

Rondo EX hides its inner swan

by Mark_Maynard

First impressions can be so, um, judgmental.

When I first saw the Kia Rondo, I thought it was one homely guppy with the roofline of a hearse.

KIA RONDO EX - Pricing for the front-wheel-drive Kia Rondo ranges from \$16,995 for the base model with 162 horsepower four-cylinder engine and four-speed automatic transmission to \$22,495 for a topline EX with V-6, roof rails, 17-inch wheels and a few options. CNS Photo courtesy of Kia.

The new model was slipped into the San Diego auto show in December just before the Rondo had gone on sale. The base model, in the unflattering new color of "Urban Gray," sat meekly in the exhibit on 16-inch wheels that looked too small for its body.

But, wow, what function.

No space is left unused for storage, including shelves, cubbies, flip-and-fold second-row seat, underfloor storage galore and an option for a third-row seat (\$500).

Gee, a young driver could get just about anything he or she needed into this car, except a date.

Five months later the topline EX test car arrived in a good-looking shade of Velvet Blue and was showing off 17-inch alloy wheels, chrome roof rails and a bunch more chrome elsewhere. It's a much younger look. The angular rear-end styling is space-shuttle modern and not bad to have to follow in traffic.

And, OK, the name's cute like a perky, Frisbee-catching dog wearing a bandanna at the collar. The name comes from music, as in a movement of a sonata, which happens to be the name of the mid-size Hyundai sedan, Kia's group partner. How'd they let that happen?

The front-wheel-drive Rondo is sold in base, LX and EX trim levels with a 162-horsepower and four-cylinder engine or a 182-hp, V-6 engine. Pricing ranges from \$16,995 for the base model without air conditioning to \$22,495 for a topline EX with the V-6 and a few options.

Four-cylinder models use a four-speed automatic; the V-6s have a five-speed. But the four-cylinder's 21/29 mpg EPA rating isn't much better than the V-6's 20/27 because of the five-speed.

Standard LX features include air conditioning, four-speed automatic transmission, roof rails and body-color side mirrors, door handles, side moldings, black front grille crossbars and 16-inch alloy wheels.

The EX adds fog lights, 17-inch alloy wheels, Michelin tires and more chrome (door handles, side moldings, grille crossbars and integrated roof rails without crossbars).

Safety features include side curtain air bags, four-wheel disc brakes with ABS, electronic stability control and 5 mph bumpers (where many makers use 2.5 mph bumpers).

Also notable is the five-year or 60,000-mile limited basic warranty.

It's not easy to be a rational and emotional design statement in this tall-wagon segment, of which about the only other competitor is the Mazda5. But the Chrysler PT Cruiser, Chevrolet HHR and Toyota Matrix also fit

the segment.

And I did enjoy the qualities of Rondo.

It has a tight body structure and is well sound-isolated from road harshness and ambient noise. It doesn't ride like an economy wagon. In fact, it could easily be dressed up with a luxury-technology package. And keyless entry with a remote starter should be available now.

The car is solid and easy to live with.

The drive height is ideal for good visibility. There is easy step-in and exit. And air flow with the sunroof wide open is enjoyable.

As a non-minivan, the back seat is roomy with a flat floor for true three-across seating. The seat fabric in the EX model is durable and of good woven quality. The second row has heat and AC vents and fore-aft slide, which also adjusts cargo space.

Each row has overhead lights and plenty of grab handles for hoisting into the optional third seat. The seat back is divided 60/40 for cargo utility, but folding the large section also compromises the center seat.

The fold-flat, two-seat third row is raised, has good foot room as well as cup holders and storage boxes on each side. But the head rests are right at the back window.

Forget first impressions in this case. Rondo exceeds expectations and its likable personality is the best cosmetic treatment available.

And that leaves the Jeep Compass as the homeliest vehicle of 2007.

Copley News Service SPECS

2007 Kia Rondo EX

Body style: midsize, front-wheel-drive, five-to seven-passenger wagon

Engine: 182-hp, 2.7-liter, DOHC V-6

Transmission: five-speed automatic

EPA fuel economy estimates: 20 mpg city, 27 highway; 87 octane

DIMENSIONS

Cargo space: 6.5 cubic feet behind third row; 31.7 behind second row

Front head/leg room: 41.6/41.3 inches

Middle head/leg room: 40.2/38.2 inches

Rear head/leg room: 35.1/31.3 inches

Length/wheelbase: 179/106.3 inches

Curb weight: 3,511 pounds, with third row bench

FEATURES

Standard equipment includes: remote locking, power windows-locks-mirrors (heated), carpeted floor mats, premium seat fabric, six-way height-adjustable driver seat, folding and reclining second-row seat, dual covered and lighted vanity mirrors, six-speaker CD/MP3 audio system, cruise control, tilt steering, roof rails, fog lights, leather-wrapped steering wheel and gear shift knob, chrome door handles and other exterior trim pieces, power steering (35.4-foot turning circle), four-wheel disc brakes, 17-inch alloy wheels

Safety equipment includes: front and side curtain air bags; active front headrests, front seat belt pre-tensioners and force limiters, four-wheel disc brakes with ABS, tire pressure monitoring system, electronic stability control and 5-mph bumpers

PRICING

Base: \$20,795 including \$600 freight charge; price as tested, \$22,495

Options on test car: premium package, \$1,200, adds power sunroof and Infinity CD audio system; third-row seat, \$500

The competition: Mazda5, Chrysler PT Cruiser, Chevrolet HHR, Toyota Matrix

Where assembled: Korea

PLUSES: Great personality, interior function, solid architecture; five-year warranty.

MINUSES: Homely styling without roof rails and large alloy wheels. Third-row headrests right at the rear glass.

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