

STRAIGHTFORWARD FLAT-OUT GREAT DEAL

How many new ways can we say "bang for the buck"?

By Joe Sage



OUR TEST KIA SORENTO EX FWD

ENGINE.....2.4L 16v DOHC CVT 4-cyl, 175hp, 169 lb.ft.

TRANSMISSION.....6-speed auto w/ Sportmatic

DRIVE.....Front-wheel drive

FUEL MILEAGE (EPA EST.).....21 city / 29 highway

ADDTL TECH AND SAFETY: Independent front/rear suspension; hydraulic rack-and-pinion power steering; disc brakes front/rear; front, front/rear side, side curtain airbags; ABS; ESC; traction control; tire pressure monitor; downhill brake control; hill assist; smart key, push-button start; cruise; Ecominder; backup warning.

INTERIOR: Dual-zone automatic climate; PW/PL/mirrors; AM/FM/Sirius/CD/MP3; USB, aux, Bluetooth; multi-adjustable driver's seat w/lumbar support; 60/40 split/reclining rear seat; leather-wrapped steering wheel/shifter; auto lights; tilt/tele steering column, overhead console; illuminated vanity mirrors; rear armrests.

EXTERIOR: Chrome grille and door handles; rear privacy glass; mirror turn signal indicators; fog lights; rear spoiler.

Base price.....\$ 24,795

LIMITED PACKAGE: Nav w/traffic data and camera display; Infinity 10-speaker audio; 18" mirror-finish alloy wheels; interior accent illumination2,000

PREMIUM PACKAGE: Leather seat trim, front/rear; heated front seats; auto-dim mirror w/camera display1,500

EC MIRROR w/compass and Homelink.....250

Destination charge.....795

TOTAL.....\$ 29,340

The Kia Sorento falls in the powerfully important midsize crossover category. If you compare it by size and purpose, the list of competitors is a mile long. If you compare it just within its price range—well, that's actually where much of the magic is. The Sorento punches way about its weight. We've driven many a \$40-50,000 crossover and thought, you could buy two Kia Sorentos for the same price. And let's not forget Kia's 10-year/10,000-mile warranty and 5-year/60,000-mile roadside assistance, introduced years back to build comfort with new Korean brands and still in play today. No wonder Sorentos have been multiplying rapidly all around us.

Our test Sorento was a front-driver. Full-time all-wheel drive is available, but with stability control, traction control, hill descent and downhill brake features, plus decent ground clearance, even this one is ready for moderately challenging terrain and weather conditions.

Our Sorento was well-appointed: keyless entry, full electric seat adjustments, including base angle. Controls overall are straightforward and clear. The center stack

touchscreen (with backup camera) is smaller than many, but so simple and informative, we wonder why others are often so big. Tuning the radio requires looking, and looking requires tipping down any polarized sunglasses. There is a good balance between manual controls, analog gauges and electronics. Climate is automatic with an LED screen, but very simple to reach over and adjust by hand. Instruments front and center are supremely legible analogs: tach, speedo, temp and fuel.

In its first mile, we find the Sorento "pretty peppy, could be a little moreso, handles great, snaking through traffic circles and onto the main road; smooth, flat tracking, no wallowing. As expected, a lot for the money."

Just as we were feeling great about it, we pulled up between a Porsche Cayenne and a new Grand Cherokee. Hmm. Well, ego and id may factor in your decision, but the Sorento actually has a neat, stylish, trim look of its own. And wisdom can trump bravado.

We noted that the automatic transmission was very smooth, with all the shift points just where you want

them, though some downshifts triggered a pause and surge, and we noted some other exceptions at times.

If we put it in park and stepped out, say to grab our mail, the Sorento protested with a shrill beep that could wake a neighborhood. We'd hope that can be overridden.

This was the 4-cylinder EX. The base model is the LX, which comes only in two-wheel drive and only with a manual transmission. When we drove this EX, it was the top trim, but now that the SX lineup has come along (see page 34), EX is in the middle. But you can get the SX's 276-hp V6 in an EX now, so the whole range is expanded. The 4-cylinder isn't bad at all: on a complex frontage road, with a merge in a turn, we let 'er rip, driving close to the pole like a high-performance sedan. The Sorento beat everybody easily, while handling just great.

The Kia Sorento is a Kelly Blue Book "Top 10 Family Car of 2011," and Consumer Reports rates it their Top Pick Family SUV. If you have major luxury badge issues, spend some of the savings on therapy: the Kia Sorento is a great vehicle at a more than reasonable price. ■

