

Rollin' on the river

BY JOE SAGE

There's no mistaking that Hyundai is on a roll. Since the first Hyundai Excel hit our shores in 1986, the brand has grown exponentially. This goes hand in hand with South Korea's growth as a technical and manufacturing powerhouse—everyone is used to the quality and value of their Samsung and LG phones, appliances and TVs.

Hyundai has managed to hit all the right notes, bringing us style that has strongly influenced the industry and products in every mainstream niche, plus a niche or two we hadn't considered, like the innovative three-door Veloster or the Genesis Coupe. And they continue to deliver value, from their extensive warranties, to their feature inclusions, to the vehicle and option pricing itself.

As the Great Recession hit in 2008, Hyundai sales took a very small dip, the first in a decade, as nobody was shopping much, but then climbed faster than ever, as the Hyundai value equation hit home. From 2008 to 2009, their market share grew by 40 percent, as sales more than rebounded, and

sales have continued to climb since then, approaching 750,000 units in the US annually.

Through all this, Hyundai continues to expand, refine and refresh its product lineup. The last few years have brought us the Equus rear-drive flagship, the Elantra GT and Elantra Coupe, the Veloster Turbo, a completely reinvented Santa Fe and Santa Fe Sport family and the Tucson Fuel Cell. Earlier this year, we drove the latest Genesis Sedan, a rear-drive and all-wheel-drive sedan with a new skin, moving style a bit away from the complex folds and sweeps of recent years toward something a little more calm and conventional.

For 2015, Sonata—their hot-selling, wide-ranging entry in the biggest car segment of all, midsize sedans—has received a similar reskin. It also receives a wide range of powertrain options.

We flew to Memphis, Tennessee, to get our hands on the first two versions coming off the assembly line at Hyundai's plant in Alabama—a 2.4-liter Sonata in three trim levels, and a 2.0-liter



turbo Sonata offering enhanced performance in a lighter-weight package. We drove both models deep into the Mississippi Delta and back.

As summer rolls into fall, expect a Sonata Eco model with a smaller turbo—1.6 liters—leveraging its turbocharger to boost power in a 38-MPG gasoline model. And for mixed powertrain fans,

the Sonata Hybrid will still be available for 2015, though it is a continuation of the 2014 model, sheetmetal and all, at least for now.

Sonata had humble beginnings, with sales of just over 14,000 its first year, in 1998. That generation ran for seven years, consistently climbing until it hit 107,000-plus sales. The next generation launched in 2005, and sales jumped almost 22 percent, then another 15 percent the next year. That model ran five years, and as sales tapered off, the very familiar most recent model launched—with sales jumping by about 64 percent in one year, then in its second year, 2011, becoming the first Hyundai to top 200,000 annual sales in the US.

Sonata represents 29 percent of Hyundai's sales, second only (barely) to Elantra's 31 percent. Next is Santa Fe at 14 percent (with sales up 26 percent for the first six months year-over-year). Six other models share the remaining 26 percent.

Your new Hyundai will come with one of the most generous warranties in the business—10 years/10,000 miles on powertrain, 5 years/60,000 miles on the full vehicle, 5 years of roadside assistance and more. Their approach to warranties was developed when the brand was unfamiliar, and they have stuck with it. And why not ... they have few complaints. Out of 32 brands, Hyundai ranks number four in JD Power's Initial Quality Study, edged out only by Porsche, Jaguar and Lexus.

Sonata has won many awards over the past decade, from International Car of the Year, to a place on *Car and Driver's* 10 Best list, *Automobile's* All-Stars, KBB's Top 10 Family Cars and

5-Year Cost to Own lists—and on a less subjective scale has received NHTSA's 5-star safety rating and is an IIHS Top Safety Pick. Hyundai might be cautious about revising the Sonata—they consider it their "brand ambassador."

But they have gone all out.

The prior generation Sonata had body sculpting that would catch anybody's eye. (BMW, Ford and others seem to have followed suit.) Known by the company as Fluidic Sculpture, it has been simplified for 2015 (as on the Genesis Sedan); however, they still refer to it by the same name, now Fluidic Sculpture 2.0. We find it a bit tamer, but we agree with Hyundai that it's more "mature."

Maturity is a theme that responds to shifts in their customer base—shifts that delight any marketer. Their average buyer's age is now lower, education level is higher and income is greater.

The new Sonata is engineered toward these changes, internally—vehicle dynamics benefit from increased chassis rigidity, stiffer and stronger body panels, more weld points and insulation, all providing that more prosperous but younger driver with firm road condition feedback, while increasing ride quality and comfort and reducing road and ambient noise and vibration.

The interior is heavily reworked. The instrument panel and driver controls are more attractive, more useful, more modern and more distinctively Hyundai—following suit to the rework of the 2015 Genesis Sedan. Controls are grouped by

KEEP RIGHT >>

2015 HYUNDAI SONATA SPECS

2015 HYUNDAI SONATA 2.4L

ENGINE 2.4L Theta II GDI 4-cyl
TRANSMISSION 6-spd Shiftronic auto
DRIVETRAIN front-wheel drive
POWER/TORQUE 185 hp / 178 lb-ft
MPG: SE 25/37/29 (city/hwy/comb)
SPORT 24/35/28 (city/hwy/comb)
LIMITED 24/35/28 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE: 2.4L SE \$21,150
BASE PRICE: 2.4L SPORT \$23,175
BASE PRICE: 2.4L LIMITED \$26,525
• TOP RANGE: 2.4L LIMITED \$31,575

