

High-five

BY JOE SAGE

When you revise your product and change your brand at the same time, you may gain audience, you may risk losing audience, or it may just be perceived as a lane change. Kia Optima has been so popular, selling in the top half dozen among over 20 midsize sedan entries, we suspect that for most, this new fifth generation with a new name—K5—will be a simple lane change. Kia has used their global K-numeric naming scheme sparingly in the US (just for the tiny-volume K900, a K9 in other markets), but it's easy to pick up. We doubt it will lose any audience. As for gains, they tell us they already have notable migration to the K5 from premium and even luxury buyers. And the abandonment of the midsize sedan market by several others is sure to also boost K5's anticipated success.

Kia launched the K5 online last fall (pandemic

style), covered in our Sept/Oct 2020 issue. All new, K5 is built on a new platform (N3)—longer, lower and wider, with its growth specifically allocated to the cabin (check out the legroom statistics at right) and trunk (a full-size-sedan-worthy 16 cubic feet).

Now we've had a week with the K5 in person.

The K5 lineup comprises five trim levels, two of which offer all-wheel drive. Ours here is the next-to-top, the highest model with the 180-hp 1.6-liter turbo common to most; the line-topping GT has a 290-hp 2.5-liter turbo (see chart, lower right).

K5 also gives us a first look at new Kia styling directions, easily identified by its grille (still mildly tiger-nosed) running full width, wrapping into dramatic Z-shaped daytime running lights.

Our drive time left us with an interesting mix of notes and therefore thoughts. We found our 180-hp front-driver handled beautifully neutrally during even hard cornering, evidence that its suspension and steering systems have effectively conquered

any torque-steer characteristics otherwise inherent in front-wheel drive. Despite our generally high interest in AWD models, this is a plus for this lineup, as it means you can get great performance in upper trims where AWD is not available. Whether handling will prove out the same in the 290-hp GT remains to be seen, but our guess is that it will.

Our car's only option, a single EX Premium Package, presents an intriguing conundrum, easy to see when split into two subsets, as in our sidebar. On the one hand, we'd welcome the creature comforts and features of the first subset. We might better welcome the driver assist systems of the second subset, though each obviously serves an altruistic purpose, if we could turn them off selectively. However, many if not all gave us a choice of three levels, but not 'off,' leaving us with situations at lower settings in which audible warnings were highly annoying and distracting (and unnecessary, such as if not perfectly centered between painted lines,

which is not always the best place to be). The only way to defeat those was to surrender driving control to the system's highest setting. This may be just us, or it may not, hence worth a mention.

We confounded ourselves reviewing our own notes on performance, early in the week finding power a bit unresponsive and brakes working well but not feeling connected to our feet—then within a couple of days noting it as “a blast to drive, smooth, accurate and quick” (and that was without even putting it in sport mode). Tough to figure, beyond just the repeat driving that starts to make a driver one with the machine. There is, of course, the 290-hp GT available, but our takeaway is to immerse yourself or test drive more than once.

By the time our week was over, it was not at all hard to understand how this can be getting those stated cross-sales from premium-luxury brands—that's before you even get into likely notable savings on parts, service and maintenance.

Built at the same Georgia plant as the Kia Telluride SUV, all trims of the new Kia K5 began arriving at dealerships last summer and fall. ■



As always, we had mixed experiences with the infotainment interface. On one hand, touch seemed to require inordinate pressure for response (not all bad compared with some that are too jumpy); on the other hand, the interface is simple, clean, large, almost elegant. What may have bemused us most is sort of midcentury steampunk throwback vacuum tube imagery—inspired by what? Do people even know what these are? We put this on social media, where people were equally amused—and liked it.



As a bonus, the new sedan's rebadging and sexy restyling from Optima to K5 may be an opportunity for Stinger, a fine performance machine that doesn't seem to have quite the recognition it deserves, to establish a more distinct identity.

SPECIFICATIONS

ASSEMBLY PLANT.....	West Point, Georgia
ENGINE / TRANSMISSION	USA / USA
ENGINE	1.6L turbo four GDI GAMMA-II alum/alum 16v DOHC, contin var valve dur
HP/TORQUE	180 hp / 195 lb-ft
COMPRESSION RATIO	10.5:1
DRIVETRAIN	FWD
TRANSMISSION	8-spd automatic
SUSPENSION	F: MacPherson strut, gas shocks; R: multi-link, gas shocks
STEERING	rack & pinion, column mount, motor driven
BRAKES	F: 12.0" vented; R: 11.2" solid
WHEELS / TIRES	7.5Jx18 alloy / P235/45R18
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	193.1 / 112.2 in
GROUND CLEARANCE	5.3 in
TURNING CIRCLE	36.1 ft
HEADROOM (F/R)	(w pano snrf) 38.4 / 37.4 in
LEGROOM (F/R)	46.1 / 35.2 in
CARGO CAPACITY	16.0 cu.ft
WEIGHT / DISTRIB	3228 lb / 60/40 F/R
FUEL / CAPACITY	reg unl / 15.8 gal
MPG	27/37/31 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE\$27,990

EX PREMIUM PKG:

- Power front passenger seat w pwr lumbar, memory driver's seat & outside mirrors, heated steering wheel, Bose premium audio, nav w 10.25" touchscreen & MapCare, LED rear combination lights;
- Driver assist incl fwd collision avoid-assist for cyclist & junction turning, smart cruise w stop & go, highway driving assist, safe exit assist w power child lock, parking collision avoidance-rear

.....3400

DESTINATION CHARGE965

TOTAL\$32,355

2021 KIA K5 LINEUP

LX.....	1.6T ...180hpfwd	\$23,490
LXS.....	".....".....fwd	\$24,490
AWD	26,590
GT-Line.....	".....".....fwd	\$25,390
AWD	29,090
EX.....	".....".....fwd	\$27,990
GT.....	2.5T 290hpfwd	\$30,490