

OPTIMIZED BY JOE SAGE

It's hard to think back just five years, to the introduction of the stunning third-generation Kia Optima, from a company at the time known for its little Rio, Forte and Soul, a time before the full-size Cadenza and luxury K900.

Midsized sedans are the largest segment in the US, representing one out of every seven sales. The segment overall has taken a dip in 2015, but not Kia. Optima sales continue to climb, even in a market where most gains have been dependent upon truck sales.

You don't mess with success. But you do strive for continuous improvement. Kia is a master at both. Witness recent new generations of Soul and Sorento—both completely new models, yet both remaining immediately recognizable. Kia has applied their magic again with the fourth-generation 2016 Optima.

WE FLEW via Denver to Aspen, Colorado, where we could drive the new Optima on a combination of high mountain passes, full of unmatched twists, turns, climbs and drops, two-lane mountain valley highways, and Interstates with scenery as stunning as the rest.

Our route took us over Independence Pass (summit 12,096 feet, surrounded by 14,000-foot-plus peaks), through historic Leadville, to a sandwich stop in Vail Village (where moose were roaming free that day), west on I-70 through Glenwood Canyon, a highway engineering showpiece along the Colorado River through spectacular Glenwood Canyon—then back through the Roaring Fork Valley to Snowmass, where our day had begun.

Winter here is so extreme that Independence Pass will simply close for the season.

And snow can start early—as early as Labor Day. We were lucky this fall day, with clear blue high country skies, dry pavement and the last vestiges of Colorado's brief but beautiful fall colors in the aspen groves.

THEY DON'T brag of Optima as a "3-killer." They don't even bill it as a sports sedan. But they could. Our SXL's 260 lb-ft of torque delivered 245 hp to the ground with all the power we needed, as we maximized both speed and control through tight turns and rapid elevation changes (without guardrails, in most cases, to accommodate both snow removal and rock slides). Rack and pinion steering has column-mounted electric boost, rather than rack-mounted, with great hands-on feel.

Kia hired Albert Biermann, previously BMW vice president of M engineering, in fall 2014. He has made his mark, starting with the Optima's new four-point suspension geometry and construction. The Kia Optima is in fact central to the brand's increasingly successful motorsports strategy.

We bore down, and the drivetrain and

exhaust delivered a satisfying soundtrack.

Pushing the Optima's sporty character could shortchange its value as an autobahn cruiser, which they also don't brag about. But again they could. Our open highway miles felt as swift, comfortable and luxurious as they might in a long-wheelbase premium German sedan at three times the price.

Also delivering a satisfying soundtrack was the 630-watt Harman/Kardon Quantum-Logic Surround 10-speaker premium audio system, with ClariFi technology that recreates a digital source's original dynamics. This is included in the SXL and available in other higher trims, while the already highly impressive Harman/Kardon Infinity system remains in midlevel cars. As usual, Harman helps Kia deliver a stunning system, included, that might cost half again the price of this car to match in many premium models.

A FULL complement of driving technologies, including ABS and EBD, traction control, electronic stability control, stability management and hill start assist are standard inclusions across the full model lineup. Our car

KEEP RIGHT >>

2016 KIA OPTIMA

OPTIMA LX 2.4, EX 2.4

ENGINE.....	2.4L 4-cylinder GDI
POWER/TORQUE.....	185 hp / 178 lb-ft
WEIGHT.....	LX 2.4: 3219 lb
.....EX 2.4: 3362 lb	
FUEL ECONOMY.....	LX 2.4: 25/37/30 city/hwy/comb
.....EX 2.4: 24/35/28 city/hwy/comb	
BASE PRICE.....	LX 2.4: \$21,840
.....EX 2.4: \$24,890	

OPTIMA LX 1.6T

ENGINE.....	1.6L 4-cylinder GDI turbo
POWER/TORQUE.....	178 hp / 195 lb-ft
WEIGHT.....	LX 1.6T: 3224 lb
FUEL ECONOMY.....	LX 1.6T: 28/39/32 city/hwy/comb
BASE PRICE.....	LX 1.6T: \$23,990

OPTIMA SX 2.0T, SXL 2.0T

ENGINE.....	2.0L 4-cylinder GDI turbo
POWER/TORQUE.....	245 hp / 260 lb-ft
WEIGHT.....	SX 2.0T: (w/o, w pano snrf) 3494-3594 lb
.....SXL 2.0T: (w pano snrf) 3594 lb	
FUEL ECONOMY.....	SX 2.0T: 22/32/26 city/hwy/comb
.....SXL 2.0T: 22/32/25 city/hwy/comb	
BASE PRICE.....	SX 2.0T: \$29,690
.....SXL 2.0T: \$35,790	

