

Always ahead of the curve By Joe Sage

Almost a decade back, when the brand was still getting its footing in the US, Kia had a website called KiaMatch.com (“Drive the one you love”), where you would answer personality questions and such, getting an artificial intelligence match of your most appropriate Kia vehicle. The Kia Sportage in those days was a more meager affair. Yet, we who then drove a full-size 4x4 pickup and a sports car were solidly matched to the Sportage. Turns out a key Kia marketing executive from that era had also been matched with the Sportage, and he, too, was a bit surprised.

Today, we would not be at all surprised. The third-generation Sportage, introduced six years ago as a 2011 model, is a sharp little number. Not that little anymore, either, despite being the compact sibling to Sorento. Seating five, hauling 54.6 cu.ft. of cargo and towing 2000 pounds, it has

been a very capable entry in this segment.

We got wind of a fourth-gen Sportage last fall. The new Sportage was to be revealed at the LA Auto Show in November, and we would be there. The reveal was cleverly done. Masked in winter camo, a quasi-amorphous subcompact utility was surrounded by a performance troupe who quickly peeled away the disguise. As is often the case, the first teaser photos hadn’t given a full experience. As we walked around the new Sportage, taking in its shape and its details—a combination of curves and angles echoing the sleek, lightweight strength of a fighter jet—we had our first glimpse of a new styling direction of the most successful kind, briefly startling, then immediately current, making its predecessor the past, and suddenly the future is now.

The first Kia Sportage in the US arrived with

Kia itself for 1994, “and Sportage has been with us every step of the way,” says Kia Motors America COO Michael Sprague. This was just three years after the first Ford Explorer, and both at the time were available as four-doors or shorter two-doors (known by Kia as five- and three-doors, including hatch). While Explorer has grown a lot, Sportage picked up its big brother Sorento in 2003 and has stayed in the compact niche.

Sprague now declares another “reinvention of the Kia brand” in a rapidly changing marketplace, and the new Sportage rides the crest of this wave, “crafted for the urban pioneer.”

The tiger nose grille remains, while curvaceous headlights set high and back define a new three-dimensional flow. This may be among the most challenging things for stylists to achieve, whether in clay, computer generation, their own minds or

combinations thereof. The new machine carries a full dose of brand equity, while delivering a double dose of next direction.

Kia Sportage is a compact crossover, but could almost be taken for a small midsize. With Kia’s Sportage and Sorento crossover lineup, and with Sorento seating up to seven, Sportage does start to close that gap more than it used to, probably because of the market’s downsizing awareness as much as due to Sportage evolution. The new Sportage starts out at 3300 pounds or so, but with full turbo trim, options and all-wheel drive, it can approach two tons—a very solid compact utility.

This growth comes with impressive capabilities for a smaller machine. Kia recently entered the new Sportage in Mudfest, the NWAPA Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year competition (see elsewhere in this issue), where it proved itself on challenging off-road courses, as well as a paved handling and performance course. The new Sportage is stylish enough for every degree of urban duty and powerful enough for highway cruising, yet has some serious utility in its bones.

“A lot has changed” since the arrival of the prior Sportage in 2011, Sprague says, with tre-



mendous progress in performance, reliability, technology, safety and owner satisfaction. Kia is number two in JD Power’s Initial Quality Study, has Top Ten spots with Consumer Reports and ALG Residual Value Awards, and is a Top Safety Pick with IIHS. Seven Kia motorsports championships in six years are additional achievements.

The new Kia Sportage looks European, not



The Anza-Borrego Desert between Arizona and San Diego was the perfect place to test our new Kia Sportage, with its combination of rough and ready capabilities and a stylish edge.



2017 KIA SPORTAGE LX

ENGINE	.....2.4L GDI 4-cyl
DRIVETRAIN	.....FWD, AWD
HORSEPOWER/TORQUE	.....181 hp / 175 lb-ft
TRANSMISSION	.....6-spd auto
FIRST GEAR	.....4.212:1
FINAL RATIO	.....3.064:1 FWD / 3.195:1 AWD
WHEELS/TIRES	.....7.0Jx17 alloy / P225/60R17
BRAKES	.....12.0 / 11.9
WEIGHT	.....FWD: 3305 lb / AWD: 3596 lb
TOWING	.....1650 lb / w trailer brakes 2000 lb
MPG	.....FWD: 23/30/26 city/hwy/comb
	.....AWD: 21/25/22 city/hwy/comb

