

# ARIZONA DRIVER

THE ENTHUSIAST'S GUIDE TO LIFE BEHIND THE WHEEL

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2014 Hyundai Equus

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# ACCESSIBLE ULTRA LUXURY

BY JOE SAGE



When Hyundai introduced the Equus at the New York Auto Show in 2001, it seemed a leap of faith. The brand was just getting established in the US, and not as a luxury contender. The whole idea was pretty easy to dismiss. But let's not forget there was a time when people doubted that Toyota, Nissan and Honda could take on the high-end German brands—yet Lexus, Infiniti and Acura are so well established now, it's hard to even recall that mindset. It's now difficult to have that mindset with the Hyundai Equus, either.

We may not need to tell you all that. You've likely noticed that Hyundai today delivers a hot-selling, stellar product line over a wide range. Fit and finish have shot to the top over the past decade. Their style arguably leads or influences everyone from the Germans to the Japanese to Detroit.

What bears reminding is that at their highest end, Hyundai's lineup goes head to head against a \$90,000 or so flagship Audi, BMW, Lexus or Mercedes-Benz. And at about two-thirds the price.

The first Hyundai Equus was introduced in Korea in 1999, a front-wheel-driver designed and built in cooperation with Mitsubishi, available as a long-wheelbase limousine, also sold in China and the Middle East.

For 2003, the Equus was restyled, had a number of feature upgrades and received new Hyundai-built engines.

The Equus of today was new in 2009—restyled, significantly reengineered with rear-wheel drive, and sporting the 385-hp 4.6-liter V8 from the Hyundai Genesis. It was first brought to the rarified realm of Pebble Beach that summer, to face as top-tier an audience as any manufacturer could dare. In spring 2010, it was shown again at the New York show, then went on sale in the US.

On the one hand, it now seems to us as though the Equus has been around longer than this. At the same time, the styling still seems fully contemporary today—fresh and on top of the curve.

Hyundai is on a roll in the United States. Brand recognition is the highest it's ever been. Sales are hitting records by the year, by the

month, by market share—and inventory turnover is the second fastest in the industry (only Subaru beats this). By mid-July, sales of the small Hyundai Elantra were moving so fast, dealer inventory had dropped 26 percent, month-over-month—twice as fast as Cruze or Dart and six times as fast as Civic or Focus. And traditionally hot-selling Corolla's inventory had *increased* by 24 percent.

This leads to good news for the brand, though it impacts the customer differently: Hyundai's need to add sales incentives is the second lowest in the industry, and their average transaction price is increasing.

They love this, not only because it is money in the bank, but as solid affirmation of their strength as a mainstream player. But value has been a key part of the Korean makers' equation to date—both the purchase cost and the wonderful 10-year/100,000-mile drivetrain warranty—and we are always a little apprehensive that they may lose sight of this. Or perhaps it will no longer be a necessary factor and therefore is not a concern. It's definitely something to watch.

It does seem to bode well for a manufacturer trying to make inroads in the higher-dollar premium luxury segment.

Equus has had one curious point of individual branding through all of this: it has borne the Equus name only, not Hyundai (although it does currently bear the oval "H" logo). In line with this purposeful separation, the car is only sold at 400 dealerships who have an Equus "showroom within a showroom." Each of these dealers has a specialist on staff—what they call a "dedicated Equus premium ownership champion."

This champ will, in fact, come to you to give a demonstration—through a program they call "Your Time, Your Place." It's the same when it comes to service, with pickup and delivery of your vehicle and presentation of a loaner at your doorstep—their "At Your Service" program. This all comes with 3-year/36,000-mile no-cost maintenance.

To be successful, premium brands must rate much higher than average in dealer and service experience, so Hyundai has taken the bull by the horns with these programs.

The result? In current 2013 JD Power Customer Service Index rankings, Equus is in first place, beating its nearest competitors Lexus, Cadillac and BMW by several percentage points.

