



Hyundai Sonata New generation

Car review | Hyundai has tried to penetrate the business market with the Sonata for many years now, so far without much success. This should change however with the fifth generation Sonata that tries to make up for all its past mistakes. Not only is its exterior more appealing, its price/performance ratio is better than ever. That is why Hyundai does not speak of the fifth generation Sonata, but of the "new generation". Rightfully so?

"Didn't you already have a test report of the Honda Accord?". Is this statement a typical sign of ignorance or is it a nice compliment to Hyundai? Whatever it is, it proves that the last generation Sonata finally appeals to the public and is even mistaken for a much more expensive competitor. Originality may still not be Hyundai's strongest point, but the appearance needed in the business market is definitely there.



Design

The exterior manages to score, the interior even proves to be inviting. Here it is not the usual black with grey and dark grey, but light shades that enhance a feeling of space. The Sonata is longer and wider than most of its equals, which immediately results in more inside space. Freedom of movement in the front is enormous and illustrates beyond any doubt that this is a generous sedan. The back too provides more than

enough room for two adults. Although the Sonata is not the best in its class, it definitely does belong in the top end. Behind the back seat the boot is again so big that it makes the Sonata belong amongst the top end of its class.

The interior is not only spacious, but practical too. The huge number of pockets and compartments almost gives the impression of being in an MPV. Because a favourable price has to come from somewhere, Hyundai has given a practical thought regarding the level of equipment. The test vehicle, in this case the Style-version of the Sonata, has all the mod cons, but looking at details it is often equipped slightly differently. For instance, the windscreen wipers do not have an expensive rain sensor but a cheaper and almost equally effective controllable interval dial. This is how on many points a slightly less complicated but much cheaper alternative has been chosen. However, this will never detract from the feeling of dealing with a luxurious car. The only thing absent/missing is an audio system.

Engine

Even though Hyundai stresses that other engines will become obtainable, the Sonata is currently only available with a 2.4 litre petrol engine. This is, again for budget reasons, a 4-cylinder and not a 6-cylinder. Furthermore Hyundai went for 5 gears instead of 6. This gearbox determines the character of the engine.

The power source has 161 horsepower that would rather gallop in first gear than anything else. This means that the Sonata accelerates remarkably well at a traffic light. Trying to outperform a few German sedans resulted in the first instance in a lot of wheel spinning and not a lot of acceleration. With the second more cautious attempt the Sonata showed the Germans her well-shaped backside. No worries on the acceleration-front then!



In second, third and fourth gear the Sonata is a smooth and quick car that makes the passengers feel their back rests slightly during in-between accelerations. Only with this kind of "indulgence" the engine is slightly more audible and sounds less sophisticated than its competitors. The fifth gear is a real overdrive. The engine has lost its bite on acceleration but on the other hand the power source is completely silent at cruising speed. Noises from the tyres or slipstream air hardly penetrate to the interior either, which puts the Sonata with this aspect in the top end of its class once again.



Road-holding qualities

The basic road holding is fine and with day-to-day use the Sonata scores very well. However, when a lot of steering action is required the Sonata lacks the driving pleasure that the (equally large, but much more expensive) Italians and Germans do offer. Furthermore, the limit, whether consciously or as a panic reaction, is reached quicker than on average.

Most test-miles were driven in rain, hail and other ominous conditions, which tempts the Sonata to predictable and controllable skidding of the front wheels. The cause is a combination of tyres, the chassis and the distribution of weight, which is slightly more refined with the competition. Moreover, the

Sonata is sensitive to side winds whereas it is not really a high or narrow car.

Maybe road handling doesn't make the Sonata a first class "party animal" or a "premium sedan", but many people do not expect or even want this anyway. Instead the Sonata scores because of tranquillity, comfort and the capacity to carry four people seemingly without much effort over large distances. This is now combined with an utterly European appearance and a traditionally low Korean price.



Conclusion

Does the new Hyundai Sonata offer the same quality as a European or Japanese business car, but at a giveaway price? Unfortunately not, but the car has indeed impressed and is definitely recommendable. The difference does not lie in design, finish or reliability.

The exterior differs in details, where choices have frequently lead to simpler but almost always evenly

effective solutions. The mechanics too have been constructed in a way that, even with relatively simple technology, performances are reached which only compare with the absolute top models of the competition. The chassis is slightly less balanced than its competitors so that limit is reached sooner in case of extreme situations.

These are all hardly disadvantages, but mostly choices. Hyundai therefore justly speaks about the "new generation" Sonata. When the promised diesel becomes available, the Sonata definitely offers a good opportunity to introduce Hyundai to a whole new generation of business drivers. ■

