

# 2011 Hyundai Sonata First Drive

Taking on Camry and Accord

By [Jason Kavanagh, Engineering Editor](#) | Published Feb 22, 2010

It has been said that "better" is the enemy of "good enough." Nobody told Hyundai.

Quick raise of hands — who wants to take on the Chevrolet Malibu, Ford Fusion, Honda Accord, Nissan Altima and Toyota Camry? You, with the 2011 Hyundai Sonata, stand up! This is the toughest segment in the U.S., and there's not a stinker in the lot. You've been warned.



That a Hyundai can compete at levels of world-class accomplishment is news from years ago. But taking on the competition is not an exercise for the meek. To succeed, you've got to be more than good enough. You've got to be better. And comprehensively so, too.

## A Better Use of Space

There's a lot to talk about regarding the new 2011 Hyundai Sonata. It's built on an all-new platform, while the exterior bodywork has been designed in Hyundai's own design center in Irvine, California. And it's been tuned for American roads with substantial input from the company's engineering staff in Southern California.

As the car is rolled out into production, the 2011 Hyundai Sonata will be available in three trim levels — GLS, SE and Limited. The car itself is similar in its dimensions to the outgoing 2010 model, save for an increase in overall length of less than an inch. In that respect, it's a midsize sedan. However, its 2.6-inch-longer wheelbase liberates enough additional cabin space to make the new Sonata classified as a large car by the EPA, just like the [Honda Accord](#).

The entire car appears stretched back from its chrome grille like taffy, and the prominent "side spears" visually slim the profile while adding a flash of character. To our eyes, the undertones of [Lexus ES](#) that permeate the styling are more like overtones. Still, it's attractive, with enough personality that it won't be lost in the crowd.

## The Ambience Inside

Although the new car's beltline is fashionably high, visibility from within the cabin remains good. The interior design aesthetic is modern, if not entirely original, what with its Volvo-esque HVAC cartoon and a cascading center stack à la [Cadillac CTS](#). The Sonata feels airier up front than the Cad, thanks

to its less bulky cowl. Likewise, the backseat serves up positively vast legroom for a 6-plus-footer, though such tall guys will notice headroom being pinched by the plunging roof line.

Dominating the surroundings are low-gloss materials that minimize annoying reflections and, well, just plain look better than the plasti-chrome that's all the rage these days. It's all rather handsome and functional in the cabin, with missteps limited to the overly flat front seat and the low-rent feel of the cloth upholstery in GLS trim.

All trim levels offer a heaping serving of standard equipment including a USB input, Bluetooth and XM Satellite Radio. Leather is available in the higher-zoot Limited trim level, which also offers luxuries like dual-zone auto climate control, seat heaters for the front and rear, premium audio and the like.

It drives smaller than it is, as body roll is kept under control and the steering is quick and precise.

### **New Chassis With a New Attitude**

An all-new chassis means all-new structural rigidity, and sure enough the new Sonata is stiffer than the outgoing car in torsion by 25 percent and in bending by 19 percent. The front end is suspended by MacPherson struts and the rear relies on aluminum control arms arranged in a multilink layout.

Three tire sizes will be available. The GLS gets 16-inchers, the Limited wears 17-inchers and the sport-tuned SE has 18-inchers. From a purely fashion-oriented perspective, the 16s look feeble under the ample proportions of the Sonata's flanks. So there.

The SE's suspension also gets a mild firming-up compared to the 2010 version by way of higher-rate springs, a larger rear stabilizer bar and more rebound damping. Monotube rear dampers are fitted to the rear of SE models to help recoup some ride quality, while the full electric-assist steering is calibrated with a shade more effort than that of the GLS and Limited. But the SE is no hard-edged beast, as on the road it compromises little ride quality in exchange for its sportier bent.

### **Four Cylinders on the Brain**

Just one engine will be available initially, a direct-injected 2.4-liter inline-4 generating 198 horsepower and 184 pound-feet of torque (the SE trim's dual exhaust is said to liberate an additional 2 hp and 2 lb-ft) driving the front wheels. This mill can be paired with a six-speed manual gearbox or a six-speed automatic, where it returns 24 mpg city/35 mpg highway and 22 mpg city/35 mpg highway, respectively.

The Sonata's motivation is made easier thanks to its reasonably low curb weight of 3,200 pounds — roughly 80-100 pounds less than last year's Sonata, depending on equipment. Though no performance numbers are yet available, Hyundai is quick to point out that the 2011 Sonata's power-to-weight ratio easily bests any of its four-banger competition.



There will be no V6 option — not now and not later. Hyundai decided very early on that the Sonata will house nothing larger than a four-cylinder for reasons of avoiding complexity and weight creep. "With no V6, there's less mass needed to support a [V6] boat anchor," says [Hyundai CEO John Krafcik](#).

### **Cutting and Thrusting**

Piloting all three versions of Sonata around the scenic hills north of San Diego, we immediately appreciate the sharp chassis tuning. It drives smaller than it is, as body roll is kept under control and the steering is quick and precise. Road lumps are acknowledged by the suspension and then promptly damped, resulting in the kind of chassis poise that will appeal to those who can appreciate the keen dynamics of, say, the [Ford Fusion](#).

You might be thinking that the Sonata's lofty highway fuel economy relies heavily on sluggish, ultra-tall gearing. While it's true that 6th gear is heavily overdriven in the automatic, the powertrain never feels lacking for power, and downshifts are served up promptly.

Direct-injected fours are notoriously vocal, and this one is no exception. Dip into the throttle and the smooth four moves the Sonata with authority while delivering prominent engine noise. It's something you only notice when you give it the boot, as the Sonata is otherwise a remarkably quiet car.

### **Future Variants**

Two other powertrains — a turbocharged 2.0-liter four-cylinder and a hybrid — will be revealed in detail at this year's New York auto show. According to Krafcik, the direct-injection turbo version will generate "more than 250 horsepower" and is targeted to match the fuel economy of the normally aspirated car. It will be offered as an optional engine rather than a specific trim level.



The range-topping hybrid will be a stand-alone model that retains the existing six-speed autobox rather than a dedicated (read: more expensive) continuously variable transmission. It employs fancy lithium-polymer batteries and, Krafcik adds, the car will rival the fuel economy of the Fusion Hybrid and [Camry Hybrid](#).

### **The New Bull's-Eye**

So far, it's proving difficult to find any substantial flaws in the considerable armor of the 2011 Hyundai Sonata, and the case for it only grows stronger when you consider the price points. It's bang-on \$20 grand for a base GLS with manual transmission, and the full-zoot Limited sans navigation commands just a hair over \$26,000. This is, quite frankly, a tremendous amount of car for the money.

It's clear that Hyundai is leaving no stone unturned in its quest to dominate the segment in every category, both objective and subjective. When it comes to size, dynamics, fuel economy, power, equipment and price, Hyundai has brought a howitzer to a gunfight. Our first brief fling with the Sonata suggests that it has the measure of the segment.