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	Hyundai Equus (2014)	Audi A8 4.0T (2014)	BMW 750i (2013)	Lexus LS 460 (2013)	Lexus LS 600h L (2013)	Mercedes-Benz S550 (2013)
Base price	\$61,000	\$83,900	\$87,300	\$71,990	\$119,910	\$95,000
Engine (L/V8)	5.0	4.0T	4.4T	4.6	5.0 hyb	4.7T
Transmission	8-spd	8-spd	8-spd	8-spd	CVT	7-spd
Drivetrain	RWD	AWD	RWD	*RWD	AWD	RWD
Horsepower	429	420	445	386	438	429
Torque (lb-ft)	376	444	480	367	385	516
MPG (hwy)	23	28	25	24	23	25
Fuel (prem/reg)	P/R	P	P	P	P	P
Weight (lb)	4553	4508	4575	4233	5159	4740
Overall length (in)	203.1	202.2	199.8	200.0	205.0	206.5
Wheelbase (in)	119.9	117.8	120.9	116.9	121.7	124.6
Turning circle (ft)	39.6	40.4	40.0	35.4	38.8	40.0
Interior vol (cu.ft.)	126.0	115.0	120.0	**na	**na	125.0
Cargo vol (cu.ft.)	16.7	13.2	17.7	18.0	10.1	16.4
Front legroom (in)	45.1	41.4	41.3	43.7	43.7	41.9
Rear legroom (in)	38.8	38.7	38.9	35.8	36.7	42.3
Warranty (yrs/K)	5/60	4/50	4/50	4/50	4/50	4/50
Drivetrain (yrs/K)	10/100	4/50	4/50	6/70	6/70	4/50

\* Lexus LS 460 w/AWD specs vary. \*\* No Lexus interior volume info available.



The 2014 Equus is a mid-cycle refresh. Up front are a revised grille and fascia, while LED foglights have been added and superfluous chrome accents have been removed. Side mirrors have been restyled for better aerodynamics and a quieter ride, and new 19-inch wheels feature a distinctive turbine blade design. In back, there is another reduction in chrome, and LED taillamps are restyled. Rectilinear dual exhaust emphasizes the car's confident stance.

The Equus interior is completely reworked, and results are dramatic. An entirely new instrument panel houses a larger screen and generous 3-zone climate control vents. Steering wheel controls receive haptic feedback in the feature selection dial. Between the main binnacle dials is a 7-inch contextual TFT LCD display (twice its previous size).

Seating is spacious, front and rear, with a special emphasis in the front (see chart), and front seats are cooled. Nice. (If you think Arizona summer is hot, try a midsummer drive in south Florida. Well, actually, it was nice.)

Refer to our comparative chart, and you'll see a regal back seat, which also includes such features as four-way power lumbar support seats, power door closure and dual 9.2-inch displays. These are not just for entertainment—rear passengers can look up

information and even input some functions, another industry first. Rear ottomans have been eliminated—they were fun to show off, but studies showed nobody used them. Result: more room.

Safety features—which rate extremely high among reasons to buy in the premium segment—now include much-requested blind spot detection, as well as smart cruise and auto stop/start, all standard.

Hyundai BlueLink telematics are augmented by Assurance Connected Care— together delivering everything from music and navigation to remote engine start and stolen vehicle recovery.

Always welcome—and handy on a very rainy Miami day—is a heads-up display, with a wider than average range of colorful information—including the world's first inclusion of blind spot detection, as well as speed, turn-by-turn nav, smart cruise, lane departure and more—any of which can be turned on and off selectively.

Rear and side blind spot cameras combine information in a multi-view screen to show a 360-degree top view of your vehicle, priceless in tight parking situations.

Suspension includes comfort and sport modes, and Hyundai has made them each more distinct than is typical. They round out the system with a new snow mode that eases you into motion in second gear.

Some people are always going to buy the product that costs more, for their own reasons. A lot of it has to do with established brand image, which brings us to a quote we heard once and have never forgotten—that "brand is a substitute for knowledge." Know this: there is a lot of value in the Hyundai Equus, with or without considering its price advantage.

Equus is offered in two configurations: Signature and Ultimate. Priced at \$61,000 and \$68,000, respectively, these are very fully featured as is. The Ultimate model used to account for 10-15 percent of Equus sales, but they are expecting this to rise to 30 percent. Hyundai has done the math for us, comparably optioning Lexus LS 460, Mercedes-Benz S550 and BMW 750i models to align with standard Equus inclusions. When this is done, the Equus price advantage becomes, in round numbers, \$11-19,000 against the Lexus, \$34-37,000 against the S-Class and \$26-33,000 against the 7 Series. For premium shoppers, Equus is definitely worth a look. ■

## Where the roads are dry and the cars are slick.



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