

Straight to the top

By Joe Sage

Kia is a luxury brand. It hasn't been until now, but in one bold stroke, they have expanded the company from a value equation to upper niche lust. Or at least this is now a component of the overall plan.

It hasn't exactly been one stroke, although this is still a bold one. Last year's release of the front-drive Kia Cadenza sedan, which we called a flagship at the time, was a big step in this direction. A quantum leap in quality, value and content in the Optima, a couple of years prior to that, had also set the stage.

And there is little denying that cousin company Hyundai's once-surprising foray into the rear-drive luxury sedan market with the Equus, introduced in the US in 2010, was also sound preparation. (Interestingly, Hyundai largely keeps the corporate brand visibly off their sedan, badging it simply as Equus.)

Kia is making a different break from naming standards, departing from a series of very strong names—Forte, Cadenza, Sorento, Soul—to an alphanumeric for this.

The K900 already exists in the Korean market, where it is known as the K9. It's not hard to see why that name was not used here, but this really doesn't answer the question. Someone may say, "I have a 5 Series" or "I have an S quattro"—or "I have an Equus"—without mention of the broader brand. Time will tell whether "K900" takes on its own luxury panache. For now, we move on, from the mission and the name to the product itself.

FIRST impressions start in the usual way: visually. The Kia K900 is a handsome machine. If you had never seen the brand before, you would have no trouble understanding its niche—between the Audi A6 and A8, BMW 5 Series and 7 Series, Lexus GS and LS, or Mercedes-Benz E-Class and S-Class.

We've noted before that the Korean builders conquered fit and finish incredibly quickly and successfully a decade ago. If it weren't for recognizable style points on all of the above brands—in Kia's case an iteration of the tiger nose grille—you could easily slot the K900 into the entry luxury niche it joins.

If you still find any cognitive dissonance in all this, Kia has some buzz-phrases to help you grasp the new state of things. Luxury with a Kia badge brings you "a modern take on luxury, luxury that's more at ease, luxury you can live with," says PR director Scott McKee. It's time, he suggests, to get rid of "the luxury you know."

Kia marketing VP Michael Sprague points out that the JD Power and Associates Initial Quality Study for 2013 ranks Kia higher than Audi, Mercedes-Benz, Cadillac, Lincoln or BMW, with a rate of quality improvement that beats the industry.

Kia brand growth makes ripples outside its own industry, as well. Among Interbrand's Top Global Brands, Kia is now ahead of such giants as Harley-Davidson and Starbucks. Among Top Global Green Brands, they rank

even higher. Kia was confident they could take their brand even farther.

The US economy has evolved considerably over the past five years or so, while consumers over the same period have come to covet the smartphone in their hand at least as much as leather and lace. Technology, design and quality come together in this value luxury sedan to deliver what Sprague calls "post-recession luxury," tailored to new sensibilities. This is luxury with a value point, as McKee clarifies that the K900 is "about the product, rather than profits."

What that may mean to you is that it's a good time to buy, while they are still poised to prove this product in the marketplace. Skim the extensive features list at right, and see what about \$60 grand can take home. They have not scrimped. And compare the \$6000 option package, as well—adding touches you might otherwise find above \$100 grand.

TWO K900 fundamentals jump to the forefront: V8 power and rear-wheel drive. (There will later be a V6 model, and we will watch for all-wheel-drive versions of both.) Step on the gas, and any vehicle's weight shifts to the rear—making these the most responsive drive wheels, all the more useful when you have 420 horsepower headed straight to them from this new all-aluminum powerplant.

The full-size K900 weighs over two tons, but feels as nimble as it does solid. Handling is direct, with good road feel—a driver's car with comfortable luxury. The chassis is very rigid, with 75 percent high- and ultra-high-strength steel.



Noise-vibration-harshness (NVH) were tackled via more than 200 sound origination points, which were variously coated, covered or freed from friction. Extensive insulation and noise-reduction materials, including laminated windows, are complemented by an underbody airflow management system.

On the road, we appreciate the hydraulic component of the K900's steering architecture. The shift points on its 8-speed automatic—designed and developed in-house—are well-spaced, providing a straight power curve you can enjoy or ignore, depending upon your driving purpose and style.

