

Hyundai hits the right notes with the new Sonata.

By Joe Sage • Photos by the author



The new larger 2006 Hyundai Sonata has 121.7 cubic feet of interior volume to move it out of the midsize rating and into the EPA's "large car" category.

This is Hyundai's top-of-the-line sedan, and surely a symphony was more work and of more significance to Ludwig von Beethoven than a sonata; but truly, Hyundai has come to the table with a significant step into the broader marketplace, with the 2006 Sonata.

We anticipated the arrival of our test Hyundai Sonata favorably. We knew the Koreans had been making fantastic strides in style, features and quality, and we'd already been seeing the Sonata on the road. A lot. Our expectation was that we would find a vastly improved machine. We expected it to be somewhat like a mainstream junior high kid... not-popular but not-unpopular, having all the right attributes, but not really being vaulted into the cliquiest circles... with the Hondas, Toyotas and other class stars.

Some suggest that the proper comparison for this vehicle is with other \$25,000 cars, and in this realm the Hyundai Sonata does very well, indeed. Others suggest that, if it's their top-of-line model, the correct comparison is with the tops of the other lines. Well, it doesn't do half-bad there, either, and indeed for less cash.

Features are extensive and complete, and they are generally well executed. Controls are largely comfortable and easy to use, perhaps much more so than a lot of more expensive but overly-tricked competitors. The K.I.S.S. theory, coupled with an eye on budget, arguably creates a win-win scenario. The ride is still a bit soft, what we can't help thinking of as "Buicky." From the first moment, we backed our test Sonata from its parking spot down a sloped curb, turning to back into the street, the floatiness was apparent, though not horribly so... really depends what you're used to. This ride effect is evident on normal surface street curves and turns, also. Not only does it depend what you're used to, but of course it also depends what you want... so if your tastes lean more toward "plush" than toward "road feel," then this is a plush plus for you.

Our vehicle was fitted with Michelin Pilot HX MXM4 225/50 R 17 V-rated rubber, which should supply supple grip and a comfortable ride, as well.

KEEP RIGHT >>





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We pulled the Sonata out onto a Valley freeway and were immediately impressed with the acceleration and the smoothness of the ride. In fact, a German sedan saw the Korean car on the merging double ramp and started accelerating from behind us... adios, muchacho! We left him in our Pacific Rim dust, and all at comfortable and legal speeds (of course). The smooth ride, however, became noticeably harsher as soon as we passed from rubberized asphalt to the old stuff. Our Michelins had decent sidewall depth and generally would tend toward the softer side, but different rubber could make a difference in this observation. As it was, though, any additional noise definitely makes it into the cabin, which seems to demonstrate reflect a need for more sound dampening in general.

Hyundai is taking the Japanese makers head-on, and making significant progress. Japan is the world's number two industrial economy, and Korea remains well behind that. But Hyundai has been at it for 40 years now, and since hitting the US market in earnest, it would seem that the Koreans are, indeed, doing as the Japanese originally did: they have learned to study, copy and improve. And they are doing it in a gigantic industry and in big, comprehensive waves, each quite well executed. The basics are there, the features are there, the styling has come light years (some might suggest the Bangle-BMW series looks more Korean than this Hyundai, at this point)... and we're sure they'll effectively tackle any minor shortcomings further.

Definitely worth checking out. ■

VEHICLE TEST : 2006 HYUNDAI SONATA



Hyundai Sonata puts major pressure on the competition

By Barbara and Bill Schaffer

The completely redesigned 2006 Hyundai Sonata is here to challenge the big boys like the Toyota Camry and the Honda Accord and frankly, it's doing a great job. The sizes of the three cars are virtually identical, the engines are almost the same size, and the initial quality appears very close. In fact, the 2004 J.D. Power and Associate Initial Quality Study listed the Sonata as the leader in the entry midsize segment, outpacing American and European competitors for the first time. And for 2006, the Sonata appears to be even better than before. It's wonderfully equipped with many amenities and technology, offers good ride and handling, advanced styling and is priced below the competition.

