

# Sampler Pack

A one-day drive of the latest and hottest models for luxury, performance, economy, features and/or all of the above

by Joe Sage / Photos: Joe Sage, Brenda Priddy and manufacturers

The Southwest Lifestyle Media Drive is a privately organized vehicle comparo drive event (as opposed to a press association event, as most are), with invitations extended to members of Arizona-based media with automotive content.

**THE VEHICLES:** Included in the SWLMD vehicle mix are a full spectrum of what you may be shopping for—sedans, pickups, crossovers and SUVs. The common thread is that each is noteworthy—a new and/or recent arrival, and/or the cream of the crop in a lineup. Most are 2020 models, and 2019s here will carry forward very close to as-is. Horsepower, highway fuel mileage and base/as-tested prices as stated include the caveat that some did and others did not fold destination charges into price totals, some gave prices before and after options for this particular trim, while others gave prices for the lowest trim in their overall lineup, with or without options. Their relativity is thus a useful starting point; you'll dig deeper when shopping. Vehicles are presented here alphabetically.

**THE ROUTE:** Though the lineup included some serious 4x4s and performance vehicles, our driving was done as the majority of yours may be on most days, from our event base in downtown Chandler, on two suggested loops within the Valley grid and freeways, with freedom to randomize on our own.

**THE FORMAT:** This was a same-day drive event—and a drive event only, no awards. We took each for a spin, to gauge daily driver performance and features, but as a relatively small set of vehicles, they were not categorized by type, price or function, as at most. You might consider it a comparo of sorts, but much as when you vehicle shop in the real world, it's a comparison within the market at large, not a collection of one-on-one faceoffs.

**Alfa Romeo Stelvio Quadrifoglio AWD (2019)**  
505 hp / 23 mpg hwy.....\$80,245 / \$88,540  
Top of the alphabet is also tops in this group for both horsepower and price. Its horsepower is higher than average here by a considerably wider margin than its price, a value formula for this twisty-road or track performance utility—capable of zero-to-60 in just 3.6 seconds, with stopping power to match, dressed in a sexy Italian skin, right down to its 20-inch forged aluminum wheels. Alfa Romeo has just returned to the States over the past couple of years, still new news. This is the twin-turbo Quadrifoglio, the highest performance model, and of special note, add-ons increase its price by only 10 percent.

**Chevrolet Traverse High Country (2020)**

310 hp / 27 mpg hwy.....\$29,800 / \$52,490  
Traverse is considered a midsize, what with Suburban and Tahoe being larger, but you'd be forgiven for taking Traverse as a full-size, with its spacious seven- or eight-passenger and 23-to-almost-100-cu.ft of cargo space. You're also likely to think it's a much pricier vehicle, even (or especially) in this top-of-seven-models High Country trim. New this year, all trims have the same 3.6L V6, and all have a new Buckle-To-Drive feature as part of a Teen Driver mode, forcing young drivers to adhere to the discipline of fastening seatbelts before shifting out of park.

**Fiat 500X Pop AWD (2020)**

177 hp / 30 mpg hwy.....\$24,490 / \$27,070  
What's new about the Fiat 500X for 2020 is that thankfully it's a survivor, as the 500, 500 Abarth and 500e are discontinued in the US market (though still available as long as existing inventory lasts). Fiat 500X is a close

**Alfa Romeo Stelvio Quadrifoglio AWD (2019)**



**Chevrolet Traverse High Country (2020)**



**Fiat 500X Trekking (2020)**



cousin to Jeep Renegade (both are built in Melfi, Italy)—as with the Alfa Romeo wrapped in sexy Italian clothing. For 2020, Fiat 500X has an all-new 1.3L turbo four pumping 177 hp and 210 lb-ft of torque into its 3305-lb mass through an efficient, responsive 9-speed planetary gear automatic to an all-wheel-drive system with disconnecting rear axle that helps deliver 30 mpg highway.

**Ford Explorer Platinum 4WD (2020)**

365 hp / 24 mpg hwy.....\$58,250 / \$60,935  
The sixth generation of this pioneering SUV is notable for its welcome return to rear-wheel drive (we put it through some hard 90-degree cornering, to celebrate). Explorer also seems bigger than its nominal midsize category (Expedition is larger), with a highly premium look and feel for its price. Platinum is the luxe-oriented top of four trims, while ST at \$3500 less is more performance-oriented (like Platinum, ST has the exceedingly popular 3.0L EcoBoost V6, but twin-turbocharged for 400 hp). Refined as Explorer may be, it is also tough, with a terrain management system and up to 5600-lb tow capacity.

**Hyundai Kona SEL FWD (2019)**

147 hp / 33 mpg hwy.....\$21,800 / \$24,570  
We had driven this exact Kona for the week prior, featured in this issue. As a review vehicle in next-to-lowest trim rather than top, it reflects Hyundai's confidence in the value found through the whole lineup (all of which are in the \$20s). Content-rich even in this trim, one key difference is that upper trims have a 175-hp 1.6L turbo to this model's 147-hp naturally aspirated 2.0L, at a loss of just one MPG highway. AWD dings fuel mileage by three (we'd still go for that), so it comes down to parsing purchase price and features. Fun, stylish and surprisingly roomy, Hyundai Kona has been an instant hit.

**Jeep Gladiator Rubicon (2020)**

285 hp / 22 mpg hwy.....\$33,545 / \$56,385  
Jeep Gladiator (launch feature in our May/June issue) looks a lot like a Wrangler and bears some of the same can-opener tricks—you can knock down the windshield, remove the doors and open up its available soft top (it was entered as a convertible in the Run To The Sun comparo, also in this issue). But it is its own animal, on a platform developed with corporate cousin Ram Trucks. Gladiator strikes us as a clever "end run," allowing FCA to reenter the midsize pickup segment as several others have recently done the same, but with a truck that has a uniquely different personality than any of the others.

