



## Hyundai Tucson proves it's time to buy a Hyundai

By James R. Healey, USA TODAY

BEVERLY HILLS — Hyundai needed a more-competitive small crossover-utility vehicle to get U.S. buyers to pay attention in a market segment dominated by Honda CR-V, Ford Escape and Toyota RAV4 — the three best-selling SUVs of any kind.

So the South Korean car company chose a design from its Frankfurt unit and made sure it would accommodate every gadget typical of bigger, fancier machines.

But it did not bother to make room for a V-6. Those are passé at Hyundai these days, and a four-cylinder should be quite enough, thank you.

A variety of preproduction 2010 Tucsons tested around here seemed more refined, more comfortable and more agile than those key competitors.

If you need a third-row seat, though, RAV4 is the only one. Or if you crave a hybrid, help yourself to an Escape. Tote lots of stuff? Tucson's cargo space is some 40% shy of main rivals'.

But if your only hesitation is the thought of snide remarks from outdated others who still think of Hyundai as a second-tier brand, grow up and make your own choice. The naysayers will be on board soon enough.

Perhaps it'll be when they notice the much-longer Hyundai warranty (60,000 miles overall, 100,000 miles powertrain). Or the all-wheel drive (AWD) that lets you lock it into true four-wheel-drive mode (50% of power to each end). And how about fuel-economy ratings 5% to 10% (1 to 3 mpg) better than those of key rivals?

As if trying to dispel the "cheap car" myth, Hyundai picked this hoity-toity locale to present Tucson to journalists. Bit of a reach, the Beverly Hills connection, but the remade Tucson is pretty slick.

The appearance is supposed to be European, though it doesn't look much like what was on the roads during a recent trip to Germany and the U.K.

By whatever name, the styling is dramatic: sweep and swoop and angles and edges. Will it wear well or soon seem outdated? For the moment, it looks good. Oddly color-sensitive. Nice in white, a color worn well by almost no vehicle.

Rear visibility is compromised by the way the sheet metal kicks up beginning at the back edge of the rear door. Pinches down the rear-most side window. Even so, you wouldn't say it's dangerously difficult to see out the back and rear quarter.

What about that four-banger-only business? Tucson has the perverse advantage of comparing the new powertrain with a ho-hum (at best) V-6 in the old Tucson. Wouldn't take much to seem better.

Abetted by Hyundai's self-designed, excellent-shifting, six-speed automatic, the Tucson's 2.4-liter, 176-horsepower four felt lively, smooth and capable in a day rolling up miles on rural canyon roads, freeways and the Pacific Coast Highway in heavy traffic. More pleasant to drive than rivals' four-bangers. All have similar

power, but Tucson models generally weigh less. And despite being 3 inches longer and an inch wider, the 2010 Tucson base model weighs 61 pounds less than the 2009.

Did the four feel like a V-6? No. Did that seem to matter? No. Was the experience undercut by any sort of coarse, bust-a-gut roar you often get in four-cylinder vehicles? No. Floor it and go, liking the sound and sensations. Simple and satisfying.

What else the drives showcased:

- Dandy manual. The six-speed stick shift, offered only in the base GLS with front-wheel drive, was an easy joy. Light-touch clutch, little worry about killing the engine or jerky shifts.
- Panoramic sunroof. Hyundai's first. Handsome option for those who can't stand being unenlightened from above.
- Roomy interior. You'd think you were in a midsize machine, especially back-benchers.
- Clean, classy accommodations. Hyundai's a champion at presenting all the dials, instruments and other hoo-hah you need in stunning simplicity that looks and feels inviting.

Favorite example of less-is-more: Manual-shift mode for Tucson's automatic transmission is via the floor lever. Period. No goofy steering-column shift paddles that are useful to Grand Prix racers loath to lift a digit from the wheel at 200 mph but laughably silly in many modern family cars.

- Good down-the-road dynamics. Based on the commendable Elantra chassis, Tucson had modest body lean for an SUV. Electric power steering was well-tuned, with good on-center feel on straight roads and responsive turning and road feel in the snaky stuff. Brakes felt good, though nearly every automaker has room to approach the Audi standard of suddenness in the "whoa" pedal.
- Niggling details. Safety belt for middle rear-rider hangs from the ceiling. Messy looking, distracting in the rearview mirror and a possible entanglement when you fold the back seat.

It's hard to lower windows just-so to prevent whistle or buffeting. Doable, but takes fussing.

Rear seat doesn't slide fore-aft, as rivals' do.

Hyundai's hot. Sales up 6.2%, Autodata says, in an overall market down 23.9% through November. Only others up this year: Kia, 7.2%; Subaru, 13.6%.

The 2010 Tucson suggests that Hyundai will be among the winners for quite some time.

- What? Compact, four-door, five-passenger crossover-utility vehicle that's different in almost every detail from the vehicle of the same name it replaces.

Two flavors: GLS and Limited, each available with front-wheel drive (FWD) or all-wheel drive (AWD).

- When? On sale this month.
- Where? Designed in Frankfurt, tweaked in California, manufactured in Ulsan, South Korea.
- Why? Needed a serious rival to Honda CR-V, Toyota RAV4 and Ford Escape, which currently outsell Tucson in the U.S. about 10-to-1.

- How much? Base GLS FWD manual starts at \$19,790 including \$795 shipping. High-end Limited AWD with premium package is \$29,490.

- How potent? Optional V-6 has been discontinued. Only engine is a 2.4-liter four-cylinder that Hyundai calls Theta II, rated 176 horsepower at 6,000 rpm, 168 pounds-feet of torque at 4,000, mated to six-speed automatic transmission with manual-shift mode. Six-speed manual available on GLS FWD only.

- How big? Six inches shorter than CR-V, otherwise similar but has considerably less cargo space. Tucson is 173.2 inches long, 71.7 in. wide, 66.3 in. tall (with roof rails), on a 103.9-in. wheelbase.

Weights 3,179 to 3,516 lbs.

Passenger space: 101.9 cubic feet. Cargo space: 25.7 cu. ft. behind second row, 55.8 cu. ft. when rear seat's folded.

Tows up to 2,000 lbs. Turning circle diameter, 34.7 ft. Carries 1,091 to 1,294 lbs. of people, cargo and accessories, depending on model.

- How thirsty? FWD automatic rated 23 miles per gallon in town, 31 highway, 26 in combined driving. FWD manual: 22/30/25. AWD automatic: 21/28/24.

Trip computers in preproduction test cars registered:

GLS AWD automatic: 22.3 mpg (4.48 gallons per 100 miles) in mixed driving including suburbs, freeway and winding canyon roads.

GLS FWD manual: 26.8 mpg (3.73 gal./100 mi.) in suburbs during heavy traffic.

Limited AWD automatic: 28.7 mpg (3.48 gal./100 mi.) in a mix of suburbs and winding, hilly canyon roads that were driven mainly in second and third gears.

Burns regular, holds 14.5 gallons.

- Overall: Could be the new champ among small SUVs.