

2010 Hyundai Genesis Coupe First Drive

Epic Roads, World-Class Ride

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It's 5 a.m. in South Korea and we slip downstairs in the dark from our motel room in Uljin to the underground parking garage. We point the key fob into the blackness and a car's soft interior lighting illuminates a sumptuous leather cabin. Headlights cast a glow, highlighting aggressive character lines that cut across purposeful bodywork.

We're drooling over a Hyundai, for heaven's sake. It's the 2010 Hyundai Genesis Coupe. We load the gear into the surprisingly accommodating trunk, slip into the chilly cockpit and press the starter button. We're looking forward to this. Really looking forward to it.



In 10 minutes time, we'll be carving a piece of Korean blacktop that's every bit as epic as the very best roads in the world. It's the Bulryeong Valley, an amazing route that starts on Korea's picturesque east coast and reaches into the country's mountainous heart.



It'll be a real test, a mustard-cutting exercise for the 2010 Hyundai Genesis Coupe that will prove whether the Koreans can make a genuine world-class sport coupe.

World-Class Rear-Wheel-Drive

This is the 2010 Genesis Coupe, the two-door version of the rear-wheel-drive car that has won Hyundai grudging respect at last from the world's luxury carmakers. At its core, this top-line Genesis SE coupe is powered by Hyundai's 32-valve, 3.8-liter Lambda V6, which produces 299 horsepower at 6,300 rpm and delivers 266 pound-feet of torque at 4,700 rpm. A ZF-built 6HP26 six-speed transmission sends the power to the rear wheels.



This car looks substantial in person, measuring 182.3 inches long, 73.4 inches wide and 54.3 inches tall. The wheelbase is commensurately long at 111 inches. The suspension setup includes MacPherson struts up front, while a five-link independent arrangement controls the rear wheels. If the V6 is in place, the Genesis coupe weighs in at 3,549 pounds; if the turbocharged, intercooled, 212-hp 2.9-liter inline-4 is doing business under the hood, the car weighs 3,439 pounds.

There are three trim levels: entry-level GS with turbo inline-4; the GT with the V6; and the high-performance SE with a sport-tuned suspension, Brembo brakes and 19-inch tires matched to either the four- or six-cylinder.

Leaving Uljin

We turn off Highway 5, burble through still-sleeping villages, then start to climb into the hills that tower above. The road to Yeongju is smooth, fairly wide and bordered by guardrails and catch fencing. Sweeping corners outnumber straights 10 to one. It's like we've found our own private racetrack.



Even in this demanding environment, the 2010 Hyundai Genesis Coupe still delivers. It grips so hard at the front that you wonder if there is actually a Korean word for understeer, then encourages you to get on the gas early and put all 299 hp to use at the rear. Again there's grip from the 19-inch rear tires, yet there's a lightness and deft poise that makes for an immensely satisfying and extremely manageable flow from one apex to the next.

The SE package's big brakes never lose their bite, thanks to 13.4-inch rotors in front and 13-inch rotors in the rear, both with four-piston Brembo calipers. Meanwhile, the V6's large reserve of torque is always on hand to haul you fuss-free from tight turns. Then it hits me. The 2010 Genesis Coupe feels exactly like the [Infiniti G37](#) — the hollow warble of the V6, the chassis balance, and the light and linear steering. We have never driven one car that feels so much like another. And to think it used to be the Japanese who imitated the Americans and Europeans.

Seoul Man

Two days earlier we were sitting in the Grand Hyatt Hotel in Seoul, listening to Western businessmen discuss deals with their Korean counterparts while looking out at a parking drive marked by [Mercedes-Benz SLs](#) and the odd [Porsche 911 GT3](#). Out of the window, this city of 10 million bathes in misty smog, and a tangle of traffic jostles into the distance. Such a familiar view doesn't seem to promise the new driving experiences and taste of a foreign culture that brought us to Korea.

As we set off into traffic in the 2010 Hyundai Genesis Coupe, we remember the advice of our Korean guidebooks, with the usual limp-wristed attitude of "driving in Seoul is crazy, man; take the bus." But the signs have English translations and it's not so bad as long as you have a basic idea of where you're heading and aren't expecting everyone to conduct themselves as if they're in a driver training video. Koreans are aggressive, but there's also an acceptance that you'll be aggressive, too.

