

# Automobile

## 2009 Hyundai Genesis

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Unapologetically and unequivocally, [Hyundai](#) has taken off its gloves. Its new Genesis is a no-holds-barred assault on luxury and near-luxury sedans from Japan, America, and Europe. Seriously, folks. Oh, we know what you're thinking. You've heard that the second-generation [Hyundai Santa Fe](#) is a decent little competitor to the [Honda CR-V](#), and you've read in these pages that the [Hyundai Veracruz](#) mid-size crossover introduced last year need not hide from the [Toyota Highlander](#), the [Honda Pilot](#), or even the [Lexus RX350](#).

But front-wheel-drive-based people movers are one thing, and rear-wheel-drive sedans that might actually quicken your pulse are another. After all, cars like that have never been the province of the Korean automakers.

But now they are. My heart rate was certainly above its normal level as I circled Hyundai's test track at 150 mph in a Genesis equipped with Hyundai's advanced new 375-hp, 4.6-liter V-8 engine. The big sedan was composed, predictable, and vigorous as the high banks dumped us onto the long straights and the scenery blurred. Yes, I was driving a Hyundai. What is this world coming to?

"We set a number of high development goals for ourselves," admits Bong-hwan Lee, executive vice president of Hyundai's Vehicle Development Center. "We wanted to achieve the same scores as other premium sedans, including [Lexus](#), in the J. D. Power Initial Quality and Vehicle Dependability Surveys.

Another priority was to attain the highest level of crash protection. We benchmarked the [BMW 5-series](#), the Lexus GS and LS, and the [Mercedes-Benz E-class](#)." Although Hyundai says that the Genesis's body-in-white (the basic body structure, without paint, powertrain, suspension, or interior) is larger than those of the [Lexus LS460](#) and the Mercedes S-class, the automaker claims that it is lighter than them and stiffer in torsion and bending properties.

In terms of size, the Genesis is bigger and roomier than most mid-size luxury sedans and, in fact, is classified by the [EPA](#) as a "large" sedan. Its wheelbase is 115.6 inches, compared with 113.7 inches for the BMW 5-series, 112.4 inches for the Mercedes E-class, and 113.4 inches for the [Cadillac CTS](#). With an overall length of 195.9 inches, it's several inches longer than those three cars and only 2.5 inches shorter than a short-wheelbase 7-series. Although rear-seat room falls short of what you'd find in a long-wheelbase 7-series or a Lexus LS, the rear seats in the Genesis are still very accommodating, with plentiful legroom that outpaces the 5-series, the E-class, and the CTS.

Design editor Robert Cumberford delivers his verdict on the Genesis's styling in the August issue of *Automobile Magazine*, but there is no question that the car has real road presence. If [Hyundai's](#) designers borrowed from the Mercedes S-class, the [Infiniti M35/M45](#), and the 5-series-and they most certainly did-the net effect is at worst benign, the car assuming a kind of generic upscale visage. At the Namyang test track, jumping among V-6 and V-8 Genesis models and also among competitor cars, I would peer across the sprawling slalom course, trying to figure out which car I'd drive next, and would continually do double-takes as the Genesis test cars were wheeled back onto the course, because from fifty yards away I mistook them for [Mercedes-Benz E-classes](#).

Inside, the Genesis also plays to widespread notions of luxury, with a big sweep of an S-class-inspired dash, pleasingly lit instruments, and substantial, cushy seats astride a center console with a [BMW iDrive](#)-style spinning knob sprouting from it. There are lots of hits in here, plus a few misses. Fit and finish and material quality are very good, both in the plastics and in the standard leather seating. The instrument panel can be fitted with stitched leather as an option or with standard faux wood, but the former would be more convincing if it were French stitched, with two rows of stitching rather than one, which leaves a tiny flap of folded-over hide that's ripe for collecting dirt.

