

TAKING ON HONDA AND TOYOTA (A)

The new kid in school shows us its stuff

Born on third base and did indeed hit a triple



By Barbara and Bill Schaffer. Photos: Joe Sage

As many of the automotive brands are sitting beside the road making repairs or explaining to the officer why they were driving recklessly, Kia seems to be moving along at posted speed limits. Average industry sales have been down 36.5 percent from 2008, while Kia is down only 6.8 percent for the year.

By midyear, Kia had already debuted two winners, the Soul urban passenger vehicle and the Forte sedan (as well as its upcoming Koup version).

The Forte initially sets itself apart from the from the tough compact competitors (Honda Civic and Toyota Corolla) with the kind of styling that makes the driver glance back when walking away from this car. Not always known for design acumen, the Kia brand has quickly matured since opening new US facilities.

Designed at Kia Design Center America in Irvine, the Forte is arguably one of the best looking compact sedans sold in the US. Bold, crisp lines, strong shoulders and a sweeping roofline blend all the other design elements into a clean sophisticated look, more like we'd expect to see on an entry-level luxury sedan.

With three trim levels, prices start at \$14,390 (including destination charge) for the LX with a five-speed manual transmission and top out at \$20,490 for the SX with a five-speed automatic and all available option packages. On an average, Forte prices are about \$2,000 less than comparable Toyota Corolla, Honda Civic and Ford Focus models.

All three Forte models come very well equipped with standard features like Sirius satellite radio, USB and audio input jacks, and all available safety equipment. We like this approach to safety, which doesn't require the buyer to pay extra for features like four-wheel anti-lock disc brakes, brake assist, traction control and stability control. All Forte models also include standard

side and curtain airbags, front active headrests and tire pressure monitoring.

With so much standard, options on the top SX model are limited to a heated leather seat package and power sunroof. The only fault we could find with the Forte was the lack of an available navigation system.

A 2.0-liter 156-hp four-cylinder engine powers the LX and EX versions with a standard five-speed manual transmission or optional four-speed automatic. The top-level SX model has a larger 2.4-liter, 173-hp four-cylinder with a six-speed manual or an optional five-speed automatic with manual shifting mode. The automatic transmission is a \$1,000 option. Both engines are all-aluminum with double overhead cams with continuously variable valve timing to maximize performance and fuel economy.

The larger engine accelerates from 0 to 60 mph in an estimated 7.3 seconds. The 2.0-liter engine is rated at 25 mpg city and 34 mpg highway by EPA estimates, with the larger engine rated two to three mpg less, depending on the transmission. For even better fuel economy, Kia offers an optional Fuel Economy Package for the EX with automatic transmission. This \$600 package adds electric power steering, "smart" alternator, low rolling resistance silica tires and aero enhancements, to increase fuel economy numbers to 27 mpg city and 36 mpg highway.

Forte gets high marks for its spacious interior, smooth quiet ride and excellent design. We were also impressed with the user-friendly controls and good fit and finish. It even had the little extras we appreciate, like passenger assist handles, door-mounted drink holders, a large dead pedal (driver footrest) and manual shifting automatic transmission linkage.

We figure we'll be seeing these new Kias in the passing lane in significant numbers. ■

AZ DRIVER LOGBOOK NOTES

It's a classic automotive emotional benchmark, but we found ourselves doing the same thing as Bill and Barbara: looking back at this car. We made a lot of notes, but here are some of the highlights:

- The first thing we really noticed was a total lack of any apparent torque steer, usually rare in all but the most highly-engineered front-drivers, and very welcome indeed. This held true on local streets and freeways, both.
- The next thing we noticed was the ongoing challenge this car drew, an indication of high profile appeal taken as a threat to drivers of Saturns, Toyotas, Neons, Scions, Hondas and such. And when we took the bait, the Forte always showed its stuff. This phenomenon was constant, and a great sign.
- We hand it to the Koreans for the name. "Forte" beats "Camry" or "Civic" hands down.
- We feel at home in this car within a block.
- The doors close like a Maybach, with a nice solid *thunk*... very impressive.
- The suspension is superb, even on speed-bumps... not too soft, a little firm, just right.
- The term "basically flawless" came up.
- Okay, low beam headlights are weak.
- A/C was very effective on a very hot day, but with a little whistling at the windshield.
- Put it all together, and what can we say—this car is extremely well executed, outfitted, engineered and built. It's fuel-efficient and amazingly priced. And it has a Kia 10-year, 100,000-mile warranty. Buy one.

TAKING ON HONDA AND TOYOTA (B)

A perennial niche vehicle aims to go mainstream

Heavily reengineered and restyled—for the better?