Outpunching the Nissan VQ V6?

It's surely no coincidence that this 3,778cc V6 outpunches the Nissan VQ V6 by about 100cc. We're slightly perturbed to see we've landed the six-speed automatic instead of the standard six-speed manual, but the six-speed slusher is a blessing in traffic — smooth, fairly quick and hassle-free. The lack of shifter paddles on the steering wheel feels odd in a car so sporting, though. At least Sport mode holds the gear to the engine's redline and asks that you press the accelerator farther before it will kick down a gear.

We stick on Highway 4 and make for Hongcheon, impressed by the quality of the roads and amazed by how much of the Korean GDP must be spent on bridge-building projects. Some 70 percent of the country is mountainous, so there's a lot of fresh air to span. But it's taking a long time to get anywhere at the mandatory speed limit of 80 km/h (50 mph). At first we toe the line, perturbed by how few Korean drivers are willing to exceed the speed limit as well as by ubiquitous photo

radar installations. But since there's zero police presence and the speed cameras are easy to spot, we settle in to a more reasonable 160 km/h (100 mph).

Even at this pace there's barely any wind noise in the Genesis coupe and tire noise is well suppressed except on the kind of concrete-paved sections you get on U.S. freeways. It's a nice cruiser, and a nice place to be. Even the soft-touch dash plastics exude quality — though the indicator stalks and charmless center console let the side down.

On the outskirts of Hongcheon the roadsides become a chaotic mix of LPG stations, single-story dwellings with tatty breezeblock walls and lunchtime eateries. A wide, slow-flowing river cuts through town and fishermen crouch peacefully at its sandy banks. But, like all the Korean towns we see, Hongcheon feels bland and reconstructed post-Korean War with too much haste and too little thought to the people who live there. So we push on through the Taebaek mountain range in search of Seoraksan National Park.

Touring Seoraksan

We hoped the road across Seoraksan's craggy granite hillsides and densely forested slopes would make for a spectacular drive. And it does, only it's a 30-mph drive. This is a key tourist destination and since there's pretty much just one road that everyone uses, it's packed on a Friday. Overtaking is forbidden, so we sit it out with the tourists and admire the fall-season trees with their golden yellows and rust-colored reds and deep greens.

Our enforced amble does highlight a flaw, because the 2010 Hyundai Genesis Coupe rides badly, as its damping lacks the supple polish of the best all-around sporting coupes. Probably the SE package's front 225/40R19 and rear 245/40R19 Hankook tires don't help. The trick for Hyundai would be in maintaining the excellence of the handling, while underpinning it with more comfort. Perhaps a trip to Lotus Engineering, a longtime collaborator with Hyundai for suspension calibration in the past, would be in order.

On Saturday morning, we point the Hyundai toward the border with North Korea and away from the tourist buses that relentlessly stream into the park. So far the tension between North and South Korea has seemed pretty distant, but the standoff starts to feel very real indeed as we run along the east coast. Beautiful beaches and calm waters lie entirely empty, an uninterrupted length of fencing topped with razor wire preventing any access to anyone. Fencing and military lookout points ensure tourists go no farther, and even a river inlet is fenced end-to-end to its deepest depths.

Then a few kilometers away from the demilitarized zone (DMZ) that separates the two countries, things start to get really strange. A man with a pink baton waves us into a parking lot and we're asked to buy a ticket. They've turned the DMZ into a tourist attraction! There's popcorn and slush-puppy drinks and the kind of tourist crap you'd get at Coney Island (if it hadn't been torn down recently, that is). At a lookout point, a line of 30 or so coin-operated telescopes are trained toward the North under a tattered awning sponsored by Fuji Film. This is a very strange vibe indeed.

The Modern Korean Car

The Koreans have had to work damn hard to rebuild their country from the ashes of war. The work ethic continues to this day. As one English executive on assignment here tells us, "If they need to do a job, they'll work 18-hour days until it's done."

Fifty years on and the hard graft is paying off. Hyundai together with Kia represents the world's fifth-largest car manufacturer with a 70 percent share of its domestic market and growing respect in Europe. And today, with the 2010 Hyundai Genesis Coupe, the company has built a truly world-class product.

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