

Sonata ready for big time

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ATLANTA — When you are competing in the family sedan market, you better bring your "A" game. The 2009 Hyundai Sonata, which has been updated, does just that. In a field loaded with the Nissan Altima, Honda Accord and Toyota Camry, the Sonata has emerged as a big-time player. Take one for a spin — and check out its sticker price — and you'll see why.

COMPETITION

In addition to the great models listed above, the Sonata also competes against the Ford Fusion and Chevrolet Malibu. When it comes to gas mileage, the Sonata tops all those models with its four-cylinder highway performance of 32 mpg. With the six-cylinder, it's tied for first with the Accord for highway mileage, at 29 mpg. It competes very effectively on price, too, as the Limited V-6 comes in \$3,300 cheaper than the Accord.

WHAT'S SPECIAL: The Sonata's changes include more powerful engines. The 2.4-liter four cylinder makes 175 horsepower and 168 foot-pounds of torque. The 3.3-liter six cylinder cranks out 249 horsepower and 229 foot-pounds. The four banger is powerful enough for most folks, but if you want the extra boost, the six is good to go.

WHAT WE LIKE: The Sonata has a new, more refined interior that is quite pleasant and classy. The center console and instrument panel show up very nicely now. There are new colors for the interior, also: cocoa, gray and camel. The exterior gets some welcome changes, too.

WHAT ISN'T THERE: An overly thirsty engine. Even the V-6 gets pretty respectable numbers: 19 mpg city, 29 highway. The four cylinder gets a nifty 22 and 32. Plus, you also don't get a lot of road noise. At highway speeds, the Sonata whispers.

YOU OUGHTA KNOW: There's a five-speed automatic transmission that is silky smooth and is available with both engines. It includes overdrive lock-up torque converter for higher fuel economy at highway speed. Hyundai also set out to improve the driving experience with a new, refined sporty suspension. Six air bags are standard on the Sonata. The intelligent braking electronics provide more safety.

EXTRAS: The Sonata has three distinct trim levels, the base GLS, which has a number of options and price points; the midlevel SE, which offers sportier cues and driving dynamics; and the Limited, which is the fully equipped luxury model featuring a leather interior. The GLS has 16-inch wheels as standard, while the SE and Limited come with 17-inchers. It has a standard iPod/USB port and auxiliary inputs. Music from the iPod can be played showing a display of artist and title.

ABOUT HYUNDAI

Hyundai has firmly established itself as the No. 4 import brand in the United States, achieving that ranking every year since 2002. It trails Toyota, Honda and Nissan and ranks ahead of Kia, Lexus and Mazda. The Elantra SE small sedan and the Santa Fe midsized sport utility vehicle were recently selected by Consumer Reports as top picks. The Sonata and Santa Fe are made at Hyundai's plant in Montgomery, Ala.

AND ANOTHER THING: There's a navigation system with high-res touch screen display and voice command.

Hyundai Sonata

Body styles: sedan

Trim lines: GLS, SE, Limited

Price: \$18,795-\$27,595

Seating: Two in front, three in rear

Engine: 2.4-liter four-cylinder, 3.3-liter six-cylinder

Transmission: Five-speed manual or five-speed automatic

Miles per gallon of fuel: 19 mpg city/ 29 highway for six-cylinder

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