

2011 Hyundai Sonata Redefines The Affordable Family Sedan

Nice Formula: Striking Design and 35 Miles Per Gallon

by: Reilly Brennan | AOL Autos

Posted: Feb, 24 2010



The 2011 Hyundai Sonata (Hyundai).

Mid-size [sedans](#) typically offer about as much excitement as a dentist appointment.

The [Toyota Camry](#) -- long the most successful sedan in this segment up until the company's recent [recall](#) troubles -- truly created the tropes of what it meant to be a mid-size sedan in America: a reliable automotive device. No trifles, no fancy. Names like Camry, [Accord](#), Malibu, [Altima](#) and Fusion reign supreme.

While dutiful, this created a sitting duck for opportunity. At some point, someone was bound to come along and create something so out of the ordinary -- yet within the strike zone of most buyers in terms of price and design -- that it would move the category in a new direction.

Having just driven the new 2011 [Sonata](#), we think [Hyundai](#) has done such a thing.

Design, design, design

When we first saw the car on its debut at the [LA Auto Show](#) back in December, we witnessed Hyundai take a big swing with its design bat. The rear of the car had two of the sweetest wrap-around taillights we'd ever seen, while the front had a big, bold front grille and equally impressive front lamps. The arc of the roof (contributing to what Hyundai calls their "fluidic sculpture design") was gradual and low. And with a rather large "H" logo up front, it appeared for the first time that Hyundai wasn't afraid to tell the world it was a Hyundai, either (remember that the [Genesis](#) sedan launched in 2008 without any badges in the front whatsoever).

"Someone was telling me here the other day that if you compare this Sonata to the last generation, it's as if we skipped forward two entire generations," John Krafcik, CEO of Hyundai Motor America, said of the design. "That's how far this one moves from the previous car. It's a massive leap forward."

Cynics might point out that the last Sonata was a few generations behind in any case, although I wouldn't agree with that in full. The previous Sonata was never our top choice in the category, but it wasn't bad, either. It was, like other cars of that type, perfectly adequate. Sales hovered around 10,000 units per month, give or take.

Design is certainly one way to get more people to take notice. What we like even more than the dramatic front and rear designs are the smaller details of the exterior: check out the long strip of chrome that extends from the front mirrors toward the front headlamps, the strong character line that runs through both door handles, and the "crab claw" shape of the front grille. While the Sonata breaks the mold from other cars within its segment, it actually goes beyond being a pure luxury imitator. It's its own thing.



(Hyundai)

The Audacity of Limiting Choice

The most remarkable thing about the Sonata is something they've taken away: there's no V-6 engine. Hyundai is only offering this [car with their new](#) 4-cylinder, an all-aluminum unit with direct injection (which burns fuel much more efficiently, offering both more power and miles per gallon) that's rated at 200 hp (the trim levels with a single [exhaust](#) tip only manage 198 hp). That's a lot of power out of a little [engine](#) (with corresponding big fuel economy numbers to boot: 35 highway and 22 city for the 6-speed automatic, with the 6-speed manual hitting 24 in the city and the same on the highway), something that allowed Hyundai to take the opportunity to wave goodbye to V-6 engines altogether. The other companies in the segment with which Hyundai competes have not been as bullish on their 4-cylinders to make this move.

Really, few companies have the vision for this radical sense of fitness and well-being. Where everything else in our lives seems to be either squirted full of botox or continuously expanded like the 91 buttons on our HD TV controller, Hyundai is quite seriously going the other direction.

The only useful analogy to a company adhering to this sort of strategy is Apple, Inc. The California computer and gadget company created a history of releasing products with fewer features, sometimes being the first in a category to do so. Call it what you want (some people thought Apple was downright crazy for removing its USB drive from the new iPad, others believed the company was even crazier back in 1998 when the then-new iMacs appeared with -- gasp -- no external floppy disk drive), but the strategy is novel and somewhat risky: few companies truly believe in reduction of features as being a benefit to consumers.

To do this well requires conviction and, with any hope, the belief that what you've taken away is actually the right decision.

I believe that the lack of a V-6 engine here is actually quite a smart move. Here's why:

- Few V-6 buyers: few buyers of Hyundai's previous-generation Sonata opted for the old V-6. As 4-cylinder engines can create more power, having a six is less of a concern.

