

Road beat: Sonata boasts world-class interior



Sonata continues to make improvements with 2016 model.
Photos/Larry Weitzman

By Larry Weitzman

About two months ago I spent some time with the all-new 2015 Hyundai Sonata Limited powered by the Theta 2.4L direct injected inline four-cylinder engine. For a detailed discussion of the new refined Fluidic Sculpture 2.0 see that story. Suffice it to say the new refined look is more pleasing in every way, with a more aggressive grille, straighter lines showing off its sleekness and improved proportions with a better cabin line.

As reported, the size of the Sonata has grown by about an inch

in wheelbase, length, width and track improving balance, stability and handling.



Specifications

Price \$21,150 to about \$35,000

Engine

Four cylinder inline 16 valve 2.4L 185 hp @ 6,000 rpm

178 lb.-ft. of torque at 4,000 rpm

Four cylinder inline 16 valve 2.0L 245 hp @ 6,000 rpm

260 lb.-ft. of torque @ 1,350-4,000 rpm

Transmission

Six speed torque converter automatic with a semi manual mode

Configuration

Transverse mounted front engine with front wheel drive

Dimensions (Sport)

Wheelbase 110.4 inches

Length 191.1 inches

Width 73.4 inches
Height 58.1 inches
Track (f/r) 62.9/63.1 inches
Ground clearance 5.3 inches
Cabin volume 106.1 cubic feet
Trunk volume 16.3 cubic feet
Fuel Capacity 18.5 gallons
Weight 3,505 pounds
Steering lock to lock 2.78 turns
Turning circle 35.8 feet
Wheels 18X7.5 inch alloys
Tires 235/45X18
Co-efficient of drag 0.27

Performance

0-60 mph 7.21 seconds
50-70 mph 3.22 seconds
50-70 uphill 4.41 seconds
Top Speed Beyond sanity
Fuel economy EPA rated at 23/32/26 city/highway/combined.
Expect 26-27 mpg in suburban driving and 35 plus mpg on a level highway at 70 mph.

But the new Sport 2.0LT also gets a new engine or a new version of Hyundai's 2.0L direct injected turbo engine which uses a twin scroll turbocharger, which doesn't mean twin turbo but a turbo with smaller twin internal impellers of different sizes. Such a system improves turbo response. It produces 245 hp at 6,000 rpm and 260 pounds of twist from an off idle 1,350 to 4,000 rpm meaning it is making 198 hp at 4,000 rpm as well. At peak hp, torque has already fallen off to 214 pounds of twist. The engine runs a high for a turbo, 10:1 compression helping low speed response.

This is not Sonata's only turbo engine. There is another 1.6L turbo designed for the ECO model for improved fuel economy. Although not tested, it shouldn't be a performance slouch in any way shape, matter or form as it knocks down 177 hp at a low 5,500 rpm and 185 pounds of torque between 1,500 and 4,500 rpm or about the same numbers produced by the normally aspirated 2.4L Theta engine. But the ECO gets a seven speed dual clutch tranny which should give it as good if not better performance than the Theta powered Sonata while picking up a couple of mpg. Power in the Sport is sent to the front wheels via its six-speed torque converter auto cog swapper with paddle shifters which I mostly ignored.

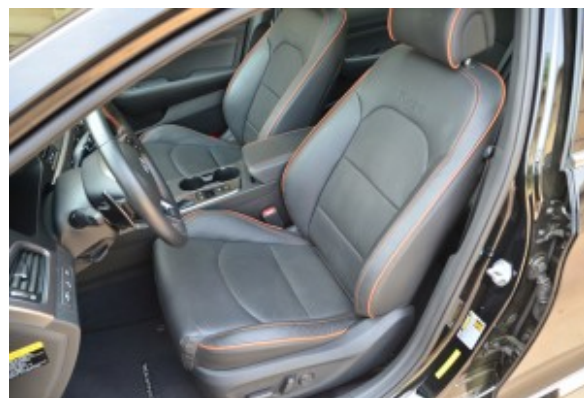
The Sport model gets some other niceties like a chrome rocker strip that accentuates its length, a fabulous, heavily bolstered interior which we will discuss later, a dual pinion steering rack, sporty tightened-up suspension, a trick flat bottom steering wheel with paddle shifters, mechanical gauges and more.

