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SUPPLEMENT TO THE CANADIAN CHAMPION FRIDAY, MARCH 20, 2009

Kia Magentis: Thoroughly refreshed for 2009

By ROB BEINTEMA

Metroland Media Group

Flashback almost a decade and there I was, tailing the goddess as we blasted through sleepy Korean villages at highway speed, a furious nose-to-tail chase through two-lane towns and the dust-blown, burial mound-spotted countryside.

The goddess, so we called her, a tall, elegant Korean PR girl, was leading our convoy on a seemingly hapless and definitely mapless route with company sweeper cars hot in pursuit.

She seemed to be in somewhat of a hurry. Maybe she had dinner plans. It was a breakneck introduction to the very first Magentis, a 2001 model I believe, but despite the white-knuckle pace, I wasn't worried because, for the first time in my test driving life, I had a get-out-of-jail-free card - a piece of paper tucked in the glove box, inscribed with senior governmental stamps and signatures that, roughly translated, said something like "Please excuse foreign journalist ignorant of law".

All right. Lead on, goddess.

That was Cheju Island, off the south coast of South Korea, sort of the Poconos of the Orient, a vacation and honeymoon haven where non-Asians were almost non-existent, evidenced by surprised experimental English greetings and panic-stricken sales girls ducking behind counters.

Now, all this happened almost a

decade ago, when a newly-rejuvenated Kia was rising phoenix-like from the ashes of financial woes and acquisition by Hyundai. Or, should I say "rising from Asia", the loose translation of the Kia name.

At the time, Kia, second salvo of the import invasion from the Land of the Morning Calm, was trying to establish itself quickly in markets like Canada by unleashing an almost yearly onslaught of new products.

The Kia Magentis, also known as the Optima, was an important

step in that process, a mid-size four-door sedan destined to follow up on the small car success of this relatively-new-to-Canada brand.

I've driven a lot of cars since then but for some reason I hadn't set butt in a Kia Magentis since the launch of that original.

Probably because this is a car easily overlooked, a regular four-door sedan, one of a myriad of mid-size competitors always being compared to Camry and Accord.

This was the first product of the new platform-sharing program by

Kia and Hyundai and the proto-Magentis was based on the then-third generation Sonata with some leftover design influence from the Kia Credos.

At the time, there was a lot of chest-thumping about "new millennial technology" and design descriptions boasting "bold", "brilliant" and "sophisticated" elements but, considering some of the company's small car predecessors, that wasn't all just braggadocio. Even the first Magentis models included DOHC powerplants,

sophisticated suspensions, Euro-style gas-filled shocks, a sport A/T automatic tranny and a passenger airbag de-activation sensor.

Since then, this second generation Magentis has evolved significantly, the latest revised version unveiled about a year ago at the New York International Auto Show.

The 2009 refreshed Magentis, bigger but still not a whole lot bolder despite the press hype, has been sharpened somewhat on the outside with a larger grille, bigger available foglamps and narrower headlamps up front. The look is almost Saab-esque. The tail lamps, bracketing a sharp edged trunk, have also been narrowed to echo the frontal design. The interior is generic "any car", a bland blend of careful mid-size anonymity but it is well put together with everything placed just where you'd expect it.

The Magentis comes with a choice of two all-aluminum powerplants, a 2.4-litre four-cylinder base engine (as tested) or an optional 2.7-litre V6.

The brand new Theta II 2.4-litre DOHC four-cylinder engine makes 175 hp at 6000 rpm and 169 lb/ft of torque at 4000 rpm. That's up from last year's 162 hp and 163 lb/ft. It is good enough to get you going, with plenty of pep and a fuel economy rating of 9.4/6.2L/100km (city/hwy).

