

MOTORING

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INEXPENSIVE EXCELLENCE

Had the latest Hyundai NF Sonata come without its badges, you might have sworn you were looking at the latest Subaru Liberty or wide-body Honda Accord.

The previous Sonata – a capable, value-for-money package – was uninspiring. This impressive new sedan – a serious contender in the medium-car segment and still at a very good price – looks superb.

Much larger than its predecessor, it offers generous passenger space and

high levels of safety, while its standard inclusions come highly specified.

Proud of its achievements with the new Sonata, Hyundai points to how the car compares with its direct competitors, and makes claims that might shock the large-car fraternity. It asserts, for example, that Sonata has more front legroom and headroom than both Commodore and Falcon. And, only 10mm narrower than the Commodore, it has more interior space than Mazda 6 and Honda Accord.

On the outside, this car has a refined, even sophisticated presence. The many pleasing aspects of its design include a nicely sculptured bonnet, projector-style front headlamps and a bold rear end. This theme carries through to the inside, where it has a spacious, airy, luxury feel.

In addition to its good visibility, the car feels big and offers excellent passenger space, both in the front and rear.

Sonata features two new all-alloy engines: a spirited 2.4-litre DOHC

four-cylinder and a powerful 3.3-litre DOHC V6. The balance-shaft-equipped four features variable valve timing and an electronic throttle, and can muster 118kW of power and 219Nm of torque. By comparison with its main competitors, this is 6kW more than Camry and 3kW less than Mazda 6 – although Sonata has more torque.

The V6 also features variable valve timing and belts out an impressive 173kW of power and 304Nm of torque. Hyundai points out that its V6 has 32kW more power than Camry V6



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and is within 2kW of the Commodore. The Sonata, however, is almost 100kg lighter than Commodore.

Each equipment grade, Sonata and Elite, is available with either the four-cylinder or V6 engine. Entry level Sonata four-cylinder is the only model to have a five-speed manual transmission but can be optioned with a smooth, four-speed adaptive automatic for an additional \$1,500.

Standard with the four-cylinder Elite is the four-speed auto, while both V6 models come with a slick, five-speed automatic. Both auto boxes feature a sequential manual shift mode and gate-style shift pattern, and are adaptive to driving style. Each is very easy to use and superbly smooth in its changing habits.

Hyundai has endowed every Sonata model with a swag of standard comfort and safety features, which include:

- ABS brakes with electronic brake force distribution.
- Six airbags (front, front side and full-length curtain).
- Active head restraints and seatbelt pre-tensioners.
- Air conditioning with pollen filter and ducts to the rear footwell.
- Cruise control with steering wheel-mounted controls.
- Remote locking with alarm and immobilizer.
- Power windows and mirrors.
- MP3/CD audio system with six speakers.
- Trip computer.

As adjuncts to safety, both V6 models feature electronic stability control and traction control. Additional equipment on Elite includes:

- Seventeen-inch alloy wheels.
- Full leather trim.
- Power (eight-way) adjustable driver's seat.
- Auto climate-control system.
- In-dash, six-disc CD with 190-watt amplifier and eight-inch subwoofer.
- Reverse sensing warning system.

Hyundai really sharpened its pencil when it came to set pricing: \$25,490 for the entry level Sonata four-cylinder manual; \$29,990 for the V6 auto; \$31,490 for the higher-spec four-cylinder Elite; and a staggeringly low \$34,490 for the V6 Elite. That is a fully equipped, medium-to-large luxury sedan for close to entry-level large-car prices.

The first things you'll notice about Sonata's first-class on-road performance are its smoothness and silence. The *Police Journal* test-drove both Elite models which, with the modest power of their 2.4-litre motor – compared to the V6 – performed well. While it is always nice to have extra horses under the bonnet, the four was a real surprise, gave a spirited performance and returned good economy (10.5 litres per 100km). It had no trouble propelling Sonata's 1,500kg in any situation, even when fully loaded.

Elite V6 is a wonderful car for the money. It is whisper quiet, powerful and very smooth. At highway speeds,



and with the audio system turned off, one can hear no wind or engine noise. Plant the foot and it bites, with its 173kW efficiently put to the ground though its slick five-speed auto. At 100km/h, the engine spins at a lazy 1,900rpm, which should equate to good highway economy. On our suburban test drive, it averaged 12.6 litres per 100km.

With excellent all-round visibility, a good driving position and very comfortable seating, the car is a delight inside. The driver and front-seat passengers each get a height adjuster (electric on Elite). As well, the steering wheel has reach-and-rake adjustment for the best possible driving position. The dash is well laid out and items such as the radio and climate-control system are fully integrated.

The Elite's leather is sumptuous and the overall finish is good. Rear seating is comfortable and all passengers have generous amounts of space. Elite models with beige leather score tasty wood-grain garnishing, while models with grey interior have carbon fibre-look inserts. Sonata's boot is enormous, houses a full-size spare wheel and gets a 12-volt power socket.

This car is in a class way above its price. The challenge for Hyundai is convincing consumers that excellence can come cheaply. Sonata is considerably better than many would like to admit.



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European-built, silky smooth

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Holden has rolled out new, smart-looking two-door and station wagon variants of its AH Astra. These latest European-built models, which complete the range, complement the previously released AH Astra Hatch (*Fits at the premium end, Police Journal, February 2005*). Both the Coupe and Wagon come in CD and CDX equipment grades.

