

ARIZONA DRIVER

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Hyundai Santa Cruz

VEHICLES • EQUIPMENT • TECHNOLOGY • PEOPLE • EVENTS • DESTINATIONS • ATTRACTIONS



Surf'n'turf

by Joe Sage

This is a time of great change and advancement in the booming pickup market, as new generations of compacts, unibodies, EVs and other entries join the ever-expanding existing pickup options from work truck to luxury showpiece.

Things are also booming in the SUV-crossover market, too, of course, by far the largest-selling category these days, by just about any measure.

Into the fray comes the Hyundai Santa Cruz, a vehicle we've followed closely for years, since its first big show concept reveal in 2015 (to which the final product remains blessedly very true).

Whether it's because both these segments are so hot, or because the definitions are becoming so complex and fluid, Hyundai has taken an either-neither-both approach to Santa Cruz pickuphood, crossoverhood or otherwise, by placing the Santa

Cruz in a new category unto its own—the Sport Adventure Vehicle.

In terms of pickups, Hyundai Santa Cruz could be grouped with the longstanding Honda Ridgeline or the brand new Ford Maverick, both of which are unibodies (vs traditional pickups' separate cab and bed on frame). This layout also harkens to the past, with the gap-bridging (or bridge-creating) Chevy Avalanche, or even farther back to the El Camino half a century ago. Yet it differs from all of these.

In terms of crossovers and SUVs, if you ignore Santa Cruz's bed (or visualize it enclosed by an extended cabin), the connection is obvious (Santa Cruz is in fact a very close cousin to the newest-generation Hyundai Tucson).

So take your pick—that's what Hyundai themselves have had to do when forced to categorize.

For example, last fall in a Pacific Northwest compare event we attend (the NWAPA Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year Awards commonly known as Mudfest), though crossover categories were available, they entered the Santa Cruz as a pickup—and it promptly won this category. But the next month, at the TAWA Texas Truck Rodeo, where pickup categories were also available, they entered it as a compact SUV—and it promptly won that category.

We've owned big V8 4x4 heavy duty pickups for years, for towing, off-roading, deep snow and river fording (and general use). We've also owned little Japanese rear-drive pickups, for high-mileage touring of most of North America (and even light construction). None of that mattered when we met the Santa Cruz. You could say it is what it is, and it's not what it's not—except to the degrees that, even then, it still is. Within its designed, engineered and specified capabilities, it just may be all things to all people, at least a lot of the time.

The model range—varying by engine and drivetrain as well as trim and features (see lower right)—is both tight (four levels) and extensive (running from a bit over \$20 grand to just under \$40 grand). Everything was included on ours (the only option was a \$195 set of carpeted floor mats).

In line with the pickup portion of its personality, our Santa Cruz is built in the US, at Hyundai's Montgomery, Alabama plant, with a US-built engine and transmission. The two lower models have a 191-hp 2.5L engine. The upper two trims move to a 281-hp 2.5L turbo. (Note that pricing materials show AWD-only for the upper two, though specification materials show FWD availability for all.)

Many attributes of the Santa Cruz are paradoxically positive. It's equal parts big and small—a compact, it still offers a generous cabin with plenty of headroom and legroom front and rear, equaling or exceeding a comparable SUV, while still adding a bed out back. On the road, it's equal parts beefy and sporty. While its suspension is the same on paper as the Hyundai Tucson crossover (which we put through quite an off-pavement workout in the mountains north of Tucson during its launch

drive a year ago), there is an emotional layer that comes with its body format—it somehow feels more trucklike with that bed out back. Yet it is sporty and nimble in urban traffic.

Power is good right from the line. Best of all, it holds that power through a righthand surface street turn—hard to say why that is so rare, but it's a delight at every turn in this rig. A subtle but sturdy growl enhances the truckline experience. Suspension is impressive—firm and smooth (we actually welcomed speed bumps, for another sample of its smooth sailing). The transmission is a dual-clutch unit, solid and certain through its eight speeds.

