Kia’s new Sportage First Impressions – an alternative view

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Author: Dave Randle

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Has Kia succeeded in house-training the SUV?

Dave Randle gives his own individualistic and inimitable view of SUVs in general and Kia’s new Sportage in particular…

Time was, and not too long ago, that four-by-fours and so-called Sports Utility Vehicles were rather uncouth affairs. They mainly found favour with those who believed other motorists were out to get them, so, as well as being built like brick cludgies, they drew their styling

cues from Bob Kane's Gotham City.

Unstoppable by anything short of a charging rhino, they were also more or less undriveable by anyone of aesthetic sensibilities or a nervous disposition. Unlikely in the normal course of things to find themselves in closer proximity to the Serengeti than Woburn or Longleat, they were conceived with a view to striking the same fear into the natives of Beds and Wilts as those of sub-Saharan Africa.

The gradual extinction of the Chelsea tractor came, when it did, like empty pianos, fine whiskey and purebred starions, from the far east. Soichiro Honda had early vowed that his company would never make such a monstrosity; that such things were against nature.

Not one to endanger his empire on a personal whim, he later relented, which took some saying, never mind doing, and gave the world the CR-V; competent in most senses but a tenderfoot alongside the snarling devils of competitors such as Toyota and Nissan, and even Richard Chamberlain wouldn't mistake it for a Shogun.

Subaru, Suzuki, Kia and Hyundai picked up on what would become a trend toward things that kept just enough Tonka toy about them to look like a Jeep to the layman, but gradually dispensing with all the armour and mechanical tackle needed to climb every mountain and ford every stream. Plug-uglies started to succumb to makeover artists. Exteriors gained curves and features; interiors shrugged off the old saloon bar and gentleman's club ambience and started to become fresh-faced and go all sports utility, with jolly colours and surfing decals.

Even fusty old Land Rover began to wake up and smell the lotus blossom, its independently sprung, light-footed Freelander remarkably competent in the undergrowth, but also more than tolerable on the Highway's Authority's network of crazy-paving.

Then Volkswagen, Audi and even, *Gott in himmel*, Porsche gave their approval to the upstart genre, and soon everyone was at it.

Enter Kia’s New Sportage…



It would seem fitting then that the next evolution would also hail from the eastern quarter of the globe, more specifically from Korean game-changers Kia; they of the 7 year warranty, leaders in the ‘Europeanisation’ of the always very reliable, but often very horrible; they who knew the time had come to swallow their Pride, change up a few cogs and become

desirable rather than affordable. And they who brilliantly succeeded in so doing, in very few short years, to the point that nobody any longer expects them to be cheap.

They certainly don't look it. Fit and finish and all round quality is nowadays remarkable, and the styling brilliance of Peter Schreyer has lent the whole range a forceful and unique brand 'look' that others would like to be able to rival.



And so it is that the newest, fourth-generation, Sportage arrives as a total creation owing little but linking design cues to generation three.

Of course the styling is top-notch. It has only to stand there to be impressive. But the real, and immediately obvious, achievement is the new car's easy drivability. On the ever-challenging and satisfying roads of the foothills of the French Alps, I felt at home at once behind the wheel. The balance of steering, brakes and suspension has been masterfully worked to inspire confidence and familiarity from the first moment.

The smallest power unit in the range is Kia's version of the new trend in apparently undersized petrol engines. This normally aspirated affair squeezes 130 bhp and a more than creditable 161 Nm (119 lb.ft) of Torque from a mere 1600 cc. Although ever more power seems to be wrought from these valiant performers, ingenious engineering and electronic management brings about levels of efficiency that approach the economy of diesel, while delivering, even in something as substantial as the Sportage, some of the driving fun of a hatchback.

In this guise, it is entirely liveable with, and you would easily get used to it, although it inevitably demands more work from the driver to get the best out of it on the kind of roads used in the test drive. There is, of course, one of those annoying devices that tells you which gear to be in at any one time, but like all such its decisions are theoretical and would result in tiresome progress. A sentient driver knows what's going to happen next. A machine doesn't know anything.

Judicious use of the smooth and responsive box based on your own skill and judgement produces a confident and enjoyable experience.

Given the choice, however, I would certainly go for the 1.7 diesel. It has so much more poise and flexibility, eating up mountain roads and village centres without the slightest hesitation, smooth and natural changes and additional buckets of torque (280 Nm or 207 lb.ft) inspiring a feeling of total wellbeing.

Like Mr Honda, I've never been particularly taken with the idea of four wheel drive. In almost all circumstances likely to be met with by the private motorist, front wheel drive –

especially with the obligatory barrage of initials supplied with modern motors – will suffice. It gives the driver more control of the physics of the car in cornering and often even in difficult traction situations. I have regularly been at events on muddy fields when it has been possible to pursuade a front-drive car to get away where a four will dig itself in like a hippopotamus.

Neither of the above cars were inflicted with it. But if you must have it, the 'viscous-coupling' system that delivers the power to the front and only brings in the back wheels in case of scrabble was always, in my view, the best compromise. The effect is now duplicated by clever electronics to give the mud-plugger by nature the best of both worlds.

The two-litre version I tried had four-wheel-drive, but was also an automatic, so much less satisfying to drive than the 1.7, though no doubt the more serious choice for those living in the Highlands of Scotland or the wetlands of Gloucestershire.

Verdict

It almost goes without saying that Sportage is a triumph of space management. Although its profile on the road is nicely proportioned, interior accommodation is far and away more useable than that of most average – or even larger luxury – cars. What proportion of SUVs are actually used for sporting pursuits, I wouldn't be prepared to guess, but the practicality Sportage offers to families, schoolrunners, business users, antiques dealers and probably moorland rescuers is an undeniable plus.

On top of all that, add the quality and the confidence that provides all those years of warranty and, suddenly here is an SUV fit to be welcomed in the politest of company.



(Kim adds… For a different angle on the new Sportage, you may also be interested in reading our First Impressions review of this model as written by Keith Ward and posted on Wheels-Alive on 5th February; please click here).