

Island Spirit

HYUNDAI KONA HAS ITS RITE OF PASSAGE ON THE BIG ISLAND

BY JOE SAGE

We've done launch drives for Hyundai Santa Fe in Park City, Utah and Hyundai Tucson in Minnesota. But for the new Hyundai Kona, it was no cliché to hold the event in no place other than the Kona Coast on Hawaii's Big Island. "We know this wasn't convenient," said communications director Jim Trainor by means of apology, "but it fits the car perfectly!" We didn't hear anyone complaining. In fact, with non-stops to Kona from Phoenix, it was only an hour or so more than, say, a flight to Boston. And our sacri-

fice (you're welcome) will help to pass that Hawaiian island spirit on to each new Kona owner.

THE SEGMENT: With healthy sales in its existing lineup of Tucson and two flavors of Santa Fe, Hyundai waited a little longer than some to expand its CUV lineup toward the smaller end—a group known generally as subcompact crossovers, but for Kona called the small CUV (which Hyundai acknowledges is not an EPA or other standard industry term). This smallest segment has grown at more than twice the rate of compact CUVs. Call them what you will, all but one in Hyundai's identified competitive set (see caption) are first-generation vehicles, making this a "wild, wild West category," per corporate product VP Mike O'Brien—ripe for innovation and open to conquest.

KONA'S BIRTH: Much like a mid-Pacific volcano, Kona's internal energy preceded and determined its final form. We remind people often that "design" is not styling, but the comprehensive effort of engineering, packaging and styling. We also encourage people to look at a vehicle on the road from the ground up, to imagine its stance, suspension and drivetrain, rather than just that dominant sheet metal. It's an interesting drill and, atypically, was the process behind Hyundai Kona.

Proportions and attitude were the vehicle's con-

ceptual starting points. Designers say probably 80 percent of a vehicle's appearance is dictated not by its skin, but by its proportion. "When you look at the side view—the distribution of engine, cargo and passenger space, the roof height, the height from the ground—those are the things that really determine your first impression of the product, not the surfacing," O'Brien says. "That comes later."

Proportion is driven by the packaging of powertrain, wheels and suspension, cargo and people inside; and "attitude," which in turn comes down to stance. As an example, O'Brien cites a football player, who will have a wide variety of stances, each with its own mission, each conveying a message. For the new Kona (rare in that its name was determined before the rest of the process), the design chief pushed the team with an active discussion of stance, leaning ever more into the conversation until all had an attitude that was "aggressive and expressive" in their creative minds, a stance that gave the Hyundai Kona life.

The islands kick in, too, with concepts of "line" and layers. Line might be considered as the first broad strokes, defining an "active urban adventure lifestyle" (even if the Big Island is not particularly urban), with its sheet metal suggesting the "random spontaneity" of a lava flow—"an improvised

Kona's competitive set includes Chevy Trax, Ford EcoSport, Honda HR-V, Jeep Renegade, Nissan Kicks, Toyota C-HR and others. Hyundai is about to realign their existing models a bit, too: Tucson still a subcompact, compact Santa Fe Sport now just Santa Fe, and three-row midsize becoming a new Santa Fe XL.

approach with a sense of unpredictability." It solidifies in final form with a nod to the smoothness and serenity of the sky in the glass area; dynamic adventure of the mountains for the sheet metal; and the solid strength of the earth beneath. The base conveys not, say, motion and speed as you might when designing a coupe, but the tough and durable off-road and all-weather capabilities of a CUV. These conceptual thoughts appear to have borne real fruit in the stable yet aggressive final product. The combined feel of durability and adventure is also presented in bodywork above the fenders, wrapping around both front and rear, tough surfaces that can handle outdoor or urban abuse.

The interior focuses on "companionship," an inviting atmosphere, ready for whatever you want to do on any given day (as faithful and eager as your dog). "Exposed technology" is easy to understand without explanation. Clear graphics and lime green accents (on upper trims) support this simplicity.

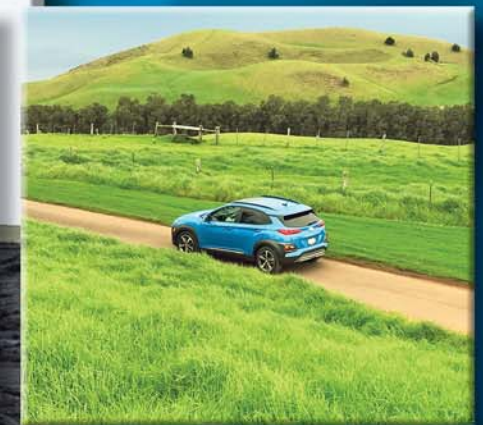
Because this is a young segment—that wild, wild West concept—it avoids what O'Brien describes as a convergence in other vehicles' sizes, where dimensions have evolved to all be within

fractions of an inch among brands. Not so in this segment, where dimensions inside and out vary widely. Comparative tables showed a notable achievement for Kona in providing tight and nimble packaging with highly competitive interior space.

Hyundai Kona has a 147-hp 2.0L engine in two lower trims and a 175-hp 1.6L turbo in two top trims. Fuel mileage is about the same for either (exactly the same combined; a point better for the 2.0L on the highway; and a point better for the 1.6L turbo in the city), making the decision largely about cost (the lower trims range \$5200 to \$6100 less than the higher) versus notably more torque (195 vs 132 lb-ft) and a 7-speed DCT transmission in the turbo, both desirable, as well as of course inclusions at each trim level (such as wheel size and audio, with the vast majority of features the same on all). Each trim level is available as a front-wheel- or all-wheel-drive model, with a price differential of \$1300 on any (and with a more sophisticated multi-link rear suspension on AWD builds).