2017 KIA SPORTAGE EX

ENGINE	.....2.4L GDI 4-cyl
DRIVETRAIN	.....FWD, AWD
HORSEPOWER/TORQUE	.....181 hp / 175 lb-ft
TRANSMISSION	.....6-spd auto
FIRST GEAR	.....4.212:1
FINAL RATIO	.....3.064:1 FWD / 3.195:1 AWD
WHEELS/TIRES	.....7.0Jx18 alloy / P225/55R18
BRAKES	.....12.0 / 11.9
WEIGHT	.....FWD: 3305 lb / AWD: 3596 lb
TOWING	.....1650 lb / w trailer brakes 2000 lb
MPG	.....FWD: 22/29/25 city/hwy/comb
	.....AWD: 21/25/23 city/hwy/comb

2017 KIA SPORTAGE SX TURBO

ENGINE	.....2.0L Turbo GDI 4-cyl
DRIVETRAIN	.....FWD, AWD
HORSEPOWER/TORQUE	.....240 hp / 260 lb-ft
TRANSMISSION	.....6-spd auto
FIRST GEAR / FINAL RATIO	.....4.651:1 / 3.320:1
WHEELS/TIRES	.....7.5Jx19 alloy / P245/45R19
BRAKES	.....12.6 / 11.9
WEIGHT	.....FWD: 3666 lb / AWD: 3898 lb
TOWING	.....1650 lb / w trailer brakes 2000 lb
MPG	.....FWD: 21/26/23 city/hwy/comb
	.....AWD: 20/23/21 city/hwy/comb

SEATING	.....5
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	.....176.4 in / 105.1 in
GROUND CLEARANCE	.....6.4 in
TURNING CIRCLE	.....34.8 ft
CARGO VOLUME	.....30.7 / 60.1 / 129.3 cu.ft.
BASE PRICE	.....LX: \$22,990
	.....EX: \$25,500
	.....SX TURBO: \$32,500
AWD ADD TO ANY	.....+\$1,500
DESTINATION CHARGE	.....\$895

Various options and packages can bring LX and EX more toward SX Turbo feature set.

Asian, says product planning VP Orth Hedrick. At 73 inches, it's now the widest in the segment, providing interior space, an athletic posture and a stable stance. Overall length grows by 1.6 inches, while sleek sheet metal drops Cd from .35 to .33. Swept-back, streamlined headlights are offset by a bold "ice cube" LED foglight cluster.

A wheels-to-the-corners stance helps improve approach angles for off-road duty.

The latest implementation of Kia's UVO system includes new 320-watt 8-speaker audio, capacitive gesture touchscreen, and both Apple and Android systems, with 14 free services via your smartphone. Hedrick describes "a feeling of precision and craftsmanship," with soft-touch surfaces, a larger panoramic sunroof and a console that tilts 7.2 degrees toward the driver. Legroom and headroom are up. Cargo space is increased 18 percent. Access, through a smart liftgate that opens in just three seconds, is two inches lower, and the floor can move down for maximum volume.

Advanced Driver's Assistance includes forward collision warning, autonomous emergency braking, rear cross traffic alert, lane departure warning and blind spot detection that monitors other vehicles as much as 230 feet behind.

The body is 51 percent advanced high-strength steel, shaving 55 pounds off the vehicle's weight. Fully 113 yards of structural adhesive prevent squeaks and rattles and provide a smooth ride.

A base 2.4-liter engine in LX and EX models has more torque at lower RPMs and delivers up to 30 MPG highway. The SX has a heavily revised 2.0-liter turbo four, boasting a quicker response and, at 240 hp versus 181 for the 2.4L, the feel of a much larger engine. Both have an upgraded 6-speed automatic that delivers smoother shifts with less gear-hunting. Brakes are upgraded for a 12 percent shorter braking distance.



For \$1500 on any model, a new Magna Dynamax intelligent AWD system is predictive rather than reactive, fully integrated with all vehicle electronics. It promises function that matches a fully mechanical unit, but without that weight and complexity. A presentation video on this technology showed mind-blowing precision.

Our drive started in San Diego and climbed through the big passes to the east, to Anza-Borrego Desert State Park—a route combining interstates, curvy two-lane mountain cruising and some time digging into the sand and dirt. At Mudfest, we tackled deep mud, steep climbs, ruts, hammer-hard log runs and more. The new Sportage was a gem in all instances.

The new Kia Sportage has matured nicely. It still starts at \$22,990. Our AWD SX Turbo included everything and hit \$34,000. If you prefer the 2.4L engine, LX and EX models can add what Hedrick calls "the most affordable features in the segment," such as heated seats (\$1500), Android/Apple (\$1505), full leather (\$2590) or 18-inch wheels (\$650). If budget allows, it's pretty hard to beat the line-topping SX Turbo with AWD. ■

