

Road Beat: Kia Forte just keeps getting better



The Kia Forte will impress those wanting a compact or compact plus. Photos/Larry Weitzman

By Larry Weitzman

Kia is the nation's newest major upstart brand, being in the United States for 24 years with a market share increase in every year since their inauspicious beginning in 1993. Sales for 2016 exceeded 647,000 units, besting another fast-growing upstart, Subaru, which like Kia, manufacturers a large portion of their production in the United States.

In the case of the Forte, the assembly plant is neither in the United States nor Korea, but Pesqueria, Mexico, and most powertrain components are also manufactured there as well. While it may not be a favorite ride of our new President

Trump, it is one of my new favorite rides and a new contender for the title of best compact car.

First is the new taut Kia body, obviously, a design shepherded by Kia's CEO and head designer, Peter Schreyer. The body panels are pulled tight from its signature Kia grille rearward. It uses a gorgeous coupe-like window line terminating with a small Hofmeister "kink." It also uses a smooth dip along the lower front of the window line for a bit of character. Because the windshield is so sloped, it is probably longer than it is wide. Check it out and you will find it simply huge as it adds to the Kia's taut design. The only other detail is a lower body mild "V" sculpt. Headlights and taillights are oversized and slick. It all adds up to a simple great looking body which challenges for the looks title in compact cars, now vying with the Honda Civic and Mazda 3 in that category.



Specifications

Price \$22,000 to about \$26,500

Engine

2.0L DOHC, 16 valve direct injected inline four cylinder 164 hp @ 6,200 rpm
151 lbs.-ft. of torque @ 4,000 rpm

Transmission

Six speed torque converter

automatic

Configuration

Transverse front
engine/front wheel drive

Dimensions

Wheelbase 106.3 inches

Length 179.5 inches

Width 70.1 inches

Height 56.3 inches

Ground Clearance 5.3 inches

Track (f/r) 61.3/61.8 inches

Cabin volume 96.2 cubic feet

Trunk volume 14.9 cubic feet

Fuel capacity 13.2 gallons

Steering lock to lock 2.96
turns

Turning circle 34.8 feet

Wheels 17X7 inch alloys

Tires 215/45X17

Weight 2,908/3,029 pounds

Performance

0-60 mph 7.17 seconds

50-70mph 4.07 seconds

50-70 mph uphill 6.14
seconds

Top speed way beyond sanity

Fuel economy EPA rated at
25/33/28 mpg

city/highway/combined.

Expect 33 mpg in moderate
suburban driving and 40 mpg
on a level highway at legal
speeds.

Size-wise it's pure compact with dimensions of 180 x 70 x 56 inches (length, width, height) on a 106-inch wheelbase.

My EX tester came with a standard 2.0L direct injected, DOHC, 16 valve inline four that pumps out 164 hp at 6,200 rpm (160 hp with the SULEV version) and a stout 151 pounds of twist at 4,000 rpm. Kia also makes an Atkinson cycle version of this engine which uses multipoint fuel injection that achieves 147 hp at 6,200 rpm and a lesser 132 pounds of twist at 4,500 rpm. It improves fuel economy a bit. More on that later. Coupled to a six-speed auto torque converter cog swapper, this Forte is a high-performance automobile demonstrating its moxie with a 0-60 mph average time of 7.17 seconds. Passing times back up the 0-60 mph time as no fluke in a 50-70 mph simulated pass requiring just 4.07 seconds and the same run up a steep grade only slowing that time by two seconds to 6.14 seconds.

Throttle response is very strong; so much so that this little Kia is fun to drive. Most compacts can't share that attribute. It will surprise most drivers. Fuel economy while rated by the EPA at 25/33/28 mpg city/highway/combined is much better than expected. At a constant 70 mph two-way run on a level highway the Kia averaged 40.4 mpg. In a round trip from Placerville to Carson City the Kia averaged 37 mpg and in a suburban/urban drive to Roseville the Forte averaged 33.7 mpg in moderate to heavier traffic. Overall it should average well over 30 mpg. Considering its level of performance, that is excellent fuel economy. During the 67-mile test run flogging which included over 20 full throttle applications of four to seven seconds, the Forte averaged 28.8 mpg.

With the Atkinson cycle engine EPA ratings go up by about four mpg and it should return at least a couple of more mpg in the same driving. I hope to test one soon to experiences the differences, if any.

Handling is small car smart, perhaps even a little smarter. Suspension is like most other compacts, with MacPherson struts up front and a semi-independent coupled torsion beam system in the rear. Steering is by a reasonably quick electric power rack that is three turns lock to lock and a tight turning

circle of just under 35 feet. Adding to the mix are 17 x 7 inch alloys and serious 215/45 series rubber on a car that tips the scales at between 2,908 to 3,029 pounds depending on equipment.

Needless to say, steering is accurate, the attitude is flat, turn in is crisp and there is great grip, even in the rain. It makes driving even more fun (see comment above) while doing an accelerated tango in the twisties. I'll bet they race these things.

Ride quality is good with a compliant ride over the rough stuff. Where the Kia shines is in the level of quiet or the lack of road, wind and engine noise even with the engine spinning 2,300 rpm at 70 mph. With the hp it has, I would like to see another gear dropping that number to 2,000 rpm for better fuel economy. Might pick up a couple of extra mpgs. Considering its small car 13.2-gallon fuel tank (it seems many small cars have the same fuel capacity. They must share vendors.), a couple of more gallons would improve the ownership experience. Who likes going to the gas station?

Standard safety equipment for this top of the line Forte EX includes all the acronyms, TCS, ABS, VSM, etc., plus at least six airbags. My tester had the \$4,480 Premium package which added the NAV system, emergency braking, Lane departure warning and lane keep assist, rear traffic alert and more. It also included HID lights which were very good on low beam and good on high (halogen). More distance would have been nice, but they do improve your safety at night.

Inside is a standard perforated leather interior. I found the seats comfortable for two-hour stints. A passenger found them a little too firm, but after about an hour in the saddle, he realized that they were more comfortable than he realized, especially after some bolster adjustment. The back seat should be good for two comfortably and three in a pinch (pun intended).

Instrumentation is complete by today's standards, with a big tach and speedo plus a fuel and temp gauge divided by a center info display/trip computer, all tastefully done. The center stack has everything you need and is easy to use. No three-unit college course required. The balance of the interior is done with high quality materials and finishes.

What's the damage? Base price for this top of the line EX is \$21,200, plus \$850 for the train from Mexico. Are there trains that run to and from Mexico? The standard equipment list is long including full power and leather. The aforementioned Premium package which was described above adds \$4,480 to the bill bringing the total damage to \$26,540, which is actually less than most other loaded up compact cars which the Forte actually isn't. By virtue of its 14.9 cubic foot trunk and 96 cubic foot interior puts it in the EPA mid-size category. But the Premium package adds a sunroof which reduces the cabin interior volume to 95 cubic feet missing the mid-size category by one tenth of a cubic foot. If you are thinking compact or compact plus, Kia Forte should be on your short list.

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.