We drove the 1.6L turbo for one full day on the

KEEP RIGHT >>



SPECIFICATIONS

SE, SEL

ENGINE	.....2.0L D-CVVT multi-point fuel inj
HP/TORQUE	.....147 hp / 132 lb-ft
COMPRESSION RATIO	.....12.5:1
TRANSMISSION	.....6-spd automatic
MPG	.....FWD: 27/33/30 (city/hwy/comb)
	.....AWD: 25/30/27 (city/hwy/comb)

LIMITED, ULTIMATE

ENGINE	.....1.6L turbo D-CVVT direct inj
HP/TORQUE	.....175 hp / 195 lb-ft
COMPRESSION RATIO	.....10.0:1
TRANSMISSION	.....7-spd DCT
MPG	.....FWD: 28/32/30 (city/hwy/comb)
	.....AWD: 26/29/27 (city/hwy/comb)

DRIVETRAIN	.....FWD / optional AWD
STEERING	.....motor driv rack & pinion, col mt
SUSPENSION	.....F: McPherson strut w coils, gas shocks, advanced valving, stblzr bar
	.....R: Coupled torsion beam axle (FWD) / multi-link (AWD); gas shocks, adv valving
BRAKES	.....F: vented: SE 280, others 305mm
	.....R: solid: SE 262, others 284mm
WHEELS/TIRES	.....16", 17", 18" by trim level
TURNING CIRCLE	.....34.8 ft
GROUND CLEARANCE	.....6.7 in
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	.....164.0 in / 102.4 in
CARGO CAPACITY	.....19.2 / 45.8 cu.ft
FUEL CAPACITY	.....13.2 gal
WEIGHT	.....2890-3344 lb
TOW CAPACITY	.....not recommended

BASE PRICES	.....\$19,500-24,700
OPT AWD (cost diff on any model)	.....+1,300

Big Island, then the 2.0L on the second day, to and from some Pacific Ocean boat time that launched several miles from our base camp.

If driving on an island sounds like a limited experience, think again. Our drive took us from the sunny, dry Kona Coast on the west side, to downpours in the rainforest around Hilo on the eastern side. We ranged from huge, harsh lava fields on an island bearing several volcanoes, one currently active, to grassy ranch land and meadows with views of Maui through the clouds, just 26 miles to the north, shoreline to shoreline. And we ranged from sea level (of course) to almost 6,000 feet of elevation on the Saddle Road along the flanks of 13,803-foot Mauna Kea, the northernmost of the two primary peaks that comprise the Big Island (the other is Mauna Loa, 13,679 feet, both subject to revision in the course of volcanic activity).

And we had a ball. Fifteen years ago, a vehicle this size was almost unheard of, but as the formula is refined today, Hyundai has mastered it. Spacious and comfortable, we could have been easily talked into driving it around Hawaii for a month. Yes, that's an easy bet, but it has the guts and creature comforts for long-term driving here on the mainland, too, including with Arizona's own dramatic elevation changes. As far as cargo, 45.8

cu.ft. behind the front seats is enough for an impressive 2500 or so boxed magazines, a benchmark load for us. And a dual-level cargo floor provides hidden storage in the rear, useful when you leave a vehicle unattended at a Hawaiian beach.

A little bit of waiting has produced huge payoffs, as the all-new 2018 Hyundai Kona has come out of the chute winning awards and generating significant sales immediately.

HYUNDAI KONA ELECTRIC: Shortly after our return from the 2018 Kona drive in Hawaii, Hyundai announced a 2019 Kona Electric promising 250 miles of estimated range, enough to top every current competitor. The EV version of Kona will be powered by a high-efficiency 201-hp (150 kW), 291-lb-ft electric motor powertrain and high-voltage 64 kWh lithium-ion battery and will contain the usual high range of included driver assistance and connectivity features. The Kona Electric will be recognizable by its grille area filled with a debossed cross-hatch design containing its seamlessly integrated charging port for easy head-in parking at charging stations.

2019 Kona Electric models will be produced in Ulsan, South Korea and available in fourth quarter 2018, first in California, then other ZEV-focused states in the West and Northeast. ■

WARDS 10 BEST INTERIORS

WardsAuto has named the new 2018 Hyundai Kona to the Wards 10 Best Interiors list, saying, "The Kona smashes the notion that a small-vehicle interior will be bland or have low-quality materials. Thanks to its matte black plastics, great head-up display, generous advanced-safety technologies and funky lime-green accents—all for under \$30,000... Hyundai's new small CUV knocked our judges' socks off." *WardsAuto* editors look for interiors that raise the bar not only for a particular brand but also for that vehicle's segment.

ASG: BEST ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE, BEST 5 ALL-AROUND PERFORMANCE

Granting Best Economic Performance to the new 2018 Hyundai Kona, Automotive Science Group (ASG) says, "In one of the fastest-growing segments, Hyundai's new crossover platform breaks onto the scene with class leading economic, environmental and social performance. The top-rated 2018 Kona outshines competitors in its class by an average of 3 mpg highway, revealing new possibilities for fuel economy gains and reduced fuel costs in the crossover segment." Best 5 All-Around Performance is a comprehensive data-driven assessment, analyzing economic, environmental and social performance indicators across a vehicle's life-cycle, and in relative comparison to 374 crossovers judged. ■

