

Taking on the kings

Kia continues to gain on the long-reigning champs in two red-hot segments

by Joe Sage

The economy has been full of mystery lately, with examples of people doing very, very well in some cases, and just the opposite in plenty of others. As explained by Kia Motors America (KMA) executive VP of sales Tom Loveless, we have been seeing positive consumer spending habits... and positive consumer saving habits. And it's unusual to see both at the same time. But, when you think about it, what better time to buy a stylish and well-equipped top-tier economy vehicle? These are the times when "a challenger brand thinks big," says Loveless.

Kia has been thinking big for the past decade, and it shows. We've commented before on the rapid pace with which they have addressed the tastes and demands of the American market, from style and model range, to fit and finish, to amenities. Loveless says the company's

goal since 2009 has, in fact, been to become an industry style leader. There's little question they have been, and the marketplace has responded.

Sales more than doubled in the US from 2008 to 2012, and Kia sold 558,000 units in 2012, an increase of 14.9 percent over the prior year—the manufacturer's 18th consecutive year of US growth, and an all-time record. And the vehicles are selling at quite a clip—last year, Kia had the fastest turn rate in the industry.

Kia's progress comes in the face of long and solid success stories for other sales kings. The brand is cross-shopped against Honda more than any other, with quantifiable Kia gains across the whole lineup. Kia is also quite proud of the fact they are on the third generation of the Forte (starting with Spectra), while the Toyota Corolla has been in its same cycle for that duration.

Two of the hottest vehicles in the lineup—the compact Kia Forte Sedan and the Kia Sorento midsize 7-passenger crossover—have received complete redesigns for 2014. Kia brought them to Arizona so we could take them for a good long drive.

Much of what makes these vehicles so popular is common to both. Start with Peter Schreyer's design language. Continue with safety: all Kias have been IIHS Top Safety Picks since the 2009 Soul. Add the company's contributions to the US economy: Kia Motors Manufacturing Georgia (KMMG) has become that state's largest economic development success story in history (bearing in mind Georgia is home to Turner, CNN, Coca-Cola and more), running three shifts and producing over 300,000 vehicles per year. And Kia quality is quantified, moving rapidly up benchmark scales, almost 20 points in the last two years alone. Yet they still provide the same reassur-

ing 10-year, 100,000-mile warranty they did when the brand first needed to establish itself in the US market. Residual value (after three years) has moved from the 30s to over 50 percent in the past three years. If you like what you see, be confident of a good buy.

2014 Kia Sorento

The original Kia Sorento ran from 2002 through 2009. Model year 2010 brought an all-new model we are all seeing on the road in droves. For 2014, Sorento receives what officially is a mid-cycle freshening and slight facelift—you will immediately recognize the vehicle, if you know the prior one—but some 80 percent of its parts are new or significantly changed. Sorento LX, EX and SX trim levels are also joined by a new Limited (or SXL) model.

The hood, side slabs and roof are the same, but front and rear fascias, grille, bumpers and lighting are redone—including available xenon HID headlights and LED elements in some models' taillights. There are redesigned wheels, and the rear liftgate receives programmable power. All together, it's not enough to disturb the Sorento's growing admiring audience—just enough to help the vehicle flow smoothly into the near future.

Grab an illuminated door handle and step inside, to find evolutions including soft-touch nano-paint and satin chrome surfaces, new YES Essentials stain-resistant seat materials (or available Nappa leather), an upgraded leather steering wheel, and a redone center stack and console—which houses a new shifter that uses a straight-line boot-type design, replacing the old stairstep. Instruments and amenities are now controlled through Kia's UVO eServices—via an 8-inch TFT center display, plus an available 7-inch contextual TFT in the

main cluster—and audio by Infinity once again provides output that sounds as though it could have cost as much as the entire vehicle. Front row seats are heated and ventilated, the second row heated, and the interior benefits from second-row sunshades and a panoramic roof that now has a one-piece power roller blind.

This checklist of features is underpinned by the biggest changes: an all-new platform and engine for 2014. The chassis has enhanced rigidity and improved NVH (noise, vibration, harshness) figures. The platform rework is good for ergonomics, too, as the second row has noticeably increased legroom (and the third row a

little bit, too, in seven-passenger configurations). Boarding and loading are easier and more comfortable, with a 10mm (about 3/8-inch) drop in step height and hip point ground clearance. All this clever packaging translates to more interior volume, too: an additional 1.4 cubic feet with the third row down or an additional

KEEP RIGHT >>

2014 Kia Sorento



2014 Kia Forte Sedan





half a cubic foot with the third row in place—all with no increase in exterior dimensions.

Suspension is reengineered front and rear, with a new H-shaped subframe in front and reinforced multilink (on AWD models) in the rear, reducing weight, improving driver dynamics and passenger comfort, and increasing straight-line stability—things our drive would confirm.

