

Shifting Gears

[Something New from Koreans on the Left Coast](#)

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By Roger Witherspoon

The man in the parking lot walked slowly around the Sonata, pausing occasionally to run his hand along the long, low, sloping front hood and arcing crease splitting the side from fender to fender.

He was tall enough to look through the open sunroof and gaze at the leather seats, the ample room in the rear for his six-and-a-half-foot frame, and the note the easy flow of the interior lines. I asked him if he would like to see how he fit in the back, and he eagerly slid inside. The seats actually sloped downward and the ceiling curved up, providing far more head room that would appear possible in the sport sedan.

He broke the silence by stating “I find it hard to believe this is a Hyundai. I thought they just made little boxes. Did they team up with Lexus or Mercedes or something?”

“No,” I replied. “They set up a west coast design shop and started turning out cars they hope Americans will like.”

“Well,” he said, “they’ve got my attention.”

The 2011 Hyundai Sonata sedan is a significant departure from the types of cars historically

produced by the Korean car company, which were high on economy, competent on technology, and low on styling. The company long languished in the deep shadows of their Asian neighbors at Toyota/Lexus, who also started out with inexpensive, boxy cars but went on to become the world's largest auto maker with a reputation for style, quality, and performance.

Hyundai, however, did not intend to wait 40 years emulating Toyota's slow, upward climb and opened a design studio on the Left Coast with simple marching orders: compete on the showroom floor with Lexus and Mercedes. They started with the eye-catching sports car, the Genesis Coupe, which was slick enough to win a spot as one of Jack Bauer's chase cars in the final episode of "24."

But then it was time to move up to family level with a car that would cost less than a Toyota Camry or Ford Fusion, but easily share a mirror with a Lexus. The mid-sized sedan is a tough market, dominated by the Camry, Honda Accord, Nissan Altima, Fusion, and Chevy Malibu. The Koreans were nowhere to be seen in this niche.



Leading Hyundai's charge into the sedan market is the Brother from the Other Coast, designer Andre Hudson, whose sketch pad produced the Sonata. The car, with a sticker price under \$29,000, has its own distinct look, with wavy lines that flow the length of the car, vaguely resembling lines drawn on a sandy beach by the meandering tides.

"That's the whole idea behind what we call fluidic sculpture," explained Hudson. "The wind shapes the sand as you sit on a beach. And when you see sand dunes, you see a beautiful line, shifting when the wind moves. You see the same beautiful patterns in new snow drifts as the wind blows the snow around. You get these beautiful formations with hard snow ridges and soft forms in between.

"Fluidic sculpture is our vision of that art form that is derived from nature. From that you get a lot of natural arcs and lines, which is nice to look at and has a flowing feel to it, even when still."



Under that graceful hood is a four cylinder engine cranking out just 198 horsepower and mated to a six-speed, automatic transmission. That's not a racing engine, the 0 – 60 miles per hour time is about eight seconds. But on a small sedan, it is more than enough power to push the car to about 150 miles per hour and give the Sonata a sporty feel, particularly in the electronic manual mode utilizing the wheel-mounted paddle shifters. In addition, the Sonata's power plant is more powerful than the Camry and Malibu engines with 169 horsepower, or the 175 horsepower engines in the Fusion, Accord and Altima.

The Sonata also packs a lot inside, and the Korean sedan includes a number of items usually sold as separate add-ons. The steering wheel is leather, for example, as are the seats and padding on the doors and dash. The front seats are powered and heated, and the rear seats fold flat in a 60/40 split. The entertainment system includes AM/FM and XM satellite, as well as HD broadcast radio, a single-disc CD player, and connections for iPod and MP3 players and USB drives. There is an eight gigabyte hard drive to store 1,000 or so of your favorite jams. The navigation system has an easy to use, 6.5-inch, touch screen, which also provides a wide view for the sharply focused backup camera. And there is a Bluetooth cell phone connection that is standard with all models.

Whether the Sonata, with its fluidic sculpture look is slick enough to slide into the crowded mid sized sedan market – or remains an extremely attractive also-ran – remains to be seen. But the Japanese and Detroit auto makers would do well to look over their shoulders.



2011 Hyundai Sonata Ltd.

MSRP:

\$28,415

EPA Mileage:

22 MPG City

35 MPG Highway

Performance / Safety:

2.4-Liter, direct injection, 4-cylinder, aluminum engine producing 198 horsepower and 184 pound/feet of torque; 6-speed automatic transmission with electronic manual mode and paddle shifters; MacPherson strut front suspension; Independent multi-link rear suspension; power assisted disc brakes; electronic brake assist; stability and traction control; 17-inch alloy wheels; rear backup camera; fog lights; front, side impact, and side curtain air bags.

Interior / Comfort:

AM/FM/XM satellite radio; navigation system with touch screen and XM traffic and weather; iPod, MP3 and USB port connections; single disc CD player; 400-watt Infiniti audio system with 6 speakers; 8-GB hard drive; leather wrapped steering wheel with fingertip audio, cruise and Bluetooth controls; leather, power adjusted, heated front seats; fold flat rear seats with 60/40 split.