



In the chase

New pitches at the high and low end of the Kia lineup

The Arizona Diamondbacks were not having much of a year, although they started the season strong. Kia's year, on the other hand, started strong and just gets better. We met at Chase Field during a D'backs-Padres game, to see some surprises Kia had stashed for us in the ballpark's garage.

These two cars represent the "bookends" of the Kia lineup: the small and affordable Rio and the large and also affordable Optima, both newly sported up with SX modifications, but of different natures. (Since its inception—see our May/June 2011 issue—SX adaptations have meant different things to different vehicles, although all a step up in performance and/or features.)

KIA OPTIMA SXL

The new Kia Optima SXL (aka SX with Limited Package) is driven by luxury and market position, as there has been an Optima SX with enhanced performance for a year and a half now (featuring a 274-hp 2.0L turbo instead of the standard 200-hp 2.4L, among other things).

What Kia learned was that their buyers were evolving to include those with incomes of \$90,000 or more, 40 percent college educated, wanting not only more horsepower and room for five, but also all the amenities they were starting to cross-shop in the likes of Acura and Audi. But they were loyal to the Kia brand.

The Optima LX starts at just \$21,200. But Kia sells over 100,000 Sorentos a year that are optioned up to \$35,000 or so (against a base price of \$23,150). An Optima SX, attractive as it already is, starts at \$26,800.

Add tech and luxury touches: navigation with Sirius traffic and backup camera, 18-inch chrome wheels and other chrome accents including door sills and spoiler trim, LED running lights, Nappa leather trim, heated and cooled front seats with driver's seat memory and 4-way power adjustable passenger seat (plus heated bottom cushions in back), red brake calipers front and rear, electronic parking brake, an attractive black headliner and interior pillars, plus full EX and SX technology packages and SX premium touring package. And still that 274 hp.

The Optima SXL starts at \$34,500, and Kia calculates that this is just what a lot of buyers are looking for.

KIA RIO SX M/T

There is already a Kia Rio SX, available in both 4-door and 5-door models. The SX delivers performance cues in the form of 17-inch alloy wheels (up from 15-inches) and adds a sport-tuned suspension, steering-wheel-mounted paddle shifters, dual exhaust tips, front fog lights, and LED front accent and positioning lights.

Power folding outside mirrors include turn-signal indicators. Additional Rio SX creature comforts include a UVO Microsoft infotainment center, backup camera, auto on/off headlights, soft-touch dash, metal pedals, and a leather-wrapped steering wheel and shift knob.

The big news in this new model has to do with that shift knob: the Kia Rio SX M/T comes with a 6-speed manual transmission.

Prior to this, a manual was only available on the lowest-rung Rio, the LX (base price of \$13,600 for the 4-door or \$13,800 for the 5-door, \$1100 lower than the automatic LX). Moving through an EX to the SX, you could spend \$17,700 (4-door) or \$17,900 (5-door) and



have SX features, but you could not drive that stick.

Now you can.

The Rio SX M/T was motivated internally as much as anything, as Kia had entered B-Spec racing earlier this year. They took a little ribbing for not having their top-spec subcompact with a manual, and they took that to heart. This Rio has the same 138-hp 1.6L four-cylinder as the others, which achieves 30/40 MPG city/highway. With good shifting skills and benefiting from the sport suspension, Kia figures you can get about a half-second quicker 0-to-60 time in the Rio SX M/T.

Fewer than 500 copies of this car are being made, so get your order in ASAP.



We didn't drive either of these new cars at this time, though we look forward to doing so. But we've driven the Optima SX quite a few Arizona highway miles before and can vouch for this being a great way to round out the package. Kia's idea of pushing upmarket in a car that already delivers impressive style, build quality and performance strikes us as a basically sound idea.

As for the Rio SX M/T, we find this immediately slots itself among the most appealing of the smallest cars—think MINI or Fiat iterations—and we definitely have developed our own urge to do some B-Spec racing. ■

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