Motor driven power steering (MDPS) is adjustable to Normal, Sport and Comfort settings. Its quicker ratio (brought to 15.9 from 16.3) delivers a 35.9-foot turning circle—less than a foot more than a MINI and more than a foot less than our admirable utility vehicle benchmark, the Jeep Grand Cherokee. The ride also benefits from wider rims, providing more lateral stiffness and better overall responsiveness.

The prior model's base 2.4-liter engine is dropped. Available for the 2014 model are two: a 2.4L gasoline direct-injected (GDI) Theta II 4-cylinder, and a new 3.3L GDI Lambda V6—which will also be used in the new Kia Cadenza flagship sedan—generating 290 hp and 252 lb-ft of torque. All-wheel drive is a fast-response system with either engine, driver-lockable. Torque vectoring and cornering control contribute to a solid safe feel over a wide range of driving surfaces and conditions.

The 2014 Kia Sorento starts at \$24,200 for the LX with 2.4L four or \$27,500 for the LX with V6. A midgrade EX with V6 starts at about \$30,000 and a top trim SX with V6 has a base price of about \$35,000.

We drove the Sorento second, during our dual-vehicle launch event, following the Forte Sedan. Despite moving from an obviously lower-centered and therefore presumably more sporty-handling format to this taller midsize crossover, we basically didn't find ride or handling lacking, whatsoever. Our drive did not include any off-road time, but our paved highways (see red route on map) included significant curves, hills and the occasional cliff-hanging drop-off. And those fast straight lines. All were handled fine at typical Arizona open highway speeds.

We have been seeing the Sorento on Valley highways two, three and four at a time—and there are many reasons why. If you need this type of vehicle, or even half-need its utility but like the format, the Kia Sorento belongs on the shortest version of your short list.



2014 Kia Forte Sedan

The Kia Forte generation being replaced is just three and a half years old. Given the typical development cycle of a new vehicle, this basically suggests that the new Forte was in the works pretty much as soon as the last one's first copy left the factory floor. "Continuous improvement" is a popular buzzword in business and industry, but this is more evidence that it's a way of life in Korea.

Check out that sexy stance in the lead photo. KMA national manager of product planning Ralph Tjoa tells us it was conceived to evoke the feel of a cheetah, ready to pounce. Or an archer, ready to shoot. In either case, it is intended to convey a feeling of strength, agility and motion. In this new generation, the sedan is picking up a lot of soul from the Forte Coup, without sacrificing four-door interior volume and utility. The Forte sedan was penned by the Kia Design Center America, in Irvine, California—the source of such inspired concepts as the Track'ster, Soul'ster and Cross GT (see Chicago Auto Show in this issue).

Great design is always a worthy goal, but Kia is driven to it by product focus groups, as much as by their own good taste. Customers identified styling and design as prime motivators in their purchase decision. Thus we see strong wheel arches, a longer greenhouse, a trunk that's two inches wider, taillights sporting 81 LEDs, and of course one of the strongest implementations of the brand's "tiger nose" grille.

(Notice how the tiger nose is accomplished in painted sheet metal on the Forte, but is incorporated into the chrome of the grille on the Sorento. It seems to us to be a stronger presence on the Forte. In Chicago, we asked Kia's lead designers whether this was driven by the fact that the hood seam abuts the grille on the Sorento, but not the Forte, or by other considerations. No, they said, it is just a matter of variety for variety's sake.)

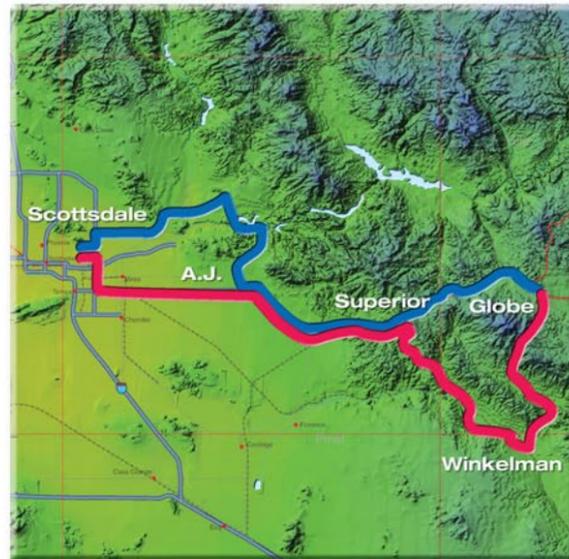
The Forte is likely to be a driver-driven purchase, and it comes with a driver-centric cockpit. The console is distinctly angled in the driver's favor, for an enhanced feeling of control. Friends and family are accommodated as well, with a longer, wider cabin and lower floor, providing more leg, head and shoulder room than the prior generation.