With the turbo engine and AWD, the Santa Cruz can tow 5,000 lb if equipped with trailer brakes (ours was not); the non-turbo can tow 3,500 lb with brakes. Any can tow 1,650 lb without brakes.

The interior is a beauty, too. The center stack bears a gloss black surround, which curves down and out of sight at the bottom, also curving at the top to encompass the vents. Generally concealed vents continue full-width, defined by handsome brushed metal bars above and below. (Many control switches are simply defined by a word against

(cont'd)

Santa Cruz has snagged many awards, some of which confirm its flexible categorization. Notable trophies to date include:

- Finalist: Truck of the Year** - North American Car, Truck and Utility of the Year Awards
- Pickup Truck of the Year** - NWAPA Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year Awards
- Compact SUV of the Year** - TAWA Texas Truck Rodeo
- Best Performing Truck** - The Fast Lane Truck (TFL Truck)
- Best New Product** - Sobre Ruedas Awards
- Best of What's New Award** - Popular Science
- Centaur of the Year Award** - Forbes



SPECIFICATIONS: LIMITED MODEL

ASSEMBLY.....	Montgomery, Alabama
PARTS CONTENT53% US/Canada, 35% Korea
ENGINE/TRANSMISSION	USA/USA
ENGINE.....	2.5L 4-cyl 16v turbo, alum/alum, GDI + MPI DOHC
HP/TORQUE	(turbo) 281 hp / 311 lb-ft
COMPRESSION RATIO	10.5
TRANSMISSION	8-spd wet dual clutch, paddle shifters
DRIVETRAIN	HTRAC active on-demand AWD
SUSPENSION	F: MacPherson strut w coils, gas-pressured shocks; R: multi-link, gas shocks, self-leveling
STEERING.....	col-mtd MDPS rack & pinion
BRAKES	F: 12.8" vented; R: 12.8" solid
WHEELS	20x7.5J alloys
TIRES	245/50R20
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	195.7 / 118.3 in
WIDTH / HEIGHT.....	75.0 / w roof rails 66.7 in
GROUND CLEARANCE	8.6 in
APPRCH / DEPART / BRKOV	17.5 / 23.2 / 18.6°
TURNING CIRCLE.....	39.6 ft
HEADROOM (F/R).....	40.7 / 40.1 in
LEGROOM (F/R).....	41.4 / 36.5 in
BED LENGTH.....	upper/lower 48.4 / 52.1 in tailgate open 74.8 in
BED FLOOR GROUND CLEARANCE	31.6 in
WEIGHT	(2.5T Limited AWD) 4123 lb
PAYLOAD	(2.5T AWD) 1609 lb
MAX VEHICLE LOAD	1411 lb
TOW CAPACITY.....	w/o trailer brakes) 1650 lb (AWD w trailer brakes) 5000 lb
INCLUDED: trailer prep/pre-wiring, sway control, self-leveling suspension, HD transmission oil cooler;	
NOT INCL: brake controller not pre-wired	
FUEL / CAPACITY	reg unl / 17.7 gal
MPG	19/27/22 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE\$39,720

LIMITED INCLUDES: 2.5L turbo engine, 5,000-lb tow capacity, dark chrome grille & tailgate handle trim, 20" alloy wheels, LED headlights, digital key, dual auto HVAC w auto defogger, rear AC vents, paddle shift, body-color door handles, leather wheel & shift knob, leather seats, heated-vented front seats, heated steering wheel, 10.25" wide nav display, Bose premium audio, dynamic voice recognition, auto-dim mirror w Home-Link, surround view monitors, dual rear USB ports, ambient lighting, rain-sensing wipers, Smart Cruise w stop/start, Highway Driving Assist, Intelligent Speed Limit Assist

CARPETED FLOOR MATS195

DESTINATION CHARGE.....1225

TOTAL\$41,140

2022 SANTA CRUZ LINEUP

2.5L 4-cyl: 191 hp, 181 lb-ft.....	FWD	AWD
SE	\$24,140	\$25,640
SEL	27,340	28,840
2.5T 4-cyl turbo: 281 hp, 311 lb-ft.....	AWD	
SEL Premium		35,830
Limited		▼ 39,870

Note: our sticker's base varied slightly from this.

that smooth black surface, a handsome presentation, but one that may require taking your eyes off the road to implement key functions.) Extremely useful contextual side cameras pop up in the binnacle when signaling a lane change.