2015 HYUNDAI SONATA SPORT 2.0T

ENGINE 2.0T Theta II GDI turbo 4-cyl
TRANSMISSION 6-spd Shiftronic auto
DRIVETRAIN front-wheel drive
POWER/TORQUE 245 hp / 260 lb-ft
MPG 23/32/26 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE: SPORT 2.0T \$28,575
• TOP RANGE: SPORT 2.0T \$33,525

2015 HYUNDAI SONATA ECO 1.6T

ENGINE 1.6T DOHC D-CVVT turbo 4-cyl
TRANS 7-spd EcoShift dual clutch
DRIVETRAIN front-wheel drive
POWER/TORQUE 177 hp / 195 lb-ft
MPG 28/38/32 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE: ECO 1.6T \$23,275

2015 HYUNDAI SONATA HYBRID

ENGINE 2.4L Atkinson cycle 4-cyl
TRANS 6-spd electronic auto w/tq.conv
DRIVETRAIN front-wheel drive
POWER/TORQUE:
GAS ENGINE 159 hp / 154 lb-ft
ELECTRIC MOTOR 47 hp
COMBINED SYSTEM 199 net hp
MPG 36/40/38 (city/hwy/comb)
..... 36/40/37 (c/h/c) Hybrid Limited

BASE PRICE: HYBRID \$26,000
BASE PRICE: HYBRID LIMITED \$29,500



The 2015 Hyundai Sonata Sport 2.0T (245 hp, at left) is being pitched as "the car you want," while the 2.4-liter naturally aspirated Sonata (185 hp, above) is pitched as "the car you need." Of course, for many people, those two things can turn out to have the same solution.



Shown here on the Mississippi River and the lakes, levees and back roads of Mississippi are the 2.4-liter 2015 Hyundai Sonata Limited in Shale Grey over brown and the 2.0T in distinctive Urban Sunset over black. The Sonata 2.0T can be spotted from the front by its three-bar grille, from the side by a chrome strip on its rocker panel and from the back by its four distinct exhaust tips.

purpose and positioned to stay in the same plane of normal interplay, for minimal visual distraction.

Body styling details include handsome straight-line yet tapered-width LED running lights in the lower front fascia, a tidy strip of chrome flowing off the headlamp assembly along the hood/front fender seam—a detail we've appreciated on the Azera over the years—and a trim yet sculpted rear end, polished off by a standard lip spoiler and dual/quad exhaust tips. It all still creates a flow, but it's stronger and leaner.

We spent half a day driving south from Memphis into Mississippi, well into the Delta farms and flatlands along the Mississippi River, starting out with the 2.4-liter Sonata. After a BBQ lunch break at the Ground Zero Blues Club in Clarksdale, Mississippi (Morgan Freeman's place), we swapped over to the Sport 2.0T, which we drove back to Memphis by more of an inland route, with a bit more in the way of hills and curves—and kudzu covering the trees and berms.

It's not unusual to offer two such engines right about now—one longstanding mainstay and one smaller but more powerful turbo. Hyundai has chosen to play up the sporting nature of the 2.0T with its name and various styling details. With this stroke, they broaden their appeal—to the huge traditional midsize sedan market who "needs" such a car (the 2.4-liter range) and to the more sporting buyer who "wants" the extra power and panache of the Sport 2.0T.

They aim to pull customers from the usual suspects—Accord, Camry, Altima, Fusion, Malibu—plus a few more such as Optima, Chrysler 200 and Passat. (The Sonata distinguishes itself from other midsize sedans by having enough interior volume to fit the EPA large car class on the inside.) And if the distinct qualities of the Sport 2.0T pull a few prospects over from the German brands, Hyundai will be even happier.

We could consider ourselves fortunate to drive just two models that day, since you may drive as many as six or eight, when you shop Sonata. Once the Eco enters the flow, and counting the carry-over (old body style) Hybrid, with three 2.4L trim levels and an option range in the 2.0T, you have not only quite a variety, but also a fair amount of overlap, in price and fuel mileage (the latter being the whole reason for many of the options, though every Sonata gets decent to excellent MPG). Consistently high inclusion of features, with minimal and affordable option packages, make it all a

lot easier, though.

On our day, we enjoyed both. Granted, our terrain was flatter in the morning (with the 2.4L), and it wasn't the mountain West in the afternoon either (with the Sport 2.0T). Both delivered the power we needed in these conditions, along with all-day comfort, good navigation in unfamiliar turf, and solid audio.

If you compare the most fundamental specs (see the sidebar on the previous page), you'll see how the variables fall. Much depends upon your own driving style—not just whether you lick your lips at the 2.0T's higher horsepower, but how many miles you drive per year and over what kind of terrain. If you drive a lot, the Hybrid could be your baby, at 40 MPG. If you drive fewer miles, the new Eco model will approach that very closely, for \$3000-6000 less. And if you're really watching your purchase price and fuel mileage, too, the base 2.4L Sonata SE, at about 250 pounds less than the Limited, is still very close to the Eco in fuel mileage—one point less, highway—but at \$21,150 leaves you headroom to cover that tiny difference, all the tinier if you're not packing on the miles.

The Sport 2.0T adds turbo to its smaller displacement the way its name indicates: to deliver its promise of power and speed. It also has more responsive new dual-pinion motor-driven power steering. Other than the turbo model, lineup variables are notable but not critical—you can almost surely visit the Hyundai dealer, see what's on the lot and find one that's right for you. ■