Performance is most improved in the midrange as 0-60 mph improves about half a second with an average time of 7.21 seconds. But passing times are much improved with a 50-70 mph time on the level of 3.22 seconds and 4.41 seconds up a six percent grade. Compared to the Theta powered Sonata whose times were 7.82, 4.25 and 6.56 seconds respectively, you can see the huge passing performance improvement with the Sport turbo engine. But a comparison should be made to the Camry V-6 which sports only 23 more hp and 12 pounds of less torque from its 3.5L V-6, yet posts performance times as if has 50-100 more hp. This example and comparison just demonstrates that there is no replacement for displacement. The Camry V-6 posted times of 5.35, 2.67 and 3.53 seconds. There is horsepower and then there is horsepower. The Camry V-6 gives up a couple of mpg to the Hyundai Sport Turbo, however. Maybe the Toyota motor has underrated hp and torque numbers as well.

Fuel economy is EPA rated at 23/32/26 mpg

city/highway/combined. Overall the Sport 2.0 Turbo averaged about 26-27 mpg and achieving 35.2 mpg on a level highway two way run at 70 mph. In a round-trip from Placerville to South Lake Tahoe the Sport averaged 30.6 mpg, which is excellent and there was no feathering of the throttle as speeds were kept near 60 mph. Sonata's large 18.5 gallon fuel tank is a real benefit when long distance cruising.

Suspension is by state of the art MacPherson struts up front with a sophisticated revised and improved multilink system in the rear. Sport is more than name only as the stab bars are thicker by a millimeter, springs are stiffer, the trick Mando dual flow shocks have been revised and the whole system is retuned for changing direction and the Sport does just that and does it extremely well. Track is actually down by two-tenths of an inch because the wheels are wider by half an inch (18x7.5 inch alloys) and the tires grow from 215/55x17 to some real meaty 235/45x18, which is substantial. The improved dual pinion power rack steering remains very quick at 2.78 turns lock to lock. With the extra rubber on the road and lower profile tires and fortified suspension, the Sport flat out corners. Grip is vice-grip like and steering accuracy is spot on. Body roll is also well controlled. I would give the handling nod to the Sonata Sport over the Camry V-6.



The interior of the Sonata sets it apart from others.

Ride quality is a bit firmer than say a Sonata Limited or even the Camry V-6. And that is good as the Sport while still extremely smooth and quiet is preferred by me, an excellent balance of handling and ride. Sport is also solid, feeling as if it was carved out of an ingot. The engine spins a low 2,050 rpm at 70 mph in sixth gear and there is no road noise and wind noise. It is a quiet car.

Sport also gets bigger front ventilated discs and in braking tests, possibly due also to the bigger wheels and wide rubber, the Sport stops in a benchmark 40 feet from 40 mph. Fantastic brakes. All the safety acronyms are standard including a rear view camera and blind spot detection. Superb HID headlights are very good. Only the lane departure warning and forward collision avoidance was optional, which might be advisable if you're an inattentive driver, but I found the collision avoidance a sometime annoyance and distracting in its own right.

Now to the best part, the Sonata's world-class interior. The leather is soft and luxurious, the design is sharp with superb side bolster and the dark orange piping and double French stitching on the seats, the aforementioned, flat bottom steering wheel, door panels and shifter. One of the best interiors out there, especially for a sticker of \$28,575. Fit and finish is excellent.

Instrumentation couldn't be better, clear, clean and concise. Big tach and speedo flank an information center which includes a trip computer which gives you both average and instantaneous fuel economy info simultaneously.



Sonata provides smooth handling on mountain roads.

Rear seating is huge as the Sonata is classified as a large car. In my tester with the Ultimate Package (\$4,950), they were also heated. Truck capacity is also large at over 16 cubic feet.

While a base Sonata starts at \$21,150 plus \$810 for the train and truck from its Montgomery, Ala., assembly plant, this super well-equipped Sport will set you back \$28,575 plus destination. If you want the ECO model with the smaller turbo four plus the seven speed dual clutch and improved fuel economy that will cost \$23,275. My tester came with two options, the obligatory embroidered carpeted floor mats for the bargain price of \$125 and the \$4,950 Ultimate package which I would live without. The standard sound system is fabulous and has XM and I certainly could easily live without the smart cruise, auto high beams and some other niceties. This Sport is so well equipped right out of the box, unless you need the trick LED interior lights, save the five grand. But you can decide for yourself.

Larry Weitzman has been into cars since he was 5 years old. At 8 he could recite from memory the hp of every car made in the U.S. He has put in thousands of laps on racetracks all over the Western United States.