Each new model features the same sporty front as does the four-door hatch, with a deep section bumper and dazzling headlight assembly. The Coupe has a lower stance with longer front doors and a profile enhanced by low side glass and a curved roofline. It also comes with an impressive rear end, a bee-sting antenna and bold tail lamps.

The Wagon, while sporting smart front and rear ends, has a fairly conservative profile compared to its siblings. Nonetheless, it is still pleasant-looking and has enormous interior space for its compact external dimensions.

All models are powered by a punchy 1.8-litre DOHC four-cylinder engine, which delivers 90kW of power at 5,600rpm and 165Nm of torque at 3,800rpm. It is not, on paper, the most powerful donk around but does perform well and offers good fuel economy. The spirited ECOTEC engine willingly revs all the way to redline (6,500 rpm).

Power delivery is silky smooth and, even when pushed, the engine never sounds stressed. It is an exceptionally quiet motor, and goes completely

unnoticed at highway speeds.

Nicely finished inside, the new Astras feature a smart, functional dash layout. Backlit gauges are clear and easy to read, while the controls are subtle and user-friendly, except for the cruise control, which one operates by buttons on the end of the indicator stalk. The small sporty steering wheel offers tilt and rake adjustment, and the driver gets a height-adjustable seat.

Visibility in both models is generally good, but looking through the rear window of the Coupe is like peering into a letterbox. Although this view takes some time to get used to, it is not a danger.

The very firm seats are exceptionally comfortable; and storage areas include a huge glove box, door bins and a small centre console bin.

Astra Wagon is built on a 2.7-metre wheelbase (89mm longer than the Hatch and Coupe). This makes for plenty of passenger space and cargo capacity. With the rear seats in place, the flat cargo bay floor is a little over one metre square. With the rear 60/40 seats folded, it has a capacity of up to 1,549 litres.

The Coupe, although smaller, is surprisingly roomy given its size and configuration. In fact, this car will, with ease and good levels of comfort, carry four average-size adults.

With prices starting at \$23,490 (CD Coupe or Wagon) and rising to \$25,990 (CDX Coupe or Wagon) Holden is not about to threaten the sub-\$20,000 brigade. Nevertheless, these new Astras are sure to sell well. They offer an excellent combination of space, versatility, power, economy and safety. As well as looking sharp, they come in models to cater to every need and offer good performance and agility on the road.

STANDARD ITEMS ACROSS THE BOARD INCLUDE:

- Front and front side airbags.
- ABS with Brake assist.
- Power front windows and mirrors.
- Remote locking.
- Single CD with seven speakers and steering-wheel-mounted controls.
- Air conditioning.

CDX ALSO COMES WITH:

- Alloy wheels.
- Cruise control.
- Six-disc CD.
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PRICEY, but comes with just about everything



The Toyota LandCruiser 100 Series has undergone surgery, but its external changes are so few that they might go unnoticed. All models have revised front-end styling with a new three-bar grille and twin halogen headlamps. Faster-illuminating light-emitting diode (LED) stop and tail lamps are fitted to the rear and there are three new paint colours.

Popular GXL models get a new driver's seat with height adjuster and automatic lumbar support. Reflecting the minor nature of its upgrade, Toyota has held price rises on GXL to \$110 – the manual V8 now sells for \$59,410.

Flagship model Sahara has gained most, with increases in active safety, additional equipment and improved ride and handling.

The *Police Journal* tested a Sahara V8 petrol automatic, with its \$83,800 price tag (an increase of \$2,600). The turbo diesel Sahara automatic sells

for a hefty \$94,200, but is more than just a large SUV – it fits squarely into the luxury category. Now packed with so much standard equipment, it can take on many expensive luxury Toorak tractors, some of which lack the off-road cred of a Cruiser.

Sahara's new TEMS (Toyota Electronically Modulated Suspension) system is designed to enhance driving dynamics on and off road and maximize roadholding. The system allows the driver to select one of four suspension settings from Comfort through to Sport for optimum ride, comfort and handling, depending on surface and driving conditions.

TEMS, a complex system, controls damping forces of the shock absorbers based on information from sensors measuring wheel speed, engine speed, steering angle and brake-pedal application.

Sahara's Active Height Control (AHC) complements TEMS. Pneumatic cylinders – front and rear –

provide variable height from low (for ease of entry) through to high (for off-road use). An auto-levelling system maintains vehicle posture, regardless of load, and is ideal when towing heavy loads. Drivers can select between OFF, NORMAL, LO and HIGH settings using a switch on the console. Within a few seconds, one can vary ride height up to 50mm above or below the NORMAL setting. Some settings, however, depend on vehicle speed.

Vehicle Stability Control (VSC) provides optimum traction in cornering by dampening strong understeer and oversteer. Sahara's four-wheel-drive traction control provides optimal traction under acceleration, supersedes the need for a rear diff lock, and is particularly useful on hill climbs and descents.

Sahara also has a new satellite navigation system which can memorize a series of GPS co-ordinates and retrace its own path for up to 200km.

The system features a QWERTY on-screen keyboard and touch screen, and incorporates a four-disc CD changer and audio unit that is MP3 and Windows Media Audio compatible.

In light of its weight – around 2,500kg – the Cruiser is a dream to drive. Its new electronic driving aids make it a smoother and more sure-footed vehicle in every situation. And its 4.7-litre 170kW V8, a perfect match with the five-speed gated automatic transmission, offers smooth, hushed power.

Take a drive of the Sahara and you will realize why it costs so much. Among its standard equipment, which includes just about everything, is a fridge in the console.

Its economy on test proved reasonable (16.5 litres per 100km) for such a hefty V8.



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