TRANS/DRIVE.....	6-spd auto / FWD
BRAKES.....	LX, EX 12.0 vent, 11.2 solid
.....SX, SLX 12.6 vent, 11.2 solid	
WHEELBASE.....	110.4 in
LEGROOM FRONT/REAR.....	45.5 in / 35.6 in
HEADROOM FRONT/REAR.....	39.8 in / 37.8 in
TURNING CIRCLE.....	35.8 ft
CARGO VOLUME.....	15.9 cu ft
FUEL.....	87 octane regular



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was a top trim SXL, which also comes standard with blind spot detection, lane departure warning, rear parking sensors, rear cross traffic alert, front collision warning and autonomous emergency braking. These are all optionally available on the SX, and about half are options on the others.

Electronics also include both Android Auto and Apple CarPlay, delivering messaging, nav, phone and other operations through your smartphone. There is also breakthrough wireless charging—just set your phone on the console—for phones with inductive technology (Android as of now).

EVERY MODEL includes Driver Mode Select, with Normal, Sport and Eco settings. All perform well. We used Sport in that thin air, to maximize twists and turns, as it changes shift points and tightens the steering ratio.

There are three engine choices in the new Optima, as charted on the previous page. They may sound familiar, but are reengineered with 66 percent new parts and entirely new turbochargers. LX and EX trims get a naturally-aspired 2.4-liter GDI, while SX and SXL models have a more powerful 2.0-liter turbo, which is also a little thirstier, though still delivering highway fuel mileage in the 30s, as they all do.

New to the Optima is a 1.6-liter turbo with a big boost in torque over the 2.4L (almost 200 lb-ft) delivered hand in hand with a 39 MPG highway rating. This winning combo is the second-lowest priced Optima in the lineup (LX 1.6T). Intriguing.

Our SXL had the same six-speed automatic the whole lineup has with one exception: the LX 1.6T has an equally intriguing seven-speed dual clutch transmission. (This model was not there that day.)

Across the lineup, you will find hot-stamped satin metal finishes and matte black elements from the premium K900 sedan, new and distinct LED taillights, an all-new instrument panel with a stronger horizontal plane, a heated D-shaped steering wheel, more premium soft touch surfaces, including leather and quilted Nappa leather—more luxury and a premium feel throughout.

Rear passengers get their own USB ports, and front and rear can enjoy an available panoramic sunroof (included on SXL, optional on EX and SX).

Special attention has been paid to the front seats, with a new steel frame, four layers of foam—and now adjustable passenger seat height.

The new model uses advanced materials—a 100 percent increase in high-strength steel and a 150 percent increase in ultra-high-strength steel—to create a stronger, tighter, lighter structure (torsional rigidity is increased by 58 percent) and a cabin three and a half cubic feet larger—within a car that's just a half-inch longer, about an inch narrower, a half-inch less high, on a half-inch

shorter wheelbase, and which has shed 40 pounds. The new Optima claims class-leading specifications for front leg and headroom, rear leg, head and hip room and cargo capacity.

EVEN WITH our top line SXL model, everything that made our Colorado day great can be all yours in the mid-\$30s. Or you can get most of it starting in the low to mid \$20s. Even the base model at \$21,840 has added a wide range of standard features, while keeping the entry price the same.

And all models still come with the famous Kia 10-year, 100,000-mile warranty program.

As fast as Kia has been growing its market share (along with its JD Power quality ratings, moving from dead last in 2001 to now second only to Porsche), the Kia Optima has been its top-selling vehicle for three years running. Optima is their first vehicle to sell over 150,000 units in a year.

They expect this to stay on track, with a lot of gains coming from current midsize sedan owners at trade-in time. The ownership and replacement cycle is longer than average in this segment, so they expect a lot of people—with outdated ideas of what Kia offers, based on their last shopping a decade or more past—to discover something new and, as they say, delighting.

The discovery process will be helped along by an entertaining new series of Optima ads starring NBA great Blake Griffin—and the Optima—"in the zone," which we previewed in Aspen.

Kia Optima is so popular in the US, and sales so strong, its production has been domestic since the prior generation three model. Optima is built at the KMMG (Kia Motors Manufacturing Georgia) plant in West Point GA, along with the Sorento. ■

