Hyundai aims high and succeeds with its new Veracruz SUV

by Mark_Maynard

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, until the copycat makes itself better than the original. Then it is just annoying competition, but it raises the standard for all.

VERACRUZ - Hyundai aims high and succeeds with its new seven-passenger Veracruz SUV. CNS Photo courtesy of Hyundai. Lexus may not fear much competition from Hyundai, but Lexus quality and refinement in its RX 350 sport utility vehicle were the bench mark for Hyundai's new and largest SUV, the seven-passenger Veracruz.

Hyundai is using Veracruz as practice for its move into the luxury segment. Next up will be the V-8-powered Genesis sport sedan, intended to compete with Acura, BMW, Lexus, Mercedes-Benz and others.

Whether Hyundai will be embraced as a maker of luxury vehicles in my lifetime is yet to be seen, but Veracruz engineering, quality of materials and attention to detail appears to have had a generous budget.

Veracruz is sold in three trim levels in front- or all-wheel drive. All models have a 260-horsepower V-6 engine, Hyundai's first six-speed Shiftronic automatic transmission, third row seats that fold flat for easily expanded cargo space, electronic stability control and a three-month subscription to XM Satellite Radio.

Pricing ranges from $27,685 to $34,695 for the top-line, all-wheel-drive Limited, today's test vehicle. With options, the test vehicle was $38,070. That's about $10,000 more than Hyundai's top-line Santa Fe crossover, a five-seater.

Veracruz competes with other seven-seaters, such as the Subaru B9 Tribeca, Honda Pilot and Toyota Highlander.

Hyundai is so confident in Veracruz that it bought six Lexus RX 350s as comparative vehicles on the ride and drive for the national media launch in San Diego.

"And it was a cheeky thing to do," said John Krafcik, Hyundai vice president of product planning.

Yes, but the current Lexus RX came out in 2004 and had a face-lift and new engine for 2007, so it is in the middle of its product cycle.

"But it's still the bench mark premium crossover and sells like hotcakes," Krafcik said.

Attention to detail is seen and felt throughout the Veracruz. The center instrument console has a Lexus RX-like arrangement of controls and vents, which is a practical and ergonomic layout. There is a woven fabric headliner and visors with extenders and covered mirrors. Latches and switch controls operate with smoothness and ease.

Doors open wide and close with a secure action. Two small storage boxes in the instrument console are spring-loaded for graceful opening, just as in a Lexus. A small, felt-lined box in the console is ideal for holding a phone and there's a 12-volt power outlet to accommodate a charger. A conversation mirror is integrated just above the rearview mirror and rotates into position with the press of a button. Even the tick-tick of the turn signal will not annoy.

Sightlines for the driver are open, access to the third row is simple enough for the agile and there is decent legroom for those who will fit back there, with plenty of grab handles to get the job done. Seat backs fold flat with the simple pull of a lever. The second row also folds but not quite flat, as for sleeping on rainy camp-outs.

The smoothness of the engineering is also felt in the ride quality, in the fine leather on the steering wheel as it rotates through the hands and in the response of the throttle and brakes. The turning circle is particularly helpful at 36.7 feet, which makes tooling around the mall for a tight parking spot a no-stress adventure.

Safety features are also luxury class, including standard electronic stability control - also standard in 63 percent of the Hyundai lineup and side-curtain air bags for all rows.

The standard equipment list includes many luxury features, but others, such as rain-sensing wipers, adjustable pedals and power tilt and telescopic steering wheel (manual is standard), are available in packages.

But Krafcik had to draw the line somewhere on the freebie list. Carpeted floor mats, even on the top-line Limited, are a $125 option. The Ultimate package includes brushed stainless steel doorsill plates with a lighted Veracruz cutout.

About the only feature not available, but appreciated, would be a rear backup camera; however, there are backup warning tones. Hyundai doesn't offer a rear camera - yet - because those typically are packaged with a navigation system with a DVD screen. And Hyundai doesn't offer a navigation system, but one is planned.

Navigation systems are readily available but quickly outdated. Hyundai is considering a simpler plug-and-play system that can be updated at a home computer.

The big benefit of not offering navigation is that the electronic controls for all in-car functions are through buttons and knobs. No joystick controllers needed to page through screens of information to change radio

stations or adjust fan speed. Just reach, press and enjoy.

The function and utility of Veracruz is over-thought and over-engineered, yet much appreciated. Now, wrap all of this refinement into a striking sedan body - Genesis - and Hyundai will have a credible new luxury car.

Don't believe me? Check out the Veracruz.

Copley News Service

SPECS

2007 Hyundai Veracruz Limited AWD

Body style: steel unibody, seven-passenger crossover

Drive system: front-wheel or all-wheel drive

Engine: aluminum, 3.8-liter DOHC V-6 with continuously variable valve timing

Horsepower: 260 at 6,000 rpm

Torque: 257 foot-pounds at 4,500 rpm

Transmission: six-speed automatic with Shiftronic manual-shift control

EPA estimated fuel mileage: 17 mpg city, 24 highway; 87 octane recommended

Fuel tank: 20.6 gallons

FEATURES

Standard equipment: keyless locking and ignition, automatic climate control, leather-trimmed seats and trim, power tilt-slide sunroof, auto-dim rearview mirror with garage-gate opener, power tailgate, power windows with one-touch up/down, power auto-dimming exterior mirrors, cruise control, trip computer, front fog lights, roof rack side rails, eight-speaker Infinity audio system with six-disc CD and MP3 player

Safety equipment: front multistage air bags, front side bags, side-curtain air bags for all rows, occupant classification system, backup warning system, front belt pretensioners and force limiters, active front head restraints, traction control, electronic stability control

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase/length: 110.4/190.6 inches

Towing capacity: 3,500 pounds

Front head/leg/shoulder room: 40.3/42.6/60.6 inches

Middle head/leg/shoulder room: 39.9/38.4/60.2 inches

Rear head/leg/shoulder room: 36.1/31.5/56.1 inches

Curb weight: 4,431 pounds (4,266 FWD)

Cargo capacity: 6.5 cubic feet behind third row; 40 cubic feet with second row folded

CHASSIS

Suspension: four-wheel independent with front MacPherson struts, rear multilink and coil springs, stabilizer bars and gas-charged shock absorbers front and rear

Steering: power-assisted rack and pinion; 36.7-foot turning circle

Brakes: four-wheel discs with four-channel, four-sensor ABS, electronic brake-force distribution and Brake Assist; 12.6/12.8-inch discs front and rear

Tires and wheels: P245/60R 18-inch on aluminum wheels (245/65R 17-inch, base model)

PRICING

MSRP: $34,695; price as tested, $38,070

Options on test car: Ultimate package, $3,200, includes premium black-and-saddle leather treatment, adjustable pedals, power tilt and telescopic steering wheel, rear seat DVD with surround sound, 115-volt power outlet, rain-sensing wipers, lighted door scuff plates, wheel locks ($50), carpeted floor mats ($125) Warranty: Five-year/60,000-mile basic coverage with roadside assistance; 10-year/100,000-mile powertrain

Where assembled: Ulsan, Korea

Competition: Honda Pilot, Subaru B9 Tribeca, Toyota Highlander, Saturn Outlook

PLUSES: Over-thought and over-engineered, but appreciated.

MINUSES: No option for rearview camera.

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