**Kia Soul X-Line (2019)**

147 hp / 33 mpg hwy.....\$21,490 / \$22,615  
We drove this exact same vehicle last spring (see our May/June issue). Kia Soul, one of several quirky little box vehicles introduced during the prior decade, is a survivor. It turns out its roominess, utility and fun factor have been enduring—and have evolved. It has shed its early "Hamstar" cartoon flavor and taken on what our prior review noted as more of a *Star Wars* Boba Fett persona—a more serious, purposeful flavor of quirky—and in this midrange trim still bearing the mix of value and notable style that attracts buyers across the spectrum. (And for \$6000 more, you can get a 201-hp turbo model.)

**Kia Telluride SX (2020)**

291 hp / 24 mpg hwy.....\$43,490 / \$46,860  
Kia has continuously elevated its brand image—improving build quality to the point of taking the top spot for those measures; increasing content, with inclusions that are options on many brands, thus preserving their value position; instantly entering the performance category with the brand-image-expanding Stinger; and now bringing themselves instantly into their largest vehicle category yet with Telluride—a near-300-hp, up-to-eight-seater with quality, style, features and an overall premium feel you might equate with vehicles tens of thousands of dollars pricier. It should be a sure-fire hit.

**Ford Explorer Platinum 4WD (2020)**



**Hyundai Kona SEL FWD (2019)**



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**Kia Telluride SX (2020)**



KEEP RIGHT >>



**Nissan Versa SR CVT (2020)**

**122 hp / 40 mpg hwy.....\$18,240 / \$21,490**

Sizes criss-cross again, as Nissan's all-new "subcompact" (and well-sub-\$20s) Versa for 2020—longer, lower, wider—could easily be taken for a midsize. In a lineup starting at just \$14,730, this example is top of three trims, with 17-inch wheels, sport interior, rear spoiler, keyless entry/start, LED headlights, heated mirrors, 7-inch touchscreen, blind spot warning and much more. Its 122 hp moves its 2729 pounds quickly, at 40 mpg highway. Versa offers a manual transmission, but only on base trim. Nissan says they are alone in having a sedan, a crossover and a truck all starting below \$20,000.

**Nissan Versa SR CVT (2020)**



**Ram 1500 Limited Crew 4x4 (2019)**

**395 hp / 22 mpg hwy.....\$56,000 / \$69,000**

Ram 1500 is all new for 2019 (see our May/June 2018 launch feature), soon followed by all-new Ram 2500/3500 HD pickups. This Limited Crew 4x4 is top trim in a seven-level lineup (starting with Tradesman at \$34,845), with sumptuous yet burly leather, wood and metal interior, plus a wide range of trick features (such as the multifunction tailgate shown at right). The efficient new eTorque HEMI V8 has 410 lb-ft of torque, a 2300-lb payload and up to 12,750 lb towing. For 2020, they add a new EcoDiesel engine with 480 lb-ft of torque, the highest among half-ton diesels. Ram has moved up to second place in sales in the US, a huge achievement.

**Ram 1500 Limited Crew 4x4 (2019)**



**Subaru Legacy XT (2020)**

**260 hp / 32 mpg hwy.....\$22,745 / \$35,895**

Subaru Legacy is all new for 2020, moving to the quieter, stiffer, safer Subaru Global Platform. The 2.5L boxer engine in most Legacy models is 90 percent new this year, delivers 182 hp, 35 mpg highway and a zero-to-60 time of 8.4 seconds. The XT model driven here has the brand's first turbo in eight years—260 hp, 32 mpg highway and zero-to-60 in 6.1 seconds. The XT's premium interior has increased passenger dimensions in all models, and a range of tech is anchored in the 11.6-inch display, with upgraded nav, 12-speaker Harman Kardon audio, and very welcome knobs on upper models. All are AWD.

**Subaru Legacy XT (2020)**



**Subaru Outback Limited (2020)**

**182 hp / 33 mpg hwy.....\$33,445 / \$36,500**

Outback is also all new for 2020, also built on the Subaru Global Platform, and also offers the 260-hp turbo on XT models (including an Onyx Edition XT). The Outback at this event was a mid-upper-range Limited with the 182-hp engine, underscoring the mix possibilities of sedan or wagon bodies and the two powertrains, with the same improved chassis dynamics on all. As with Legacy, Outback is all-AWD and has a CVT with manual mode, while boasting 8.7-inch ground clearance, X-Mode for slick surfaces and inclines, adding roof rails with cross bars and tie-downs and a hands-free rear liftgate.

**Subaru Outback Limited (2020)**



**Toyota Camry TRD (2020)**

**301 hp / 31 mpg hwy .....\$31,040 / na**

Surprised to see Camry and TRD in the same name? It's a first-ever for Toyota, and the good news comes in threes—301 hp, 31 mpg highway, all for \$31,040 base. Head north of 300 hp in a front-driver, and it's not unreasonable to expect some torque steer, but this TRD-developed Camry is so sure-footed through acceleration, cornering and braking, we paused to check again to make sure it wasn't AWD. Camry TRD will certainly add a new dimension to your thinking about the venerable midsize sedan, a well-known vanilla shake that has now had a big basket of the best red chiles tossed into the mix.

**Toyota Camry TRD (2020)**



Odds are good you may have just discovered something new, or perhaps confirmed an existing leaning or curiosity, about what's coming to market this year. It can be fun to see who wins a comparo award, but there's something to be said for the trophy-free approach, too. As in the real world, there are no wrong choices. ■