The only significant differences are on the window sticker, often a few thousand less for the Hyundai, and a warranty that is five years or 60,000 miles for the Sonata and three years or 36,000 miles for the competitors. The Hyundai also has an industry-best 10-year or 100,000-mile powertrain warranty.

The new Sonata sports a clean fascia, sharply angled headlight assembly, raked hood, and a sleek forward motion appearance swooping down toward a clean-cut grille.

Inside you'll find major improvements to quality and material making it more competitive with the Japanese brands.

The Sonata rides on a sophisticated four-wheel independent suspension with double wishbones in the front and a five-link rear suspension in the rear, providing a very smooth, quiet ride while still retaining better than average handling. It's a little softer than I would choose, but for the average driver it's great. Engineers have obviously worked hard to dampen interior noise through its rigid design and tight fit which nearly eliminated wind noise.

A 235-hp 3.3-liter V-6 engine powers the

Sonata's front wheels through a smooth five-speed automatic transmission with Shiftronic® manual control for those drivers that prefer to be more in touch with the shifting. The technologically advanced all-aluminum engine utilizes a Continuously Variable Valve Timing (CVT) system and a four-valve per cylinder double overhead cam configuration. The V-6 engine is standard equipment on the top level LX version and an option on the GLS model we drove.

The Sonata GLS is very well equipped, especially considering the cost. Standard equipment includes items shown in the sidebar, plus keyless entry with alarm, leather-wrapped steering wheel, driver's lumbar support and other features for \$20,895. Sonata GL starts at \$17,895, powered by a 162-hp 2.4-liter four-cylinder engine, with a five-speed manual transmission and available four-speed automatic with Shiftronic.

In addition to electronic stability control and traction control the Sonata features front seat side airbags, side curtain airbags, front active head restraints and 4-wheel anti-lock brakes for driver and passenger safety. Hyundai was the first non-luxury brand to include side impact airbags on all its models, standard.

Hyundai claims 0 to 60 mph acceleration time in the 7.5 second range. My personal acceleration test gave a speed of 74 mph in the approximate one-eighth mile distance from where I pull onto our main road.

EPA figures have the V-6 Sonata at 20 mpg for city driving and 30 mpg on the highway. We actually averaged 27.8 mpg during our week of combined driving.

The Sonata is an impressive vehicle offering style, comfort, economy and value and it is worth looking at if you are in the market for a mid-size sedan.

For several years we've been amazed at the value offered on all the Hyundai vehicles. Compound that with the good fit and finish and add in the industry leading warranty and the Hyundai Sonata looks like one of the best buys in the mid-size market. ■

2006 Hyundai Sonata

STANDARD EQUIPMENT:

Electric Stability Control; Traction control; 16-Inch alloy wheels; Power windows, locks and mirrors; AM/FMCD/MP3 audio system; Air conditioning; Cruise control; Tilt wheel; Premium cloth seats; Fog lights; Floor mats; Solar glass.

Base Price: \$20,895
Options: Power sunroof\$850
 Power driver's seat\$250
 Auto-dim mirror, HomeLink, compass .250
 17-Inch Euroflange alloy wheels\$150.
Total Options.....\$1,500
Freight.....\$600
Price as Tested.....\$22,995

DIMENSIONS

EPA SizeLarge
Weight.....3,458 lb.
Wheelbase107.4 in.
Length.....188.9 in.
Width.....72.1 in.
Height58.0 in.
Fuel Capacity17.7 gal.
Cargo Capacity.....16.3 cu. ft.

MECHANICAL

Engine3.3L DOHC V-6
Horsepower237@6000
Torque228@3500
Transmission5-Spd. Auto.
DriveFront wheel
BrakesDisc ABS
Tires225/50R17

PERFORMANCE

0 to 60 mph.....7.5 sec.
Speed to mailbox.....74 mph
EPA economy rating20/30 mpg
Our actual fuel econ.....27.8 mpg

COMPETITORS

Buick Century, Buick LaCrosse, Chevrolet Malibu, Chrysler Sebring, Dodge Stratus, Ford 500, Honda Accord, Kia Optima, Mazda 6, Mitsubishi Galant, Nissan Altima, Pontiac G6, Suzuki Verona, Toyota Camry, Volkswagen Jetta