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Quick Test: 2009 Hyundai Sonata

■ By Frank Markus



Value has always been a Korean-car hallmark. In the beginning, that meant using killer stereos, gigantic warranties, and used-car pricing to lure customers into miserable cars designed and built by people who were new to driving, let alone automaking. The value pricing and impressive warranty terms (five-

year/60,000-mile bumper-to-bumper and 10-year/100,000-mile powertrain coverage) persists today, though they have arguably become unnecessary. In terms of packaging, feature-content, driving dynamics, and build quality, Hyundais now rival the benchmark blue-chip brands, and in 2006 Hyundai nosed ahead of mighty

Toyota in the coveted J.D. Power Initial Quality Survey rankings.

The 2009 Hyundai Sonata is a perfect case in point. All new for 2006, Hyundai has again spent big to keep its bread-and-butter sedan competitive with the new Toyota Camry and Honda Accord sedans that have appeared since then. The

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2.4L four-cylinder engine gets continuously variable valve timing on both camshafts, a new variable-volume intake manifold, and other refinements that boost horsepower from 162 to 175 and torque from 164 to 168 lb-ft. EPA fuel economy also increases from 21 mpg city/30 mpg highway to 22/32 with the five-speed automatic, besting Camry and Accord. And it's not just the numbers that impress. This is a smooth-running, sweet-sounding four that doesn't shake at idle and never vibrates the steering wheel as many fours do. Acceleration to 60 mph in 8.7 sec feels competitive and unstrained from the driver's seat.

Big money was spent upgrading the interior with a new center console, some new color choices, and chrome accents that make the Sonata feel like it's competing in a higher price class. Officially classified by the EPA as a large car, there's ample room to seat five in comfort and the giant 16.3-cu-ft trunk ranks as best in class (at least until the new Mazda6 sedan arrives, boasting 16.6 cubes). Sonata standard equipment includes stability control, tire-pressure monitoring, heated mirrors, and an XM-ready stereo with USB/iPod connection and auxiliary jack. Our SE added a standard sunroof, 17-inch wheels with a sport-tuned suspension, and automatic headlights. Fancier Limited models get an optional navigation system this year.

Probably what impresses us most about the 2009 Hyundai Sonata is its sophisticated ride and handling. The control-arm front/multilink rear suspension delivers a ride that's smooth and supple while providing confident, neutral, and predictable handling. Ultimate grip limits are



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modest (0.78 g), but the light-effort steering keeps the driver informed of where those limits are. State-of-the-art anti-lock braking with brake-assist helps stop the Sonata from 60 mph in just 124 ft.

Outside, the styling is freshened with new lamps (including jewellike projector-beam headlamps), grille,

bumpers, and wheels. It's a handsome and rich look, but if there's one place where the Koreans still trail the industry it is in design. There's not a single detail inside or out that doesn't look familiar or seem borrowed from another sedan. Who knows? Maybe the Koreans realize they're trailing the pack in this regard, and that's

why they're keeping their prices so low. Sonatas open at just \$18,795 for a GLS or \$21,195 for an SE (ours rang in at \$22,235). A loaded V-6 Limited model with vigation still comes in under \$28,000. Whatever you spend on a Sonata, you're getting big refinement and quality bang for your buck.

2009 Hyundai Sonata SE

POWERTRAIN/CHASSIS

Drivetrain layout	Front-engine, FWD
Engine type	I-4, alum block/head
Valvetrain	DOHC, 4 valves/cyl
Displacement	144.0 cu in/2359cc
Compression ratio	10.5:1
Power (SAE NET)	175 hp @ 6000 rpm
Torque (SAE NET)	168 lb-ft @ 4000 rpm
Redline	6500 rpm
Weight to power	19.1 lb/hp
Transmission	5-speed automatic
Axle/final	3.77:1/2.75:1
Suspension, front; rear	Control arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar; multi-link, coil springs, anti-roll bar
Steering ratio	16.9:1
Turns lock-to-lock	3.3
Brakes, f/r	11.0-in disc; 10.3-in disc, ABS
Wheels	6.5 x 17-in, cast aluminum
Tires	215/55R17 93V M+S, Kumho Solus KH16

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DIMENSIONS	
Wheelbase	107.4 in
Track, f/r	62.0/61.4 in
Length x width x height	188.9 x 72.1 x 58.0 in
Turning circle	35.8 ft
Curb weight	3338 lb
Weight dist., f/r	61/39 %
Seating capacity	5
Headroom, f/r	40.1/38.2 in
Legroom, f/r	43.7/37.4 in
Shoulder room, f/r	57.4/56.9 in
Cargo volume	16.3 cu ft
TEST DATA	
Acceleration to mph	
0-30	3.0 sec
0-40	4.6
0-50	6.6
0-60	8.7
0-70	11.5
0-80	15.0
0-90	18.7
Passing, 45-65 mph	4.3
Quarter mile	16.7 sec @ 84.5 mph
Braking, 60-0 mph	124 ft
Lateral acceleration	0.78 g (avg)
MT figure eight	28.6 sec @ 0.55 g (avg)
Top-gear revs @ 60 mph	2175 rpm
CONSUMER INFO	
Base price	\$21,195
Price as tested	\$22,235
Stability/traction control	Yes/yes
Airbags	Dual front, front side, f/r curtain,
Basic warranty	5 yrs/60,000 miles
Powertrain warranty	10 yrs/100,000 miles
Roadside assistance	5 yrs/Unlimited miles
Fuel capacity	17.7 gal
EPA city/hwy econ	22/32 mpg
CO2 emissions	0.76 lb/mile
MT fuel economy	23.8 mpg
Recommended fuel	Unleaded regular