INSIDE, the K900 is rich and spacious, with supple leather, soft-touch surfaces, supportive seats evocative of German brands (with a high-supporting seat extension in our sam-



KEEP RIGHT >>



SPECIFICATIONS

2015 KIA K900 V8 (SPRING 2014)

ENGINE	5.0L V8 DOHC GDI
POWER/TORQUE	420 hp / 376 lb-ft
WHEELS	19x9.0
TIRES	245/45R19 front / 275/40R19 rear
WEIGHT	4555 lb
MPG	15/23 (city/hwy)

2015 KIA K900 V6 (ARRIVING LATER)

ENGINE	3.8L V6 DOHC GDI
POWER/TORQUE	311 hp / 293 lb-ft
WHEELS	18x7.5
TIRES	245/50R18 front and rear
WEIGHT	4277 lb
MPG	18/27 (city/hwy)

TRANSMISSION	8-speed automatic
STEERING	electro-hydraulic
BRAKES	4-wheel disc, ABS
SUSPENSION	multi-link front/rear

OUR TEST K900 (WITH 5.0L V8)

INCLUDED: advanced airbags incl seat side and side curtain, ABS, traction control, ESC and VSM, shift-by-wire gear selector, Lexicon Logic 7 900-watt 17-speaker surround-sound audio, UVO eServices, nav with 9.2" display, 3 months SiriusXM, 3-zone climate control, blind spot detection, rear cross traffic alert, lane departure warning, front and rear cameras, front and rear parking sensors/guide system, illuminated door scuff plates, nappa leather seats and trim, genuine wood accents, ventilated front seats, heated front and rear seats, 12-way power driver's seat with lumbar and memory, keyless start and entry, heated power tilt/telescope leather-wrapped wood-trimmed steering wheel, leather-wrapped shift knob, leather upper dash, console and door panels, power close trunk, power rear sunshade, manual side sunshades, rear seat ski passthrough to trunk, rear seat center controls, panoramic sunroof with power shade, LED headlights, adaptive front lighting, LED marker and fog lights, power fold auto-dim mirrors, hydrophobic front windows, rain sensing wipers, chrome exhaust tips, LED taillamps.

WARRANTY:
 10-year/100,000-mile limited powertrain
 5-year/60,000-mile limited basic warranty
 5-year/60,000-mile roadside assistance

BASE PRICE.....\$59,500

VIP PACKAGE: smart cruise control, active vehicle safety management, soft-close power door latches, 12.3" LCD display, heads-up display, surround view monitor, driver's seat cushion extension, front power headrests, power reclining rear seats, ventilated rear seats, lateral adjusting rear headrests, rear seat lumbar support.....6000

FREIGHT AND HANDLING.....900

TOTAL.....\$66,400



The new Kia K900 luxury sedan is well-appointed and spacious, front and rear.

ple), power headrests and more. The multimedia system builds upon a 9.2-inch navigation screen (upgraded to 12.3" in our test car), with UVO eServices and a separate driver information control—a console knob—allowing a high degree of interaction without reaching for the screen or looking down. Add to that a heads-up display—always a welcome feature, and one of the better ones we've seen, with a user-adjustable array of information, all in 65,000 colors (about a thousand colors per purchase dollar). Surround view monitors integrate cameras front and rear—also used for backup, cross-traffic and so on—to create a virtual satellite view of yourself, useful when parking.

K900 and Hyundai Equus have the same wheelbase, though the K900 is 2.5 inches shorter overall. The K900 has more interior room—mostly in the front including more front headroom, but with a little less kneeroom in back. And the K900 has coil-over suspension, while Equus has an airbag system. Kia is less interested in Equus comparisons and more focused on the K900 being bigger inside than Lexus LS, BMW 7 Series regular wheelbase or Audi A8.

Another comparison could be with the new Mercedes-Benz CLA. While Kia pushes into the upper end—with a luxury product for less cost than its most prominent competition—Mercedes has moved into the sub-\$30,000 market, with a similar mission. The new Mercedes benefits from a lifetime of high-end “halo” cars (same bloodlines as an S-Class or SL), while Kia is inventing a halo car, which can rub off on their already hot-selling Rio, Optima, Soul and so on.

KIA has ever increasingly demonstrated that they can build a really good car—and they've demonstrated this once again with the K900. Kia has also demonstrated that they can build a really good brand, and that they can define it and retune its position as they go. We'll be watching closely to see how the market responds to the K900—their most elevated niche yet. ■

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