



2009 Hyundai Elantra Touring makes travel a real treat

By [James R. Healey](#), USA TODAY

Isn't this a sweet surprise? The 2009 Hyundai Elantra Touring could be the best auto bargain going.

The small/midsize wagon seems to fashion contradictions into complementary attributes, rather than settling for compromises. For instance:

PHOTOS/AUDIO: [Hyundai Elantra with Healey's comments](#)

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Elantra Touring takes up the road space of a compact, but provides the passenger room of a midsize and the cargo area of a middling SUV.

It's simple in presentation to keep costs down, but comes across as elegant and refreshingly restrained.

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It's not very powerful, but is loads of fun to fling.

It looks dumpy in pictures, but appealing in the flesh — resembling an elongated, well-proportioned Honda Fit without the Fit's silly spoilers and other plastic dreck.

It offers an automatic transmission, of course, but almost demands that you take the manual, to enjoy the tingling satisfaction of manipulating the B&M Racing brand sport shifter.

It's an economy car, but comes with sophistication lacking in some pricier cars, including independent suspension front and rear, disc brakes all around, standard stability control and alloy wheels.

It has an enticingly long warranty — five years or 60,000 miles overall, 10/100,000 powertrain — that's better than some luxury brands.

And you probably won't need it. The Touring hasn't been on sale long enough to have a track record, but the Elantra sedan on which it's based has a "recommended" rating from *Consumer Reports* magazine with top scores in reliability and ownership cost. Two-thirds of all Hyundais on sale long enough for a record are recommended by *CR*.

If you still think Hyundai's the cheap brand you buy instead of what you really wanted, boy, are you out of date.

In addition, most details got unexpected attention. Some examples:

- The top model has an exceptionally well done and useful storage tray under the cargo floor, sitting atop the spare tire.
- Bottle holders in the door panels are angled for easy grab-and-gulp moves while underway. (If the bottle's much smaller than the holder, though, it merely tilts precariously.)
- All three rear seating slots have safety head restraints. You find only two on some higher-price cars, as if somebody decided that the middle rider needed no whiplash protection.

The Elantra Touring test car was so unexpectedly good that it called for two separate test periods, to see if the good first impression was illusory. It wasn't.

Touring is a daring car because it's a wagon introduced into the U.S. market, which doesn't like those much. ("We don't call it a wagon here; kiss of death," says Hyundai's small-car product manager in the U.S., Mark Dipko. "We call it a versatility vehicle.") In Europe, its main market, it's a "crossover wagon."

And, truly, it's easy enough to think of it as a hatchback with very generous cargo space.

Hyundai has added the Touring to the U.S. lineup, Dipko says, because "We saw the opportunity to enliven the Elantra line with something styled in Europe."

The gripes, and it's a short list:

- All-wheel drive.** Not available. It wasn't designed to accommodate it, so don't expect it, period, Dipko says. "We have the Tucson (SUV) if you need all-wheel drive," he says.
- Leather.** Not available. Cloth was comfy (and available heated), but leather sheds spills better.
- Visor notch.** Too small. Hard to get a finger behind the sun visor to fold it down. Wearing gloves? Forget it.
- Lighting.** Too light. The small green lamp that shows the air conditioning is on was unreadable in daylight. The dashboard lighting is a gorgeous, classy blue, but it didn't illuminate the gauges as well as expected.

•**Shifting.** Mainly terrific, and that B&M linkage delivered a light metallic click as you moved it among the gears, somewhat like the precise sound of a rifle bolt. But the shift between first and second gears, up or down, sometimes took an extra push.

The clutch engagement could be tricky. If you sit close enough that your left leg always can let out the clutch pedal smoothly, you might find your right leg too close to the throttle and brake pedals.

Most people probably could adjust their way around that. The driver's seat had what seemed like more notches, closer together, than most manually adjusted seats. Thus you could slide very slightly fore or aft to fine-tune your relationship with the pedals. The manually adjustable seats in most cars have big gaps between the positions.

Touring is a slick piece of work; a lot of satisfying automobile for the money. It'd be tragic if America's aversion to cars that look like wagons killed it in showrooms.

ABOUT THE ELANTRA TOURING

• **What?** Compact, front-drive, four-door, five-passenger wagon. (Must you? asks Hyundai. How about crossover-utility hatchback or some such, since "wagon" is the kiss of death in the U.S.) New to the U.S. lineup, based on the Elantra sedan that was new for '07.

• **When?** On sale since fall.

• **Where?** Made in South Korea.

• **Why?** Already being manufactured for the European market, where buyers are wise enough to appreciate the benefits of wagonlike cars; not a big investment to test the waters in the U.S.

• **How much?** Starts at \$18,495 including \$695 shipping. Premium model starts at \$19,995. Nearly loaded test vehicle: \$20,455.

• **Who'll buy?** Hobbyists, do-it-yourselfers and others who like a trim-size car, but need extra capacity. About 55% female, 65% married, 45 years old (plus or minus), \$65,000 median annual household income.

• **How punchy?** More than the specs suggest: 2-liter, four-cylinder engine is rated 138 horsepower at 6,000 rpm, 137 pounds-feet of torque at 4,600 rpm; five-speed manual with B&M Racing brand sport shifter is standard; four-speed automatic is optional.

• **How deluxe?** Unexpected standard features: stability control, fog lights, outside mirror defrosters, four-wheel disc brakes, four-wheel independent suspension.

- **How big?** Compact outside, midsize inside. Elantra Touring is 176.2 inches long, 69.5 inches wide, 59.8 inches tall on a 106.3-inch wheelbase.

Weighs 2,937 to 3,112 pounds.

Passenger space listed as 101.2 cubic feet. Cargo space: 24.3 cubic feet behind rear seat, 65.3 cubic feet when rear seat's folded.

Turning circle: 34.2 feet.

- **How thirsty?** Rated 23 miles per gallon in town, 31 (manual) or 30 (automatic) mpg on the highway, 26 mpg combined.

Trip computer in manual test car showed 22.7 mpg in spirited suburban driving (4.41 gallons per 100 miles).

Burns regular, holds 14 gallons.

- **Overall:** Terrific surprise; pocket change for remarkable blend of practicality and satisfaction.