

Road Beat: Improved design on Sportage



The latest Kia Sportage has substantive improvements.
Photos/Larry Weitzman

By Larry Weitzman

Kia Sportage was launched in the United States in about 1994, a year after Kia arrived in the United States with the Sephia. Now in its fourth generation, which came out about a year ago, the Sportage has grown by an inch and a half in wheelbase and length over generation three. While the new design, again by Kia President Peter Schreyer, it has a strikingly similar design with most changes in detailing. But the profile and window line are similar.

However, Schreyer's design improvements make a big difference. It has lost some of its bulk, especially in the front end. The

new Kia signature grille is smoother and more refined. It has been given a set of menacing four block driving lights a la the K900, Kia's super luxury car. New taillights give the new Sportage a cohesive, slick modern look. Everything ties together beautifully. I am not a fan of the truncated window line and its "Hofmeister kink" terminating the rear window line. It gives the Sportage a bit of a stubby ending. Wilhelm Hofmeister was the legendary BMW designer who first used the "reverse" window line design in the 1961 BMW 1500.

Now with a length of just 176.4 inches on a wheelbase of 105 inches, Sportage offers an unusually large cabin because of its wide 73 beam. And no, this is no boat, unless you are thinking small deep "V" off shore racer, like a Reggie Fountain or Formula. It stands a reasonable 65 inches tall. Total interior volume is pushing 130 cubic feet and there is a solid 60 cubes behind the front chairs and half again as much behind the second row. This "small" CUV can definitely hail the mail in more ways than one.

Under the bonnet is one of two engines, the ubiquitous 2.4L DOHC, 16 valve inline wazoo four found in so many Kias and Hyundais today as well as some other manufacturers as this engine was designed by a consortium and it has been refined over the years to be a world class, direct injected engine which in the Sportage cranks out 181 hp at 6,000 rpm and 175 pounds of twist at 4,000 rpm. But forget about that engine and focus on the rocket motor, or should I say a square 2.0L DOHC 16 valve turbo blown inline four that puts out a conservative 240 hp at 6,000 rpm and 260 pound of twist between 1,450 to 3,500 rpm. That is a serious torque curve which translates into massive down low power.



Specifications

Price \$34,895

Engine Turbo-direct injected
DOHC, 16 valve, 2.0L inline
four 240 hp @ 6,000 rpm

260 lb-ft of torque @
1,450-3,500 rpm

Transmission

Six-speed torque converter
automatic with lock-up

Configuration

Transverse front
engine/FWD/AWD

Dimensions

Wheelbase 105.1 inches

Length 176.4 inches

Width 73.0 inches

Height 64.8 inches

Track (f/r) 63.3/63.8 inches

Ground clearance 6.4 inches

Fuel capacity 16.4 gallons

Weight 3,765-3,997

Steering lock to lock 2.71
turns

Turning circle 34.9 feet

Wheels 19X7.5 inch alloys

Tires 245/45X19

Cargo capacity (rear
seats/up/down) 30.7/60.1

cubic feet

Tow capacity 2,000 pounds
(with trailer brakes)

Co-efficient of drag 0.33

Performance

0-60 mph 6.73 seconds

50-70 mph 3.53 seconds

50-70 uphill 5.15 seconds

Top speed Plenty fast (well
into triple digits)

Fuel economy EPA rated
20/23/21 mpg
city/highway/combined.

Expect 24-25 mpg in rural
country, suburban driving.

29s mpg on the highway at
legal speeds.

How serious? How about 0-60 mph in a very quick 6.73 seconds or a level 50-70 mph pass in 3.53 seconds and going up a steep (6-7 percent) grade only slows that time 1.6 seconds or 5.15 seconds for the run. Not only does this Sportage fly, but throttle response is almost too strong as when it comes on boost it creates some significant "G" forces. Sportage rocks, especially considering it is almost 4,000 pounds at the curb. Tow capacity is limited to 2,000 pounds meaning perhaps a small bass or aluminum boat with as much as a 100 hp outboard or a couple of jet skis.

