Kia’s latest model line-up sampled – First Impressions.

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Kim Henson tries four current 2016 Kia models… Optima, Venga, Carens

and Soul EV.

(Words and Photos by Kim Henson).

Kia has been going from strength to strength in terms of UK buyer appeal across its model range, and sales figures are on a steeply upward trajectory, reflecting the high regard in which the company's products are held.

For more information on the firm's impressive performance in recent times, as well as a report on a brief test drive in the latest Picanto, please take a look at the feature that we posted recently on 'Wheels-alive', and written by my colleague David Miles (please click HERE to view).

While David was collecting and analysing the sales figures (he is very good at that!) and driving the Picanto in and around the lovely city of Bath, I took to the wheel of four other current Kia models, starting with the Optima…

Optima 3 – My First Kia Test Run of the Day



The restyled second generation Optima models are unashamedly aimed at business buyers seeking a comprehensively-equipped, fuel and tax-efficient saloon (although the cars also have much to commend them to private buyers).

Therefore the latest examples are all powered by the same EU6-compliant 139 bhp, 1.7 litre CRDi turbo diesel engine, mated to either a six speed manual or seven speed 7DCT (Dual Clutch) automatic transmission (depending on version).

The engine has been revised, compared with the previous Optima, and in all variants incorporates an ‘Idle Stop & Go’ (ISG) system, to save fuel in typical urban driving

conditions.

Power is up by 5 bhp from 134 to 139 bhp, and maximum torque rises from 325 Nm (240 lb.ft) to 340 Nm (251 lb.ft); it's also developed at lower engine revs – from just 1,750 rpm.



Kia says that fuel economy has been improved (by 10 per cent for manual gearbox cars, and by 17 per cent for examples equipped with the DCT transmission), together with emissions (reduced from 128 g/km to 110 g/km), which also helps reduce Benefit-in-Kind taxation for business users.

In terms of quoted fuel consumption figures the improvements are most impressive, with the official Combined figure now being 67.3 mpg for the manual gearbox versions, and 64.2 mpg for the versions fitted with the 7DCT automatic transmission.

Three specification levels are offered at the moment, starting with ‘2’ and then moving up in ‘3’ and ‘4’ variants. ‘GT-Line’ and ‘GT’ versions are due to join the line-up later in 2016.

Without wishing to quote the entire features lists, suffice to say that in fact the latest Optimas have been revised from top to bottom, and the cars have been improved in many small but significant areas. Throughout the design and engineering processes, there have been major efforts to build-in higher quality and a host of features to make the cars easy to live with as well as enjoyable to drive.

In addition to the bolder exterior styling approach, the latest Optimas incorporate more luxurious interiors than hitherto, and a range of state-of-the-art technologies, including (for example) wireless mobile telephone charging.



Importantly too, the body shell of the latest versions has been stiffened, improving ride and handling characteristics, and Kia's rack-mounted power-assisted steering system is employed, which saves fuel (by three per cent) as well as providing improved feel for drivers.

Future versions, planned to join the line-up soon, are sporting GT and GT-Line variants, plus a plug-in electric hybrid model and, most likely, an estate based on the SPORTSPACE concept aired at the Geneva Motor Show in 2015.

Of course, all Optimas benefit from Kia's industry-leading seven year/100,000 mile

warranty.

On the Road

I sampled the comprehensively-equipped Optima 1.7 CRDi ‘3’, and was immediately impressed by its welcoming, comfortable interior, with plenty of head room and generous space for passengers’ legs, both in the front and rear seat occupants.

I found that the car drove well too, with the revised turbo diesel engine performing effortlessly and quietly in a range of driving conditions, from busy city streets to narrow, winding country lanes, to sweeping open roads.

The yardstick zero to 62 mph acceleration time is 9.7 seconds, and the theoretical top speed, 121 mph.

Cruising at speed is relaxing; at an indicated 60 mph in sixth (top) gear, the tachometer was indicating just 1,400 rpm.