- Lower mass: Not only is the 4-cylinder engine an obviously lighter object to carry around than a V-6, Hyundai says the entire front end of the car changes when you know you're only building it for a 4-cylinder. In other words, if you have to design a car that could have the potential of carrying around that heavier V-6, the support structure in place around the engine needs to be much more robust. This move alone saved (not counting the difference in engine weights) over 100 lbs.
- A better fuel economy story: With only a 4-cylinder in the Sonata (the new [Tucson](#) crossover features the same singularity of engine choice), Hyundai can realistically tell consumers it's fuel efficient. 35 miles per gallon on the highway is a massive number for a non-hybrid.



(Hyundai)

Driving

Truth be told: We set out expecting that this new Sonata would be pretty good behind the wheel. With the way Hyundai's been working on its driving dynamics as of late (the 2007 [Santa Fe](#) was the first time we drove a Hyundai that really made us believe they had chassis engineers who cared about the driving experience), we had visions of a much more compelling steering rack, probably a bit of road noise improvement and [braking](#) characteristics that would give us confidence.

What we didn't expect was how much the experience is impacted by Hyundai's completely reworked interior. The seating position is perfect (there's tons of room in the back, too -- even with our seat full adjusted to our six-foot frame, rear legroom wasn't a problem), the A-pillars aren't too terribly wide (most cars these days have grown so thick in this area for [safety](#) reasons), and the roof starts so far back that we didn't feel encased in mail slot (a lot of these cars with sloping roofs tend to push you so far back that the experience gets a bit, well...removed). So much of our confidence behind the wheel has to do with how much we're able to see and Hyundai seems to appreciate this as much as we do.

While the 4-cylinder's power didn't let us down, some of its road noise coming up to speed did give us pause. As you'd expect from a four-cylinder engine carrying around a one-and-a-half-ton automobile, you pick up a slight buzzing sound. In contrast to the smoothest V-6 engines of the segment (the [Honda Accord](#) and Ford Fusion are our favorites for V-6s), any 4-cylinder will let you know it's hard at work. In contrast to the other 4-cylinders we've driven within this group, it's quiet. In fact, what we picked up wasn't even audible to our co-driver. This is something to keep in mind if you're truly looking for the tradeoffs associated with opting out of the V-6.

Ride and handling in the new Sonata is very good. One car in this segment that never gets enough accolades is the [Mazda 6](#) sedan and we found ourselves comparing this Sonata to that car throughout the day. This is high praise for Hyundai. While steering response isn't quite as quick as the [Mazda](#), it's still better than most of what you'll find at this price (or a good deal more). Hyundai's trim lines give buyers the opportunity to choose a more robust suspension package (the "SE" model) that further proves out the experience.

Of the two cars we drove (the base "GLS" model and the "SE"), we noted one similar gripe beyond the slight engine noise we picked up on earlier: knee room for the driver could be increased. After a few hours of driving we found ourselves wanting for just one or two more inches of horizontal knee space. The center stack in the Sonata (no doubt a nice one, but it is filled to the brim with controls) could use a belt tightening to find that extra room.

With those rather small gripes noted, we regretfully turned back the keys to Hyundai. Of all the cars in this mid-size segment, we can't recommend any other that has such a high degree of quality in terms of exterior, interior, and driving experience. This is how brands are built in the car business: through the steady, constant release of significantly improved products. Yes, the 2011 Sonata is a whole lot more fun than a dentist appointment.

Hyundai Speed

Later in the day after my drive in the Sonata, I had the opportunity to sit down with Hyundai CEO John Krafcik again. I asked him how the company had been able to innovate so quickly -- from the design and technological leaps in product to being the first manufacturer offering a [Cash for Clunkers](#) rebate program. His response was surprising but absolutely in keeping with what we've come to expect from their products.

"We have four vice presidents -- that's all," he said. "When I have a staff meeting, we can literally do it in a closet. We can make decisions very, very quickly."

It's showing. For all the hype about Hyundai over the last 12 months, the company is really walking the walk and doing it fast. If you're looking for a new sedan around \$20,000, you absolutely must put it on your list.