Just ask our codriver: she managed to get arrested for speeding in not one but both of these vehicles. A good time was had by all.

All in all, the Kia SX lineup is a study in relativity. Ka has already positioned itself enviably, offering a stylish, reliable and affordable set of vehicles that compare very favorably with other offerings in their segments. They have managed to preserve the value portion of their formula, even as models improve dramatically in quality, features and styling. The SX models are no exception. Relative to the cost of their lesser siblings, their upgrade prices are quite reasonable for all they deliver. And relative to the cost of their performance competitors, they still deliver value along with the goods. ■