The ride quality was impressive, even on some unevenly-surfaced country lanes to the north of Bath.

The boot is long, wide and deep (albeit with a high-ish load sill), and passenger/luggage accommodation variations are helped by a rear seat which folds 2/3:1/3.



During my driving, much of which undertaken in heavy city traffic, the car averaged an indicated 32.7 miles per gallon.

The Official Combined mpg figure is 67.3 mpg.

VERDICT

Highly impressive, especially at £23,495 for the Optima 3 as tested.



Venga 1.4 Petrol ‘SR7’ ISG – The Second Kia of My Driving Day



Kia’s Venga – a compact five seater MPV – is a great example of how to provide generous accommodation for passengers and luggage within a package that is externally relatively small, and is easy to drive and to park in urban environments. Yet at the same time the car is perfectly capable of covering long distances with ease, and with its occupants travelling in comfort.

Built at Kia’s factory in Žilina in Slovakia, the current, facelifted Venga was first shown at the Paris Motor Show in 2014, and incorporates a number of significant improvements, compared with the original model.

In fact the Venga, acclaimed by many for its fresh styling, was the first Kia to be launched

by the company under the design influence of Peter Schreyer, who is now President of Design for both Kia and its partner company Hyundai.

Compared with their predecessors the second generation models feature sharper styling, new aluminium alloy road wheels, more luxurious interiors and a range-topping Venga 4 version.

For those unfamiliar with the model line-up within the Venga range, it can sound a little confusing. However, there are six trim levels, starting with '1' and progressively moving up through '1 Air', 'SR7', '2', '3' and '4'.

Engine choices are between a 1.4 litre petrol unit, developing 89 bhp and 101.3 lb.ft. of torque (and offered in 1, 1 Air, SR7 and 2 versions), a 1.4 litre diesel – also producing 89 bhp but with much more torque – 177 lb.ft (and available in Venga SR7 and 2 variants), plus two 1.6 litre petrol motors (114 and 123 bhp), in both cases driving through a six speed manual gearbox, plus a 123 bhp 1.6 litre unit coupled with a four speed automatic transmission. The manual 1.6 models are sold in trim levels 3 and 4, while the 1.6 automatic is offered in variants 2, 3 and 4.

Depending on engine capacity and version, Official Combined fuel consumption figures vary from 43.5 mpg (for the automatic 1.6) to 64.2 mpg.

Standard features include divided rear seats that can be slid forwards or backwards by up to 130 mm (5.12 in), allowing maximum leg room for rear seat occupants on occasions when maximum luggage carrying requirements are not required.



The clever boot is a two tier affair, with a standard load capacity of 440 litres (15.54 cu.ft), which can be increased to 570 litres (20.13 cu.ft) in total, simply by lowering the movable boot floor. In this process the height of the load compartment then becomes 163 mm (6.02 in) taller.



To effectively turn the Venga into a ‘small van’ when required, the rear seats incorporate another useful trick, in the form of a ‘Fold and Dive’ function which allows them to sink into the car’s floor, then providing a completely flat load floor and a total capacity of 1,253 litres (44.25 cu.ft).

Equipment levels are high, especially with trim levels 3 and 4. For example, in addition to the multitude of safety systems and useful aids to driving provided across the line-up, the Venga 4 features a smart key with an engine start/stop button, a heated steering wheel (in addition to heated front seats, which are also part of the Venga 3's specification), and a panoramic sun roof. The Venga 3 and 4 also have a seven inch touchscreen satellite navigation system, plus a reversing camera.

Much to the disappointment of many would-be owners who still value their CD collections to musically enhance their time behind the wheel, a CD player is not part of the infotainment system. This is said to be due to the increasing tendency of customers to use portable devices to play their music. Okay, I take the point, but personally I still value a CD player when on the move!

Refined

I test-drove the 1.4 litre, 89 bhp petrol-powered five speed manual Venga SR7, priced at £13,595, and I found the car to be spacious, comfortable and well-appointed.