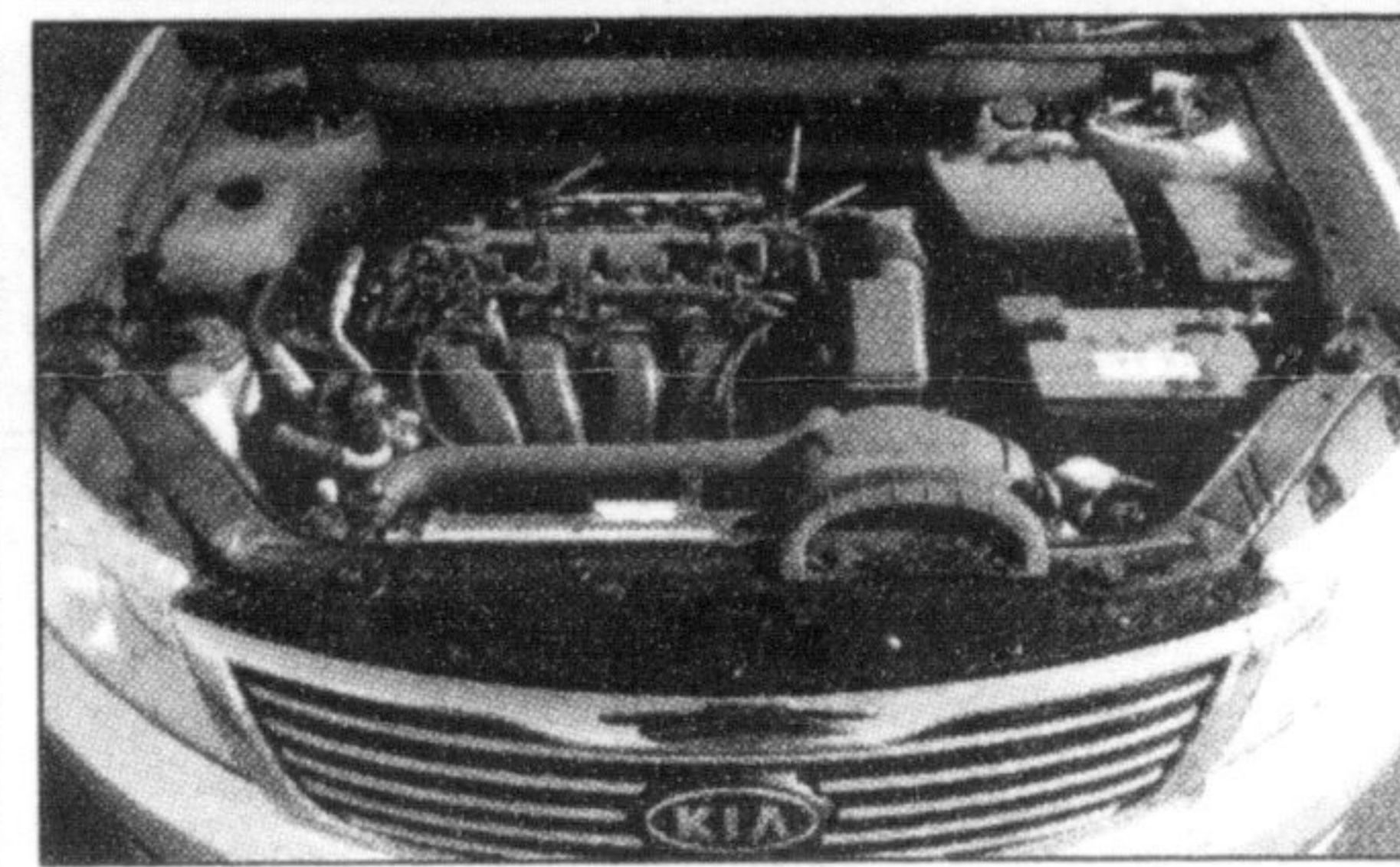
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LEFT: The Kia Magentis, thoroughly refreshed for 2009 inside and out with midsize roominess, a long list of well-finished appointments and amenities and a choice of two more powerful engines



TOP RIGHT: A quality-built interior, standard heated seats and a long list of included standard equipment will please even the entry-level model buyer.



BOTTOM RIGHT: The 2009 Magentis' base engine (as tested), a brand new Theta II 2.4-litre DOHC four-cylinder all-aluminum engine makes 175 hp at 6000 rpm and 169 lb/ft of torque at 4000 rpm.

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GT-V6 model shown
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357 Queen St. Acton
Phone 519-853-0200
Toll free 866-620-3248

www.achillesmazda.ca
info@achillesmazda.ca