

Road Beat: Kia Optima – a guilt free car



The 2016 Kia Optima LX Turbo combines incredible fuel economy with performance. Photos/Larry Weitzman

By Larry Weitzman

Kia has been in the United States market for just more than 20 years and it has come a long way from their little Sephia, which in Kia's first commercials was shown chasing a Honda Civic throughout a city, to their now world class K900. When Kia brought out the third generation Optima as a 2011 model, its stunning good looks shook up the mid-size car world. I agree. If you wonder why Kia has had so many great designs, Kia's president is also its chief designer, Peter Schreyer, who in a prior life designed for VW.

For 2016, Optima enters its fourth generation. The new body is a bit tighter and sleeker, but the overall shape and influence

of the third generation still remains in its DNA as there is a resemblance. Instead of being revolutionary, its evolutionary. In that evolution, Optima's wheelbase and length has grown by half an inch (110.4 and 191.1 inches, respectively) and width is up by a full inch to 73.2 inches. While it stands almost half an inch taller, it looks lower with the wider stance and taut sheet metal. Coefficient of drag is a slick 0.27.

But what makes this particular Optima of the new generation so unique is the small 1.6L turbocharged engine and its new super-efficient seven speed dual clutch automatic. Dual clutch automated manuals, introduced by Audi and VW in 2005 have no torque converter which even though are extremely efficient today, still have a hydraulic coupling torque converter. With a dual clutch, the tranny is always connected to the drive wheels, using electronically controlled clutches to perform the shifts and slippage during starting from a stop.



Specifications

Price \$23,990 to about \$30,000

Engine

1.6L DOHC, 16 valve turbocharged inline four cylinder 178 hp @ 5,500 rpm; 195 lb.-ft. of torque @ 1,500-4,000 rpm

Transmission

Seven speed dual clutch

automated manual

Configuration

Transverse mounted front engine/front wheel drive

Dimensions

Wheelbase 110.4 inches

Length 191.1 inches

Width 73.2 inches

Height 57.7 inches

Ground clearance 5.3 inches

Track (f/r) 63.5/63.8 inches

Weight 3,224 pounds

Fuel capacity 18.5 gallons

Trunk capacity 15.9 cubic feet

Passenger capacity 104.8 feet

Steering lock to lock 2.78

Turning circle 35.8 feet

Wheels 6.5X16 inch alloys

Tires 205/65X16

Co-efficient of drag 0.27

Performance

0-60 mph 7.28 seconds

50-70 mph 3.68 seconds

50-70 mph uphill 5.56 seconds

Top speed plenty fast

Fuel economy EPA rated 28/39/32 mpg

city/highway/combined.

Overall in rural country driving expect 34 mpg. On

the highway at legal speeds should net 44 mpg.

Knocking down 178 hp at a low 5,500 rpm and 195 pounds of

twist which hits at an off idle 1,500 rpm and lasts to 4,000 rpm, this conventional gas powered passenger car returns amazing performance and incredible fuel economy. No batteries or electric motors here, just great design.

Zero-60 mph arrives in a scant 7.28 seconds which is about a half second quicker than the standard 185 hp normally aspirated 2.4L inline four. Passing performance clearly bests the 2.4L model with a 50-70 mph sprint lasting only 3.68 seconds and the same run up a six-seven percent grade only extending that time to 5.56 seconds. This is a high performance automobile. And with its high for a turbo compression ratio of 10:1, turbo lag is significantly reduced.

Shifts are almost imperceptible, almost like a CVT. It's a superb powertrain.

Now for the better news.

EPA rates this 1.6 turbo Optima at 28/39/32 mpg city/highway/combined. On the highway in a two-way run at 70 mph on cruise control it recorded an average fuel economy of 44 mpg. That's getting close to many hybrids. Overall this Optima returned 34 mpg even though it was hard not to dip into its delicious throttle. A 140-mile round trip to South Lake Tahoe on Highway 50 averaged 37.1 mpg and that includes several full throttle passes made in the passing zones. One nice feature of a turbo is the altitude doesn't reduce engine hp as in a normally aspirated engine. With its large 18.5 gallon fuel tank, highway range extends out to an easy 700 miles, longer than most single engine light airplanes.

Changing directions is not quite like the performance minded 2.0T SXL model, but it is still quite adept. All models get the same MacPherson struts up front and a multilink independent system holding up the rear with stab bars at both ends. The electric rack steering is quick at 2.78 turns and the turning circle is good at 35.8 feet. But it comes with

just 6.5X16 inch wheels which are shod with taller 205/65 series tires. While ordinary handling is excellent, three other Optima's get standard bigger wheels and tires, either 7X17 inch alloys (EX) or 7.5X18 inch alloys (SX & SXL) with the SX getting some serious 235/45 series tires. They (EX, SX) probably get some recalibrate the spring and damping rates as well to sharpen up the handling. But understand the LX as all fourth generation Optima's handle better as a result of a much stiffer (58 percent more torsional rigidity) and lighter chassis so from generation to generation handling is improved from good to even better. And to further emphasize the point, track is a wide 64 inches front and rear. As a result, this LX is still a credible handler and it will satisfy 99 percent of drivers, me included, it's just not ready for the track, although with a couple of tweaks, it might surprise someone.

Kias have a new found quiet and this new LX turbo is no exception. It is quiet. On the highway the engine spins about 2,050 rpm at 70 mph and is totally inaudible. Wind and road noise is obviously subdued. It also has an extremely supple ride with no float, able to handle the biggest bumps like Superman, in a single well damped bound.

Braking is by four wheel discs (front are one foot in diameter and ventilated) with ABS and other acronyms. Electronic stability control, traction control, seven airbags and more are standard. Brakes are strong, stopping the Optima in 41 feet from 40 mph under perfect control. My tester had the Tech Package which added blind spot monitoring, Nav, rear cross traffic and a lot more (\$2,600).

Inside is a cloth interior and soft touch materials everywhere. Seats are very comfortable. The IP contains a full complement of instrumentation and a complete trip meter so you can keep track of your fuel economy. The center stack is easy to use, no college degree required and that's a blessing. It is also non-distracting. Rear seating can handle three adults with ease and the trunk now holds 16 cubic feet of baggage and

overall with 105 cubic feet of interior space, the Optima is considered a large car by the EPA.

OK, here's the deal, the LX 1.6 turbo stickers for just \$23,990. Add the Tech Package and \$825 for shipping from West Point, Ga. That totals \$27,415. If you are thinking of buying an expensive hybrid, you must check out this Optima. It costs thousands less, performs as well if not better (actually much better than the smaller hybrids) and almost gets the same fuel economy. This Kia Optima is a guilt free car. You can stick your foot into it and go like a slightly scalded dog and still achieve astonishing fuel economy. If you get on the Interstate for a road trip, the fuel tank will easily out last your personal tank unless you and your passengers all are equipped with a "Motorman's Friend."

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.