

Hyundai Sonata taking the lead

MARK PHELAN, Detroit Free Press

The remarkable 2011 Sonata rewrites the book on Hyundai.

The roomy sedan adds chapters on adventurous styling and outstanding fuel economy to the high-value happy-ending story that made Hyundai one of the few automakers to score a sales increase in 2009.

With luxury-car style and a budget-friendly price, the 2011 Sonata looks like a blockbuster.

Prices for the 2011 Hyundai Sonata run from \$19,195 to \$25,295. All Sonatas come with an outstanding 2.4-liter four-cylinder engine and six-speed automatic transmission. The engine produces either 198 or 200 horsepower. The extra two horsepower come courtesy of the Sonata SE's twin tailpipes, which allow exhaust to flow more freely so the engine produces slightly more power.

I tested a very nicely equipped SE with a \$25,295 sticker price. Options on the car included a navigation system, upgraded stereo and power sunroof.

The Sonata is a large car as defined by the EPA, which sets the official standards for vehicle classes. However, it's priced to compete primarily with midsize sedans like the Chevrolet Malibu, Ford Fusion, Honda Accord and Toyota Camry.

The Sonata I tested cost considerably less than a comparably equipped version of any of those cars. It also has a larger interior and higher fuel economy.

The Sonata's 103.8-cubic-foot passenger compartment and 16.4-cubic-foot trunk lead the pack. Its EPA fuel economy rating of 24 mpg in the city and 35 on the highway tops four-cylinder models of the Accord, Camry, Fusion and Malibu.

The Sonata's efficiency goes beyond the fuel pump. The new Hyundai squeezes extra room for people and luggage into a package that's shorter than the Accord, Fusion and Malibu, and just 0.6 inches longer than a Camry.

The Sonata is also a relative lightweight, tipping the scales 70 to 216 pounds lighter than those competitors. Excess poundage has been a persistent problem for Hyundai, reducing fuel economy and performance. High-strength steel and clever engineering keep the 2011 Sonata light and nimble.

The car accelerates so eagerly that it's hard to believe the sizable Sonata is powered by a four-cylinder engine. Throttle response is excellent, both around town and at highway speeds. The aggressively geared automatic transmission shifts quickly and smoothly.

The SE I tested had the Sonata's sporty steering and suspension setup. I liked both a lot. The steering is firm and responsive. The suspension absorbs bumps well and keeps the car stable and planted in spirited driving. Torque steer is minimal.

In addition to plentiful room, the Sonata's interior offers attractive, high-quality materials. The car I tested featured dark tones with interior accent trim that looked like brushed metal. Soft-touch paint added tactile appeal and contrasting looks to the padded steering wheel, armrests and dashboard.

The front seat has plenty of storage bins and cubbies, including one designed to be exactly the right size for an iPhone.

The navigation system worked very well. It's a welcome feature in such a reasonably priced sedan.

The voice-activated hands-free telephone system is less effective. It requires too many prompts, making calls more time-consuming than necessary. The people I called consistently complained about their words echoing back at them through the connection. The control for iPods also needs refining.

The doors open nearly 90 degrees, making it easy to get in and out of the Sonata.

The exterior design is striking and modern. A V-shaped grille and low nose set the tone. Creases in the hood and along the fenders lead to a rising beltline and coupe-like roof. The roof creates fairly big blind spots.

Judging from the dramatically styled Sonata and new 2010 Tucson SUV, Hyundai could be on the verge of adding design leadership to the excellent value that's been the brand's hallmark for years.

Don't judge the book by its cover, though. The 2011 Sonata is good inside and out.