

# Clean Sweep

## The curvaceous Azera is a prime contender

By Joe Sage

Hyundai's passenger car lineup is very complex. Sedans alone vary tremendously (see list at lower right), from the extremely affordable Accent to the flagship Equus, able to go toe-to-toe with such top-dollar segment champs as the Mercedes-Benz S-Class (at a fraction of its cost). There are near-sedans, such as the Veloster (a body shape all its own), and related non-sedans, such as Genesis Coupe, Elantra Coupe and Elantra GT.

One look at the Hyundai Azera and you might think it is shooting for the "four-door coupe" niche, sharing some of that type of sweeping elegance

with known contenders in that niche (Mercedes CLS, Audi A7, Volkswagen CC)—but they avoid that name game. Besides, the Azera was distinctly and clearly a sedan for most of its history.

So if this is yet another sedan, in a lineup as well-populated as this one is, what is its particular *raison d'être*? It may come down to subtleties (and specifics) of style and features. It largely comes down to positioning—delivering a vehicle that looks and feels as delicious as the flagship Equus, but at a price point below the Genesis Sedan.

Still, do they need that many sedans? One thing

for certain: they are not likely to get rid of this one any time soon. Since the launch of this generation in 2012, Hyundai claims Azera as the hottest-selling nameplate in the large car segment. It surely is one of the fastest-selling: inventory turnaround averages 16 days, compared with Nissan Maxima at 65 days, Toyota Avalon at 28, Buick LaCrosse at 63 and Ford Taurus at 70 days (per data from Hyundai). Azera also claims a 61 percent conquest rate—buyers coming to the car from other brands, always one of any manufacturer's prime goals.

There are some specific distinctions. The Hyundai Azera is classified as a full-size sedan and competes in that segment. The Sonata is also classified as full-size but largely sells against competing midsize cars. Azera is a near-luxury model with front-wheel drive. The Genesis Sedan is a full-size rear-drive sedan competing in the luxury segment. (The Genesis Coupe starts at just \$24,250, so figuring its relationship to the full-size, luxury Genesis Sedan is another drill entire-

ly.) Aside from anyone's firm preference between rear- and front-wheel drive, choosing among the group can still be daunting.

Nonetheless, once you have it on your radar, the Azera stands out from the crowd.

One notable thing about the Azera's particular combination of luxury, size and price is that it is Hyundai's first V6 vehicle to achieve 30 MPG highway fuel economy—and this with a 293-hp engine (best-in-class power-per-liter output).

Azera also boasts the segment's top front seat headroom (40.3 inches) and legroom (45.5 inches). Even with the stylish sweep of its roofline, the rear seat is close behind, with 37.6 inches for your friends' heads and 36.8 for their legs (provided in part by front seats with scalloped rears).

Standard interior features include leather seating, a ten-way power driver's seat (eight-way for the front passenger), with a driver's seat optional cushion extension, plus integrated memory system for the seat, steering wheel and side mirrors. Also included are manual rear side window shades. Our test vehicle's one optional package also added a power rear window shade—a feature more often seen in such vehicles as the Lexus LS 460L or Audi A8 L, in the \$110,000 range.

Our car's black glass roof caps off its optional power tilt and slide panoramic sunroof (also part of our one add-on package), which adds to the Azera's spacious interior look and feel.

Additional standard features inside include navigation with rearview camera, Bluetooth hands-free phone and streaming audio with voice recognition, the Blue Link telematics system, and heated front and rear seats. Dual climate control for the front also feeds standard second row air vents, and even the glove box is cooled, standard.

We've mentioned the one and only option package a couple of times already because it covers a broad spectrum. Despite being known as a Technology Package—perhaps because so many tech features are already standard—this bundle includes everything from a couple of tech upgrades, such as an always welcome Infinity premium audio system with subwoofer, and electronic rear parking assistance, to features that could certainly be categorized in other ways, whether performance, style or luxury. These include 19-inch hyper-silver alloy wheels with plus-size tires, ventilated front seats, a driver's cushion extension (welcome on long trips), power tilt/telescope steering wheel and attractive ambient interior lighting. The package adds more than



### HYUNDAI LINEUP COMPARO

	2013 BASE PRICE
ACCENT .....	\$14,545
ELANTRA .....	\$16,965
VELOSTER .....	\$17,600
SONATA .....	\$21,195
AZERA .....	\$32,250
GENESIS .....	\$34,200
EQUUS .....	\$59,250

KEEP RIGHT >>





<b>BASE PRICE</b> .....	<b>\$32,250</b>
<b>TECHNOLOGY PACKAGE</b> ...19" alloy wheels, pano sunroof, HID xenon headlights, rear parking sensors, Infinity premium audio, ventilated front seats, power rear sunshade, power steering column, driver memory, ambient interior lighting .....	<b>\$4000</b>
<b>CARPETED FLOOR MATS</b> .....	<b>\$100</b>
<b>IPOD CABLE</b> .....	<b>na</b>
<b>DESTINATION</b> .....	<b>\$875</b>
<b>TOTAL</b> .....	<b>\$37,225</b>

10 percent to the car's price, but the total remains well under \$40 grand. It is the only package there is, and it leaves nothing lacking. We would opt for it, without question. The Infinity audio upgrade and the cooled seats would be reason enough, right there.

Center stack styling has somewhat the zoomy look of a boombox, while coming off as classy and elegant at the same time. Interface details are easy to find and generally adjustable in mercifully few steps. The audio interface is quick, providing complete information instantaneously as you tune through radio channels or iPod titles.

Hyundai stylists have done an especially nice job with exterior details on this car. Body sculpting is different from most of the rest of the lineup's sheet metal and does a nice job of extending a distinctive shape suggesting a larger and even more prestigious vehicle. It's different from the rising beltlines just about universal today, creating more of an arced line that sweeps up from the middle of the rear side windows.

A chrome bar tapers from above the headlights to wrap around the edge of the hood to the beltline at the door. It looks great and it's unusual, reminiscent perhaps of something last seen in the era of dreamy GM styling of the late '50s and early '60s. Hyundai may have put their finger on something from that era, evolved to work really well today. To augment the upswept lines above the rocker panel, they again do something different from everybody else: an insert of chrome defining the bottom of the doors while clearing the top of the rocker with an uphill sweep. Complex and stylish headlight and taillight assemblies each have three little circular reflectors providing a spacy detail, again still with a stylish look (and only ever so slightly reminding us of classic Buick portholes).

The Azera's economical but strong V6 gave us all the freeway power we needed, conquering every challenging situation. Its 36.5-foot turning circle rates very well for a full-size sedan. The 3605-pound Azera delivers the feeling of a tighter, lighter and more spry car than its size might suggest. We noted the 6-speed SHIFTRONIC transmission repeatedly for its smooth and powerful acceleration and shifting. (We also had good results with its manumatic function.)

As we roamed the competitive streets and parking lots of the northeast Valley, we had the general feeling that we were driving one of the best brands going and one of their best models going. Once you tune in to this particular spot in the lineup, you notice a lot of admiring glances and a number of curious ones. Among a wide variety of other Hyundais and a lot of other brands, the Azera fills a very sweet slot. ■