Try as we might, we were unable to locate and disarm frequent chirps, flashing lights, voice warnings and such triggered by such mundane occurrences as an already clearly visible traffic light or a vehicle fully in a left turn lane ahead, clear of our path. Besides being annoying, these nanny touches seem out of character for sport and adventure.

With the persona of a great beach or surfboard rig around town, we figured the Santa Cruz would also welcome some time in the dirt—even with this top trim's larger wheels and tubeless all-season tires—so off we went to the desert. As with the Tucson, the Santa Cruz proved ready for anything. We drove it hard on a particularly gravelly, twisty, rutted, gutted and gullied dirt road well out of town... and at a pretty good clip. Handling like a dream, it was rock solid while also comfortable on the rough surfaces, and stayed solidly planted on turns and climbs. The product planners, engineers and stylists were totally in sync developing this.

We walked up first to check our wisdom on a steep and precipitous dirt high spot. Good to go! Without even trying its alternate drive modes, nor front/rear locking differential, we climbed right up it with a minimum of skittering. (And just imagine this with some serious off-road tires!) We gave it a second run with traction features optimized, but while great to have, they really weren't necessary.

The bed, too, is a solid execution, with a tough surface, just four feet, though its power tailgate extends this by about two feet when down. A sliding cover disappears completely behind the cab with one easy push and returns just as easily.

Longer beds have become rare even on full-size pickups, hand-in-hand with the popularity of multi-row, multi-door cabs. Shorter beds, five or six feet instead of the classic eight, generally have a similarly finished tailgate these days, implying that a six-foot bed can have the utility of an eight-foot. Thus in this case, you could say the four-foot bed is as good as a six. But that forgoes the trick by which a six is as good as an eight.

It's all beside the point here. You will find this a great format for so many things—stuff that's awkward to load or unload through an SUV's doors, stuff that might be dirty or wet—great for everything from gardening to camping to fishing (just no nine-foot sharks, unless carried on the roof).

We put quite a few miles and a great variety of service on our Santa Cruz, and while we almost never log specific fuel mileage (unless it's a core attribute), we did notice the gauge dropping pretty fast. Stated fuel mileage of 19/27/22 (city/hwy/comb) seems less than we might expect from a four-cylinder turbo compact, though it does weigh in at just over two tons with our top trim and maximum drivetrain. Note that the lesser engine's numbers are near-identical, some a point higher and some a point lower. So if budget allows, we would go for the considerably higher road power, torque and load capability of the turbo.

You can parse the nature of the Hyundai Santa Cruz all you want—whether it's a truck or an SUV or something completely different. You can compare it with the sudden flood of other small pickups in particular. There are already enough SUVs to compare anything with to choke a horse. But none of that matters. It just falls together perfectly as exactly what it is. And if it's a one-of-a-kind, all the better. No competition.

Santa Cruz will show a lot of SUV and crossover fans why people like pickups. A specialized pickup like this gives a lot of the basic SUV experience, with an interior that's not that different. Even if it's the same, it feels stronger and more powerful, and you have that useful space in the back—which you may or may not use (any more often than you may or may not use the trunk of a sedan or the rear cargo hold of an SUV, for that matter). But it has a different air and a different flair.

Correlated to a comparable SUV, the adaptation of this chassis and powertrain to pickup body form has not only lost nothing, it might even be a more perfect union. At a minimum, it gives you choices.

In our diverse and busy week with it, the Hyundai Santa Cruz proved to be tough, smooth, potent, fun and useful.

Is it, as the saying goes, an answer to a question nobody asked? We're thinking it's more like the original Steve Jobs product philosophy—show people what they want before they even realized they wanted it. And if you do it right, the world will beat a path to your door. Hyundai may very well have hit the jackpot with this one. ■

