

NEW POINT OF ENTRY

BY JOE SAGE

Interesting fact about the Kia Forte compact—it attracts more first-time buyers than the brand's less expensive subcompact. At the recent launch of the generation-three 2019 Forte in Pittsburgh, Kia's national manager of product planning Ralph Tjoa pointed out that fully 30 percent of Forte buyers are first-time buyers, the highest Kia brand introduction rate in the entire lineup. Thus the nominal entry level Rio starting at \$13,900 is arguably not the entry level model—the \$17,690 Forte is.

And while you can get a 6-speed manual transmission on (just) the base model, Kia expects most shoppers to enter at \$18,590, the price with their new Intelligent Variable Transmission (IVT).

It's a matter of volume versus bottom dollar, and this in itself is a microcosm of Kia today, as not only are sales booming, but the brand is successfully nudging itself upscale. The front-drive Cadenza and K900 sedans have been offered in the premium-luxe range for several years now, but the arrival this year of the rear-drive (or AWD) Stinger—a grand turismo making defensible comparisons to Germans at two to three times the cost—brings both premium fitment and a performance halo to a much bigger audience than their big sedans.

With that in mind, the gen-three Kia Forte picks up a number of cues that evoke the racy Stinger and cement Forte's entry level appeal all the more so. Elements of the Stinger's proportions are carefully translated to the compact front-drive Forte, including a long hood (the cowl point has moved back a full five inches) and short rear deck, echoing the fastback design language of Stinger. Turn signals front and rear have been moved to separate units well below headlights and taillights, enhancing the car's well-planted look and feel.

Kia communications chief James Bell emphasizes that the new Forte is "not a baby Stinger"—it's front-wheel-drive, for one thing—but does convey its premium performance ethic. They don't overdo Stinger comparisons, as the primary goal of Forte is to exceed expectations, especially for a car starting at around \$18 grand.

To demonstrate that Forte delivers on expectations, Kia showed us a great tongue-in-cheek film (which you can find on YouTube, "The Contenders") pitting the Forte against a Lamborghini Aventador on the track—or at the track, anyway, with a family of five. Forte blows the Aventador away—in useful factors including access/egress, head count and luggage space, as well as features including its 8-inch touchscreen and available 10-way power driver's seat, wireless charging and smart trunk—all at just around four percent of the Lambo's cost.

In addition to style, the new body proportions

provide more legroom, more headroom and more cargo volume than the previous car. Add to this new seats with thinner frame, thicker padding and substantial bolstering, and you'd be forgiven for forgetting this is nominally smaller than midsize.

Android and Apple integration are included in all models, while top EX trim offers new 320w, eight-speaker Harman-Kardon audio with Clari-Fi technology that restores original studio sound.

As for that IVT, it's another hallmark of the new Forte and another harbinger of more to come from Kia under a Smart Stream powertrain name, destined to be worked into more models. Both the 2.0-liter Nu four-cylinder Atkinson Cycle engine and the IVT are in-house Kia builds. Engine horsepower and torque are the same as on the prior Forte, but fuel mileage is increased.

Kia took time and care to overcome traditional objections to continuously variable transmissions (CVTs), most notably to eliminate what they call a "rubber band-like feel," solved by replacing commonly implemented push-belt design with a chain-type belt (a first in the compact class). The result is the smooth, linear acceleration of a CVT (along with its fuel efficiency), but mimicking the steps of a traditional automatic in performance conditions. And it works. (The only time we were aware of its CVT nature was in free-spinning downhills.) Engineers also tackled the droning hum of most CVTs by wrapping the unit in its own sound-insulating

jacket, which results in a car that's even quieter than the non-CVT prior generation, with noise levels reduced by five decibels.

On the road, the 2019 Forte benefits from a new chassis that's 54 percent high-strength steel, reducing weight while boosting stiffness by 26 percent, for road-hugging performance. Drive modes include a smart setting that learns from the driver's best behavior.