Tradition dominates in the Genesis cabin, as there is no aluminum or aluminum-look trim. The headliner, a familiar polyester-knit fabric, is largely inoffensive, but it's a long way from Alcantara. Double-glazing for the windows in the driver's and front-passenger's doors is a nice touch, though, as are fold-out map pockets in the doors and the available brown-and-black interior color scheme. The trunk is large, with a low liftover and sheathed hinges, but the interior grab handle for pulling the lid closed is mounted too far inward, making it awkward to use. And the cheap trunk lining is old-school Hyundai; surely they noticed the richly trimmed trunks in the cars they benchmarked?





Hyundai calls its iDrive-style controller DIS, or Driver Information System. The Koreans have had time to digest similar setups from BMW, Mercedes, [Audi](#), and [Acura](#) and presumably have integrated what they thought were the best features of those systems while avoiding many of their pitfalls. We'll have to wait until we have more street time in the Genesis to render a full verdict on DIS, but it seems intuitive, the knob feels good in the hand, if perhaps with not quite enough tension in it as one might like, and it's easy to scroll among menus to control navigation and the stereo. The iPod connection works well, and the touch-screen function is as good as anyone's. An optional 500-watt Lexicon stereo might not be the equal of the Mark Levinson system offered by [Lexus](#), but it will meet the expectations of all but the pickiest audiophiles, and there's easy access to the equalizer function.



Originally, Hyundai planned to offer the Genesis with both its 3.3-liter and 3.8-liter V-6s, which currently serve in the front-wheel-drive Azera, as well as the Tau V-8. But then it came to its senses and realized that the choice of three engines is a bit much for a vehicle with a modest annual sales goal of 30,000 units in the United States and only 80,000 units worldwide. (It's interesting to note that, although Hyundai eagerly apes European sedans with the Genesis, it is not offering the car in the hypercompetitive Western Europe market; it's already on sale in Korea and will be sold in China and Russia, among other markets.) And the 3.8-liter DOHC V-6 powertrain, no slouch with variable valve timing, 290 hp, and a six-speed automatic, handily allows Hyundai to boast that the Genesis offers more standard power than the [Infiniti M35](#), the [Pontiac G8](#), and the [Chrysler 300C](#).

"We've tuned the Genesis to fall somewhere between the Lexus GS and the Infiniti M," explains Wendell Collins, Jr., engineering manager for the ride and handling group at Hyundai Motor America. "We definitely wanted it to be sportier than the GS, but not as brutal as the M." The suspension is by unequal-length control arms at the front, with a multi-link rear setup. V-6 models get seventeen-inch tires as standard, with eighteen-inchers optional; eighteens are standard with the V-8. The Genesis made pretty

smooth work of lane-change and slalom courses at Namyang, with body control well in check, but the V-6 model is let down by a disappointing lack of steering feel, an old Korean-car bugaboo. Thankfully, V-8 models have electrohydraulic power steering, "which allowed us to define the steering curve for a very linear feel," claims Collins, and which we found to provide a far clearer line of communication between the front wheels and the palms of our hands. We're not talking BMW-like steering here, but it's a far cry from the [Toyota Camry's](#) or, for that matter, the [Hyundai Sonata's](#).

Both engines are very refined, eager to rev, and work seamlessly with their respective transmissions (the V-6 unit is from the Japanese supplier Aisin, while the German company ZF supplies the V-8's six-speed box). There's a manual-mode shift gate for both, but there are no steering wheel paddles in sight. Hammer the V-8, and some pleasing induction and valvetrain resonances will drift back into the cockpit, but more impressive is the strong torque band and the nice whack of acceleration that the Tau provides. We'll wait until we can drive a Genesis stateside before running performance numbers, but [Hyundai](#) promises a 0-to-60-mph time of well under six seconds. And even the V-6 model stormed around the high-speed oval with little drama, the speedo needle swinging around to 100 mph in no time and then rising steadily to 135 mph.