Power is sent to all four wheels via a six-speed auto torque converter tranny and a single speed transfer case. Very smooth and there is little if any gear hunting. In fact, in Eco mode shifting becomes aggressive meaning even with throttle pressure in sixth gear at speeds below 40 mph, the tranny will not downshift. That improves fuel economy.

EPA rates the Sportage Turbo at a not so good 20/23/21 mpg

city/highway/combined. But as with most Kia Hyundai products, those numbers are extremely conservative. At 70 mph in cruise control on a level highway during a two-way run the Sportage averaged 29.5 mpg and on a round trip run from Placerville to Carson City the Sportage averaged 28 mpg. Overall it returned about 24-25 mpg, far better than the dismal mileage projected by the EPA. With this power train in a Santa Fe Sport returned even a couple of mpg better, so the numbers I am reporting should be accurate.

Sportage has all the credentials of a sweet handling CUV. Significant suspension and steering improvements have been made. The structure is safer, stiffer and stronger. Steering is a quick electric power rack at 2.7 turns lock to lock, turning circle is under 35 feet, track is almost 64 inches, it has 19X7.5 inch alloys shod with lower profile, wide 245/45 series rubber and all four wheels are independently sprung on a state of the art system. The results are a quick and crisp turn in with only mild understeer, a flat attitude and excellent cornering power. In other words, the Sportage flat out handles like a sporting sedan. In traffic, handling couldn't be easier, but while I found the steering perfectly weighted some might find it just slightly heavy.

Ride quality is quiet. This powertrain is perhaps the least intrusive of all four bangers. It rides beautifully when the going gets tough, with sublime compliance and well-tuned shocks. On smooth roads, because of the quiet, it seems extra smooth. NVH has become a term of the past. The engine spins about 2,150-2,200 rpm at 70 which may be the reason the Santa Fe Sport returns slightly better fuel economy as it is geared to spin 2,000 rpm at 70 mph. But if minimum overall length is important then go with the Sportage as it is inches shorter without sacrificing width.

Brakes are over a foot in diameter and are very strong with all the acronyms. It has a forward collision warning system and advanced emergency braking. Headlights are terrific and

you gotta' love those parking/driving lights. Although high beam automatic dimming has been around for about 60 years (I remember Cadillacs from the 1950s have a spacey looking device on the left side of the upper dash that was an auto dimmer), but the one on the Kia is better than a human it works so well. Also, loved the adaptive front lighting (developed by Tucker in 1947) that bends the light in the direct of your turn (Kia calls it Dynamic Bending Light). Of course, standard are blind spot detection, lane change assist, lane departure warning, and rear cross traffic alert. Safety definitely does not take a back seat here.

When you open the door, it is amazing just how luxurious the new Sportage is. High quality, soft touch materials are everywhere and the seats in my top of the line tester are well designed in soft leather. A great place to spend several hours. About the only negative is that the head restraints at their lowest position intrudes into the area where my upper back resides. You might have to adjust them up by about an inch. Rear seating is spacious for three and the rear cargo area is huge for a vehicle this size.

Instrumentation is complete (speedo, tach flanking the trip/info computer) in a well-designed IP. The center stack (radio/HVAC) is complete and easy and intuitive to use, no problems there.

Finally, what is it going to cost you? My loaded tester had a Monroney of \$34,000, which is refreshing not to see something like \$33,999. (It's called a Monroney in honor of Oklahoma Sen. Mike Monroney who introduced the window sticker legislation back in about 1957. The FAA headquarters is also named after him.) The boat from South Korea is \$895 bringing the total to \$34,895. This vehicle had no options or add-ons. Everything but the kitchen sink and hot and cold running water is standard, including the famous 10 year/100,000-mile powertrain warranty. Even the entire vehicle is warranted for five years/60,000 miles. Nothing like standard piece of mind

as well.

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.