By Barbara and Bill Schaffer. Photos: Joe Sage

Just because Subaru is introducing a new generation of the Legacy, don't look for revolutionary changes—that's not how Subaru designers and engineers work. Rather they constantly refine the cars. The major change for 2010 is taking the size up a notch. While we like the size of the previous generation Legacy, planners felt the car needed to be a bit larger to compete more directly with the big sellers like Camry and Accord.

To test the larger interior, we climbed in the rear seat and invited a 6'3" friend along for the test. There was enough headroom and legroom for our friend, and plenty of room for us all—as long as the front seat wasn't all the way back. We especially like the comfortable angle of the rear seat backs. For future reference, however, we're calling "shotgun" next time. Even with 9.5 cubic feet of new interior room, the overall length of the four-door sedan increased by only 1.4 inches.

If you live in the snow, all-wheel drive has an obvious advantage, but there are handling and safety benefits on dry roads, too. If you don't think so, watch the rally drivers sometime. Subaru is distinctive in being the only company to have AWD as standard equipment on all the cars they sell in the US. Subaru's Symmetrical AWD comes in three flavors, each best suited for a particular engine and transmission configuration.

There are three Legacy models: 2.5i, 2.5GT and 3.6R. A horizontally-opposed engine powers each. The base engine, which we drove recently, is a 170-hp, 2.5-liter SOHC four-cylinder with a standard six-speed manual transmission. A CVT (Continuously Variable Transmission), which includes paddle shifters and simulates six gear settings, is a \$1,000 option. The GT gets a 265-hp turbocharged DOHC 2.5-liter four-cylinder with a six-speed manual. The top-of-the-line 3.6R has a 256-hp DOHC 3.6-liter six-cylinder engine paired to a five-speed

automatic with paddle shifters, too. These horizontally-opposed engines have a reputation as lasting forever. The low profile layout also helps maintain a lower center of gravity for improved handling.

Each engine offers its own advantages in performance, fuel economy and smoothness. The strong turbo engine in the GT was exciting to drive. After only a slight hint of turbo lag, the engine produces instant power across the operating range—it's the same basic engine used in the Impreza WRX—taking the GT from 0 to 60 mph in an estimated 5.9 seconds. The six-cylinder 3.6-liter engine is a couple of seconds slower, but is smoother and more refined. The 2.5i four-cylinder does 0 to 60 in an estimated 8.5 seconds. Fuel economy estimates for the GT and 3.6R are 18 mpg city and 25 mpg highway. The 2.5i is 19/27 or 23/31 with the CVT. Our actual average for the 2.5i with manual transmission was 23.4 mpg.

All versions of the Legacy are fun to drive. Some all-wheel-drive systems can make a car feel more bulky or constrained, but the Legacy feels agile and light. AWD can require a wider turning radius, but the Legacy makes a U-turn in just 36.8 feet, rivaling two-wheel drivers.

The new six-speed manual transmission has a positive feel and intuitive spacing, but we thought it was a little notchy, distracting slightly from the smoothness.

The larger size offers a big improvement in seating comfort. We especially like the quiet and wind-free sunroof, comfortable seats and door-mounted drink holders.

The Legacy is offered in a broad range of prices from \$20,660 (including destination charge) for the 2.5i with six-speed manual, up to \$30,600 for the GT Limited. With all options, including trim, performance and navigation, the price can top \$36,000. Even base model Legacys have all the standard power equipment, cruise control and other features drivers like. Comfort and convenience features added at each higher level. ■

AZ DRIVER LOGBOOK NOTES

A pretty decent execution, but not universally so. We drove the 2.5i and noted pros and cons:

- Corners very nicely and aggressively. Stick? AWD? Affordability? Kind of like this.
- Engine sound effects, throaty growl, seem distracting and inappropriate to the base car. Performance sounds without performance.
- Somewhat balky shifter, flimsy and loose in the gates, a somewhat light and spindly feeling. Shudder and chatter starting in first gear. Noted as a potential deal-killer. But we did like the transmission and gearing.
- Black fabric seats uncommon, attractive.
- Front seat pulls back for tons of room, but manual latch sends you flying. Set brake first.
- Push-to-set electronic handbrake should be pull-to-set to mimic physical controls.
- Radio off switch fades sound to zero, nice touch (though noted as annoying at times).
- Simple +/- fuel economy gauge may base unexpected readouts on wishful thinking.
- We received several pointed comments that people found the car unattractive, especially from the rear, with critique of overwrought fender flares and too-common front.
- The ideas are all there, but proportions not quite right. As a restyling, we noted that it was like an adolescent ready for the first big school dance, but nonetheless still at that awkward age. A nice size and shape, interior is comfortable, with intuitive, simple, complete controls, but outside, we just didn't find the styling particularly attractive.