Unfortunately, the Genesis has not shed that layer of isolation that so characterizes [Lexus](#) cars and, of course, most Hyundais. This car, especially in V-8 guise, has the power and the presence to hold its own with cars costing much more. But those looking for pure tactility will be disappointed, as I was reminded when I ran the 530i and the M35 through the same paces that I'd driven the Genesis. Especially around the handling track, those two cars were far more in tune with the driver's intentions and better at communicating what was happening at the tire's contact patches. We'll grant Hyundai that the Genesis is more involving to drive than the Lexus GS (and certainly more so than the ES350), but for a sedan that so unabashedly aims for the best from Germany, it still needs a more Teutonic tilt to the chassis tuning: more road feel and steering feel, please. And although the brakes in both V-6 and V-8 Genesis models were responsive and progressive, they could use a more positive-feeling pedal.

Hyundai has a lot of irons in the fire. Between it and [Kia](#), its subsidiary, it controls 75 percent of the Korean home market, and its sales are burgeoning in China, India, and other emerging markets. In fact, the United States comprises only 20 percent of Hyundai's worldwide sales, so it's little surprise that Hyundai decided, at least for now, not to launch a luxury sales channel here like [Toyota](#) and [Nissan](#) did two decades ago.

Instead, it is essentially dipping its toe into the luxury-car waters with the Genesis. If it is a success, more luxury products are likely to follow, and Hyundai co-chairman and CEO Dong-Jin Kim does not rule out the possibility of a luxury arm for the future: "Some day, when we are strong enough. But for now, we have concluded that a separate premium brand is premature."

This means that, at least for the time being, the Genesis does without some of the baubles of the luxury-car establishment. No optional all-wheel drive. No direct injection or variable valve lift for the engines, no air suspensions or dual-clutch gearboxes, and more than likely, no special dealer treatment, just "a special, well-decorated corner [of the showroom] to display the Genesis," says Kim. Hyundai Motor America will, however, take pains to ensure that salespeople more accustomed to pushing Elantras and Sonatas out the door are properly trained to sell the Genesis and to deal with its potential customer base.

That customer base, if Hyundai's research proves accurate, will be a disparate group. "We will get people who normally graduate from an Accord type of car and make the leap to a luxury brand," says Joel Ewanick, Hyundai Motor America's vice-president of marketing, "but we'll also get people coming down from the luxury brands. We already get buyers like that for the Azera, people who do a lot of research on cars who then realize, 'this [a Hyundai] is a car that hasn't been on my radar screen, but should have been.'" As for pricing, Hyundai is positioning the Genesis squarely on top of the [BMW 3-series](#) and the Mercedes C-class, meaning the V-6 model starts at about \$33,000 and stretches up near the V-8 model's starting price of \$38,000. Fully optioned, the V-8 will be priced in the mid-\$40,000s. Bold strokes, these, since in reality the Genesis is also going to be cross-shopped with the [Pontiac G8](#) and the 3.5-liter [Chrysler 300C](#), which start at \$27,595 and \$29,290, respectively, and since Hyundai has yet to prove itself over the long haul in J. D. Power surveys and in resale values, although there has been recent progress on those fronts.

Hyundai might not be entering the luxury-car world with a new brand and shiny new dealerships, but there is nothing tentative about the Genesis itself, a car that represents the most ambitious engineering undertaking ever for the Korean automaker. Hyundai is a company that is very much looking forward but is also keenly aware of how far it has come. It didn't even have the wherewithal to build its own engine until 1991, when it introduced its Alpha four-cylinder and no longer had to license engines from [Mitsubishi](#). Now, here it is making its own, high-powered V-8 engine. The company insists that it will make money on every Genesis it sells, unlike Toyota, which sold its first Lexus cars at a loss to establish its luxury-car bonafides. In Hyundai's case, it's clear that, while the Genesis is a commodity product that will increase the bottom line, it's also an emotional milestone for the company, a way to mark its place in the world. And there's no need to apologize for that.