The engines are new. And they are "NU"—Kia's name for a series of smaller and lighter powerplants just entering the product stream. For the Forte, we have a 148-hp 1.8-liter multi-port injection (MPI) in the LX model and a 173-hp 2.0-liter gasoline direct-injection (GDI) in the EX.

The new Forte is reengineered to deliver increases in comfort—new suspension structure with comfortable ride in mind, driver-adjustable steering, and many NVH improvements, from instrument panel isolation to floor insulation, to engine note tuning, to reduction of idle vibration, to additional lightweight foam throughout. The car was already small and light enough to provide a sporty drive with good road feel, and these creature comforts do not detract from it.

Body aerodynamics—from new body panels, to small deflectors in key spots, to new wraparound taillights—reduce drag from a Cd of 0.29 to 0.27, almost matching the Kia Optima Hybrid's benchmark 0.26.

Body stiffness—which provides everything from solid handling to passive safety, to a degree of fuel effi-



ciency—is increased by 37 percent, largely through an increase in the use of high-tensile strengthened steel to 63 percent throughout (which is where fuel-shaving weight savings come into play).

If this sounds like a series of win-win-win propositions, you're right. Technologies and innovations from higher-end models continue to migrate down the lineup. (They also are enabling a migration up, which is where a new flagship Kia Cadenza is about to enter the scene, but that's another story for another day.) As an example of small but welcome touches, the Kia Forte now has ventilated seats, an exclusive in this segment.

Speaking of welcome, as you approach your new Kia Forte, the mirrors and lights will all come to life to welcome you aboard. (Of course you can fine-tune your preferences for all of this, if it doesn't float your boat.)

The base Kia Forte LX with manual transmission (another huge plus, right there) starts under \$16,000. Well-equipped, you can still top out in the mid-\$18s. (Full pricing details will become available in March.) Both the manual and automatic transmissions are 6-speeds.

The Forte EX (with the same 2.0L as the LX) moves to 17-inch wheels and offers comprehensive Premium and Tech Packages, with a base price under \$18,000 and a combined add-on of less than \$3000 even to max out with both of those packages. Expect an SX also, as in the prior lineup, with info to follow.

The Forte was our first drive of the two (see blue route on map). We departed downtown Scottsdale and used familiar shortcuts to duck out through Fountain Hills to the Beeline Highway, taking it north as far as Bush Highway, where a small caravan of Forte sedans with GoPro cams turned heads, snaking past Saguaro Lake and the Salt River at far better than snake-like speeds. From there, we cut down to the eastern reaches of Loop 202 and US 60, heading out through Apache Junction, to the canyons between Superior and Miami-Globe. The cars were great handlers, and we had a chance to sample multiple drivetrains. The 148-hp base LX model has a 6-speed manual standard, with an automatic available, while the EX—at 173 hp—is automatic-only. Now, there is a devil's bargain, as we would always rather have the horsepower, but prefer the manual transmission. But if

you want the power, and have a grand or two more to spend—and prefer the automatic—the choice is easy. If you really like to drive with two hands and three pedals, at least the process is easy, if not the choice: drive the LX and see how you like it. If your shifting style ekes out the grunt you seek from this engine, then you have a win-win: a less expensive car, and a clutch. There are plenty of competing cars whose horsepower falls anywhere in the range of these two, anyway (but may not offer the manual), so the odds lean in your favor.

Either way, you have a vehicle of tremendous fit, finish and value, with a surprisingly spacious back seat and trunk, clean and comfortable ergonomics, and that outstanding Kia warranty.

UVO eServices

Kia's electronics interface is via Microsoft-partnered UVO—"your voice." Early setups had music and phone functions, but customer feedback urged enhanced connectivity with the outside world and more content on "the emotional side." New UVO software adaptations in the 2014 Sorento (and other models, with more on the way) wrap telematic services into the mix—free for 10 years or 100,000 miles, with no contract—using your own smartphone's connectivity. This trend should serve consumers well, as proprietary systems are hard pressed to keep up with the rapid change of everyone's handheld mobile environments. As such, Kia chief technical strategist for the connected car Henry Bzeih tells us that the updated UVO eServices package is "not a challenger but a disrupter of the telematics industry."

Functions expand to include everything from phone, web and real-time mileage-based vehicle maintenance cues, to 911 connect (tied to airbag deployment), roadside assist, even contextual information about just how routine or serious a system warning light may really be—letting you finally know whether you actually need to deal with something right now or not.

With so much outside connectivity, Kia welcomes Google, Apple (including Siri), Pandora and other major partners into the mix—all of which of course offer free downloads and updates.

Kia for 2014 is clearly plugged in. ■