It is especially impressive in terms of passenger space and innovative luggage accommodation set-up, as already described.

In and around the city of Bath it performed willingly and the engine was a refined operator. Equally when out on the open road the Venga was enjoyable to drive, providing lively performance and effortless cruising at higher speeds.

For the record, the nought to 62 mph acceleration time is 12.4 seconds, and the top speed is 104.4 mph.

The Official Combined fuel consumption figure for this model is 50.4 mpg, and CO emissions are stated to be 130 g/km. (Interestingly, this contrasts with 64.2 mpg and 139 g/km respectively, for the more powerful 1.6 litre petrol motor mated with Kia's six speed manual gearbox).

VERDICT

Highly practical, spacious, easy and enjoyable to drive.

Carens 1.7 CRDi ‘4’ 7-speed DCT eco – My Third Kia Drive of the Day



Many buyers have a need for carrying up to seven people in the same vehicle, yet they also value style and good driving dynamics – on all counts Kia’s extensively revised third generation Carens should be on the list of possibles for consideration…

The latest Carens models are all seven seaters, within a restyled package that is slightly shorter and narrower, and also 45mm (nearly two inches) lower than the previous Kia bearing the same name. However the wheelbase has been increased by 50mm (about two inches) and the seats sit lower in the car, so in fact there is plenty of room for passengers

within a vehicle that, overall size-wise, is said to fit between the five and seven seater MPVs offered by rival firms.



Compared with the previous Carens, the new car provides a revised seating set-up, with three individual sliding and reclining second row seats (instead of a divided bench), with two further seats towards the rear of the vehicle.

The luggage compartment is longer, wider and taller than hitherto, and features a lower loading sill.

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The Carens is offered in four different trim levels (ascending from ‘1’ to ‘4’) and with a choice of engines, all operating with Kia’s ‘Intelligent Stop & Go’ (ISG) system, to save fuel in town driving.

A 1.6 litre GDi petrol motor, developing 133 bhp, is available in ‘1’ and ‘2’ versions, and in each case is mated to a six speed manual gearbox.

For those preferring diesel power, there’s a 114 bhp 1.7 litre CRDi unit, driving through a six speed manual gearbox, and available in trim level ‘2’ guise. Alternatively, buyers can opt for specification levels ‘3’ or ‘4’ with a 139 bhp version of the 1.7 litre CRDi motor, delivering the power through either a six speed manual gearbox or a seven speed DCT automatic transmission.

Top of the Range

On a route which took in city streets (where the car was easy to drive), twisting country lanes and main roads, I sampled the line-up topping Carens 4, fitted with Kia’s seven speed DCT (Dual Clutch Transmission) automatic transmission.

This unit, developed in-house by Kia, is interesting in technical terms as it incorporates a ‘flat’ torque converter (minimising the size of the assembly) and twin dry clutches plus an electric motor driven clutch actuator (to improve fuel consumption), and two input shafts – one each for the odd and even gear ratios. This allows the transmission to operate sequentially or for the driver to jump at once to any of the seven ratios.

This transmission permits continuous delivery of power and eliminates loss of torque during ratio changes, thus helping to give a smoother drive in all conditions.

In developing this transmission, Kia engineers were aiming to achieve an improvement in fuel efficiency of seven per cent, plus a five per cent cut in the acceleration time from rest to 62 mph, as well as improved ‘Noise, Vibration and Harshness’ performance.

An ‘ECO’ switch is also provided to optimise fuel economy when required.

Without listing them all in this necessarily brief appraisal, suffice to say that in terms of safety systems and driver convenience aids, equipment levels on the Carens ‘4’ as tested are very comprehensive indeed.

I found this model was very pleasant to drive, and the car felt less bulky than some other seven seaters I have driven. It was nimble on the bendy sections of road I encountered, with a good ride quality as well as predictable handling.

The engine was responsive too, from low speeds as well as at higher revs, and its eager delivery of power was complemented by the sweet-changing transmission.

