

Kia once again has the Power to Surprise



Kia enters with Canadian crossover/station wagon segment with the 2007 Rondo that offers an automatic transmission, stability control, traction control, six airbags and anti-lock braking for under \$20,000.

BY JIM ROBINSON
Road Worthy

WHISTLER, B.C.: Kia bills itself as the carmaker with "The Power to Surprise".

Kia did just that to me when it announced the 2007 Rondo. Instead of a Kia-ized Hyundai Elantra, the Rondo is officially a crossover utility vehicle (CUV) that has no counterpart at Hyundai.

Rondo is really more of a mini minivan/station wagon being more in the same vein of the Mazda5, Chevrolet HHR and Toyota Matrix. It's no secret that Canadians are moving away from the traditional minivan partly due to cost of operation, but primarily, like my wife, who see minivans as just to big for one person to drive 99.9 per cent of the time.

Ergo, vehicles like the Rondo have flexible seating and cargo/storage configurations, but are lighter and far more fuel efficient to drive.

The Rondo's standard drivetrain is a 2.4-litre, twin cam inline four-cylinder producing 162 hp and 164 lb/ft torque driving the front wheels through a four-speed automatic transmission with Steptronic sequential manual shift mode. Fuel consumption is rated at 11.0L/100 km city and 7.5L/100 km highway.

Optionally available is 2.7-litre, dual overhead cam (DOHC) V6 producing 182 hp and 182 lb/ft of torque with a five-speed Steptronic automatic transmission also powering the front wheels. Fuel ratings for the V6 are 11.8L/100 km city and 7.9L/100 km highway.

Both engines run on regular fuel. Interestingly, there is no manual transmission offered although it's usually standard fare on Rondo's main competitors. All-wheel-drive is not offered. It might be in future plans but Kia was not saying. The Rondo is a five-seater as standard but a third seat for two more is an option.

Kia has recognized the fact Canadians now expect world-class safety and has included a bevy of standard features, some of which were only available on premium luxury sedans only a decade ago.

For under 20 grand, the Rondo comes with electronic stability control (ESC), traction control, four-wheel disc brakes with ABS, active anti-whiplash

front headrests and six airbags including side curtains.

Pricing is divided between the four- and six-cylinder vehicles. The base LX starts at \$19,995 with the more extensively trimmed (i.e. air conditioning, heated front seats, cruise) EX priced at \$21,995. The seven-seat EX-Premium adds things like 17-inch wheels, leather seating and sunroof for \$23,995.

The six-cylinder EX has a sticker price of \$22,995 while the \$25,995 seven-seat EX-Luxury is similar to the EX-Premium but with climate control and trip computer.

Interestingly, the four-cylinder can tow up to 1,500 kg with trailer brackets while the V6 can haul up to 2,000 kg with trailer brackets fitted.

Kia expects 70 per cent of sales, will be the four-cylinder.

In an era where small cars are getting ever taller, Kia engineers managed to scoop out no less than 2,083 litres behind the front seats with back seat(s) folded flat and behind the second row seat there's still 898 litres.

Suspension is coil springs over McPherson struts at the front with a multi-link independent system at the rear with stabilizer bars at both ends.

With this new generation of taller people movers, handling, and more importantly cornering, is an issue. If you have a top-heavy vehicle that bends over in a turn like a reed in the wind, it imparts of sense of being unsafe and nobody wants that.

To see if the Rondo could cut it in this regard, the drive route for the press introduction included the highway up to a snowy Whistler, B.C., and in and around the streets of Vancouver that were typically awash with rain.

Even though 16-inch wheels are standard, the high sides of the body make them look a tad small, maybe the reason why competitor Mazda5 went for standard 17-inchers. And because Hyundai engineers (to their credit) craved out every cubic inch they could on the interior, it results in what is essentially a huge, hollow box that can amplify sound. Noise suppression is very good with what they had to work with, but some road tire noise on the granular roadbeds they use in B.C. was an issue at times. It should be noticed this vanished in the city.

Contd. on Page 10

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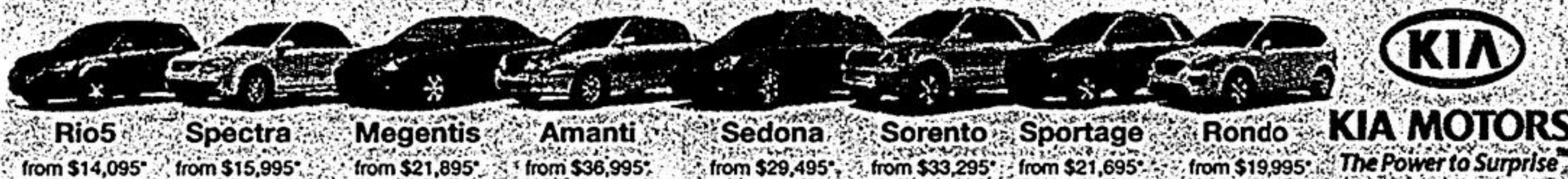
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