



Mike Cooney's

Winding Road

TM



Kia Optima SX

2011 Kia Optima SX and Forte Koup SX Setting the Pace for Design and Features

Kia design chief, Peter Schreyer (formerly of Audi) has set a bold new course for Kia's entire lineup.

Take the redesigned Optima for example. Somehow, Schreyer didn't get the "mid-size cars have to look boring" message. It's striking. A rakish roofline lends an upscale look to the entire car, and the uniquely shaped grille is the new "identifier" for Kia cars.

Inside you'll find tasteful design, quality materials, intuitive functionality of buttons and switches, and as part of the \$2,150 Premium Package, some great features you don't normally find in this class. Among them, you can have warm or cool air blown through the perforated leather seats in front, and rear seats are heated as is the steering wheel. And check out the front-to-rear panorama sunroof!

The \$2,000 technology package adds

navigation, backup camera, and a great Infinity audio system.

Front seats are truly comfortable, as is the ride. Although a 2.4L 200 hp engine is standard in the Optima, the SX comes with a 2.0L turbocharged engine with 274 hp and 6-speed Sportmatic auto with paddles for manual control.

The SX also gets wider 18-inch tires for added grip. Even so, the turbo's punch causes the front tires to squeal a bit when floored from a standstill, clawing for traction. The SX is a quick car, 0-60 sprints take just 6.5 seconds. When pushed in the corners, it's a bit soft yet takes a set and remains stable.



Kia Optima SX

Its platform gives an excellent compromise between ride and handling. The Optima cruises quietly on the freeways, with low tire and wind noise.

If you prefer a compact, there's the Kia Forte. Again, sharp styling. The belt line

running from head to tail lamps visually lengthens the Forte, and its curved, sharp-edged trunk lid adds a sporty look. It comes as a 4-door sedan or 2-door coupe. Or Koup as Kia prefers.

The Forte's interior is nicely laid out with clearly labeled controls. Front seats are comfortable and the rear seats are decent—just a bit short on legroom.

Two 4-cylinder engines are available. Mine had the 173 horsepower 2.4L engine and 6-speed auto. Acceleration felt noticeably quicker than most compacts—not surprising with its power advantage. A 2.0L engine with 156 horsepower is available in lower trim levels. It trades less power for greater fuel economy.

Handling was impressive. Lots of grip and a nicely firm suspension allows for fun on winding roads. The ride is comfortable, though, and fairly well isolated from road noise. It's nimble and fun to drive.

I like the trip info on both Kias, but when you're viewing Instant MPG, you have to push the "Trip" button eight times to return to the Average MPG readout. Kia could combine the two readouts, or use a rocker

switch to toggle forward and backward.

The Optima SX Turbo begins at \$25,995 and this one with the Technology and Premium packages totaled \$30,840. It is EPA-rated 22-city, 34-highway mpg and I averaged 26 mpg. The Forte Koup SX begins at \$19,395 and this one with Leather and Technology packages plus sunroof totaled \$23,640. It is EPA-rated 23-city, 31-highway mpg and I averaged 27 mpg. Prices include destination fees.

Kia is producing impressive cars with long warranties and quality materials. Both these models are strong competitors in their respective classes and deserve a close look. Start at kia.com.

Mike Cooney is a lifelong auto enthusiast living and writing in Southern California. Comments are welcome at Michael@GlobalBrand.com.



Kia Forte Koup SX

Photos by Michael Cooney