Much work has been put in by Kia’s engineers to optimise refinement, and certainly the car was quiet and smooth in its progress.

The nicely-furnished interior was comfortable and roomy – for all occupants.

The luggage compartment was well thought-out too.

During my test drive the on-board computer indicated an average of 40.2 miles per gallon, but to be fair this included much stop-start driving in heavy traffic. The Official Combined figure for this model is 58.9 mpg – excellent for a seven seater people carrier.



VERDICT

Sophisticated, stylish, spacious, good to drive and economical.

Soul EV – My Last but Definitely Not Least Drive of the Day



Since the introduction of the ‘Dare to be different’ Soul, I have liked the car’s styling, and have been impressed by the model’s dynamic performance too.

However, it was not until very recently that I have had the chance to drive the EV (Electric Vehicle) version.

It is increasingly important for motor manufacturers to be able to offer their customers electrically-powered versions of their various models, and in the case of the Soul EV, this is the first battery-electric vehicle from the company to be sold around the world. It is also the result of nearly three decades of development by the firm into electric powertrains.

Deliberately, it features the same funky bodywork styling and practical interior as Soul models with internal combustion engines, but crucially operates courtesy of a sophisticated electric motor system.

The car's lithium-ion polymer batteries (mounted beneath the car in a protected area) are arguably said to be the most advanced of any electric vehicle on sale, and have a greater energy density than competitor models.

Further up-to-the-minute features of the propulsion system include the adoption of nickel-rich material for the cathodes (the terminals that transmit the electric current from the batteries), regenerative braking (topping up battery charge when the vehicle is coasting or slowing down), a unique air conditioning arrangement that can be set to operate on one side of the car only, when the driver only is aboard, extra aerodynamic aids underneath the car, and super-low-rolling-resistance tyres, which can reduce energy consumption by up to 10 per cent, compared with normal low-rolling-resistance tyres.

In addition to public recharging points, the batteries of the Soul EV can be charged using a domestic 230 volt supply (this takes about 10 to 13 hours), or from a wallbox or public fast-charge point (this approach takes approximately five hours).

Using a public rapid charger the batteries can be topped up to 80 per cent of capacity (the maximum available with this type of system) in just over half an hour.

A full charge will give a nominal range of 132 miles, with the clever regenerative systems helping to top up the batteries in normal driving.

Power...

The electric drive motor produces 81.4 kilowatts (equating to 109 bhp from a combustion engine) at between 2,730 and 8,000 rpm, and develops its maximum torque output of 285 Nm (210 lb.ft) immediately from drive-away, and up to 2,730 rpm.

Acceleration to 62 mph from a standing start is accomplished in 10.8 seconds, and the car's top speed is said to be 90 mph.

Since (as with all electric vehicles) the motor is very quiet, the car is fitted with a 'Virtual Engine Sound System' to operate at low speeds in both forward and reverse gears, to warn pedestrians and cyclists of the vehicle's presence.

Driving

I found the Soul EV to be roomy, comfortable and as practical as the combustion-engined versions.

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Of course this car is all about its propulsion system…

The vehicle was uncannily smooth in operation, accelerating rapidly to normal motoring speeds in both town and country running. It was very happy to cruise at all legal speeds, and felt positive in terms of handling.

When I took the wheel, at a time when the car had been driven for most of the day by fellow motoring writers, the remaining range indicated on the dash display was 42 miles. However, despite driving normally for about 15 miles, the available mileage had dropped only to 34 mpg. This was due to the regenerative abilities of the charging system, in particular switching the transmission selector to the 'B' position for maximum recharging during deceleration. As the last few miles of my test route were mainly downhill, this considerably boosted the available battery charge and hence remaining mileage range.



From past experience with other electric cars I feel that owners of the Soul EV would soon get used to adapting their driving style to make optimum use of the battery power.

The price? £24,995 ‘On the Road’.

VERDICT

A brilliant vehicle, in terms of style, practicality and its electrical propulsion system, which gives lively, refined performance over a much greater mileage range than some other rival electric models.


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