The new Forte retains coupled torsion-beam rear suspension, as on Rio, as opposed to multi-link on Optima and above. However, Forte also has twin-tube gas shocks and reworked suspension geometry for increased stability. Our drive route included a little bit of city street, bridge and highway time, but mostly beautiful country two-lanes in western Pennsylvania, West Virginia and eastern Ohio—purposefully including stretches with harsh, damaged pavement. Try as we might to break the tail loose, it remained firmly planted and tracked true. And Optima runs from \$22,900 to \$31,900, while even a top trim Forte still beats any at \$21,990.

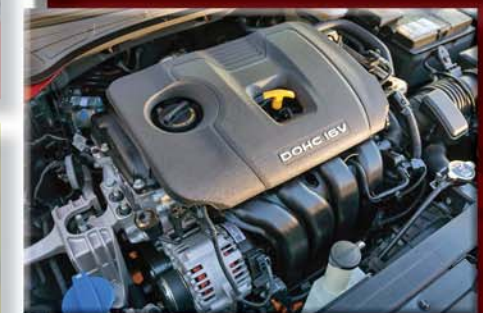
Product planner Tjoa identified sportiness, technology, efficiency and refinement as the team's touchstones in developing the new Kia Forte. Add to that Kia's well established factors of value and quality (Kia now ranks first or second in multiple

high-profile industry quality rankings).

Crossover and SUV sales have been so hot lately, especially compact crossovers, that some manufacturers are trimming down, failing to refresh or even completely walking away from sedan line-ups. Not Kia. Bell told us they have "no intention of walking away; we have the recipe down pat."

Kia Forte is such a staple of the small car market, it's almost hard to believe that the first arrived as recently as 2009 and only two prior generations bring us to this point. This is due to both the strength and volume of its presence—Forte annual sales almost doubled during the prior generation, from about 66,000 in 2013 to almost 118,000 in 2017. Buyers choose the model for its value, its "unexpected performance" (in its own right and with an image boost from Stinger) and because it specifically is not the biggest selling brand.

Expect more from the Forte lineup over the coming months. One possibility is a new version of the original Forte Koup two-door; another might be a new Forte5 hot hatch; intriguing to us is the possibility of a compact-platform version of their stunning European show cars, the Ceed Sportswagon or Pro Ceed Shooting Brake (a streamlined wagon, in Euro lingo). These are all speculation. Anticipation is fun; any reveals will be moreso. ■



SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE	.....2.0L multi-port inj aluminum four
COMPRESSION RATIO	.....12.5:1
HP/TORQUE	.....147 hp / 132 lb-ft
TRANSMISSION	.....6-spd manual (FE only); .....IVT (intelligent variable transmission)
DRIVETRAIN	.....FWD
STEERING	.....rack & pinion, elec motor
SUSPENSION	.....F: McPherson strut w coil; .....R: coupled torsion beam axle; .....twin-tube shocks
BRAKES	.....F: 11.0" vented; R: 10.3" solid
WHEELS/TIRES	.....FE: 6.0x15 steel / 195/65R15.....LXS: 6.5x16 alloy / 205/55R16.....S, EX: 7.0x17 alloy / 225/45R17
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	.....182.7 in / 106.3 in
TURNING CIRCLE	.....34.8 ft
GROUND CLEARANCE	.....5.3 in
LEGROOM (F/R)	.....42.2 / 35.7 in
PASSENGER VOL	.....96.0 cu.ft (93.5 w/sunroof)
CARGO CAPACITY	.....15.3 cu.ft
WEIGHT	.....FE 6-MT: 2707-2721 lb.....FE, LXS, S, EX IVT: 2762-2903 lb
FUEL / CAPACITY	.....87 oct reg / 14.0 gal
MPG	.....6-MT: 27/37/31 (city/hwy/comb) .....IVT: 30/40/34 - 31/41/35 (city/hwy/comb)

TRIMS / PRICING

FE	.....6-spd manual	.....\$17,690
	.....IVT	.....18,590
LXS	.....IVT	.....\$19,090
S	.....IVT	.....\$20,190
EX	.....IVT	.....\$21,990
EX Launch Edition	.....IVT	.....25,200