

## **2013 Kia Optima** **Quiet and refined midsize sedan.**

### **Overview**

The Kia Optima is a midsize sedan with a smooth, quiet ride and able driving dynamics. The 2013 Kia Optima competes with the Honda Accord, Ford Fusion, Mazda6, Toyota Camry and Hyundai Sonata.

For 2013, Optima carries over largely unchanged, but new features have been added and Kia has consolidated the model lineup.

All 2013 Optima models get a revised Kia badge on the hood, trunk and steering wheel, as well as a new sliding front headrest. Last redesigned for the 2011 model year, Optima still looks contemporary. It's sleek and muscular, without a jumble of distracting design elements.

Kia Optima LX and EX use a 2.4-liter four-cylinder that makes 200 horsepower and 192 pound-feet of torque. This engine is short on excitement, but it's fine for most drivers. Quiet at highway cruising speeds, it delivers enough power to keep up with fast traffic on the freeways, while delivering an EPA-estimated 24/35 mpg City/Highway. All 2013 Optima models come standard with a 6-speed automatic.

Kia Optima SX features a peppy 2.0-liter turbocharged engine. The turbocharged inline-4 found on the Optima SX sweetly carries this sedan into another world. With 274 horsepower and 269 pound-feet of torque, the Optima SX boasts first-rate performance, stability and agility. Silky smooth, the turbocharged engine propels the Optima SX from 0 to 60 in 6.5 seconds, quick for this class. Fuel economy suffers a bit compared to the naturally aspirated version, with an EPA rating of 22/34 mpg City/Highway. and comes standard with leather upholstery and wood interior accents

Kia Optima Hybrid uses a 2.4-liter four-cylinder Atkinson cycle gas engine that produces 166 horsepower connected by a wet clutch to an Interior Permanent Magnet (IPM) synchronous electric motor producing 40 horsepower. The battery that powers the electric motor is state of the art, a 270V lithium-polymer (Li-PB) battery. Compared to a nickel metal hydride system, this 95-pound Li-PB system is 20-30 percent lighter, 40 percent smaller, holds a charge 25 percent longer, is 10 percent more efficient, and offers twice the power density. The warranty is good for up to 10 years or 150,000 miles. It's a hybrid, so you don't need to plug it in. Just fill it with gas and go.

Efficiency-wise, the Hybrid drags Optima back into a third world. Its EPA estimated mileage is 35/40 miles per gallon. However, we only got 25.5 mpg during our lead-footed stint. The 6-speed automatic transmission was rough, which we blame on its electronic programming.

Interior appointments and materials in all Optima models are handsome, generous, and of high quality for the class. Beautiful leather adorns the dashboard and seating, comfortable with firm support, including the rear. The design and layout of the instrumentation reflect thought and employ the latest technology. The expected conveniences are all there, plus bonuses such as a cooled glove compartment for keeping beverages cool.

Optima uses front-wheel drive and a four-wheel independent suspension that is athletic and responsive. We found the ride quality compliant over rougher pavement, filtering out harshness, while the suspension accurately communicates smaller bumps and ripples. The chassis is good, and although Optima is no performance sedan, its handling has a sporty glimmer.

## **Model Lineup**

Three trim levels plus a hybrid version comprise the 2013 Kia Optima lineup. Optima LX and EX models are powered by a 2.4-liter inline-four that makes 200 horsepower and 192 pound-feet of torque. The SX uses a 2.0-liter turbocharged inline-four with 274 hp and 269 pound-feet of torque.

The 2013 Kia Optima LX (\$21,350) comes standard with cloth upholstery, manually operated air conditioning, tilt/telescope steering wheel with audio controls, power windows/doors/mirrors, Bluetooth connectivity, an audio system with Satellite radio capability, USB port, auxiliary jack, cooling glovebox, rearview camera display integrated into the rearview mirror, 60/40 split folding rear seats and 16-inch alloy wheels. An optional Technology Package (\$2,700) adds dual-zone automatic climate control, navigation, an 8-speaker Infinity audio system and rearview camera. The Convenience Package (\$600) upgrades to an eight-way power driver's seat, auto-dimming rearview mirror with Homelink and compass. For those who opt not to add the Technology Package, the Convenience Plus Package (\$1,100) adds the Convenience package features plus Kia's UVO infotainment system and a rearview camera.

Optima EX (\$23,650) adds leather upholstery, dual-zone automatic climate control, rear air conditioning, an 8-way power driver's seat with lumbar, pushbutton start, leather-wrapped steering wheel and gearshift knob, wood interior accents, power-folding outside mirrors and upgrades the wheels to 17-inch alloys.

The EX Premium Package (\$2,950) adds heated and cooled front seats, heated rear seats, a heated steering wheel, driver's seat memory, a four-way power passenger's seat the 8-speaker Infinity audio system with HD radio, rearview camera, a power sunroof and power folding outside mirrors.

Sporty SX models (\$26,800) get leather sport seats, a rear lip spoiler, wood interior accents, chrome exterior accents, LED daytime running lights, HID headlamps, LED tail lamps and unique 18-inch chrome wheels with red brake calipers.

Optima Hybrid (\$25,700) uses a 2.4-liter I4 Atkinson cycle gas engine that produces 166 horsepower and an electric motor with 40 horsepower. It comes with 16-inch alloy wheels, heated outside mirrors, front and rear lower bumpers and side sills, a rear spoiler, and LED taillamps. Inside, there's an eight-way power adjustable driver's seat, electric dual zone automatic temperature control with rear vents, push-button start with Smart Key, leather-wrapped steering wheel and shift knob, fixed rear seats with ski pass-through. Premium Technology Package (\$5350) adds 17-inch alloy wheels with low-rolling-resistance tires, panoramic sunroof, a four-way power adjustable front passenger seat, driver's seat memory, heated and cooled front seats, heated rear seats and steering wheel, HID head lights with automatic leveling, leatherette-wrapped center fascia, auto-dimming rear-view mirror with Homelink and compass, a navigation system with back-up camera and SiriusXM Traffic, and the premium Infinity audio system.

Safety features include dual front advanced airbags, front side airbags, side curtain airbags, side-impact door beams, front/rear crumple zones, impact-absorbing steering column, three-point seatbelts, front seatbelt pretensioners, adjustable front seatbelt anchors, child safety locks, child seat anchors, emergency trunk release, four-wheel power anti-lock disc brakes (ABS), brake assist, traction control (TCS), electronic stability control (ESC), hill-start assist (HAC), and the mandated tire-pressure monitor.

## **Walkaround**

When this generation Optima was introduced as a 2011 model, it was a bold, fresh prism through which to view the Kia image. As with the Sorento and quirky good-natured Soul, the Optima's design focus is not Korean nor even Asian. It is a world car like sedans from Ford, Toyota or Honda. Sleek, aggressive and modern, the Optima is at ease; it's like a well-tailored Italian suit, made in Korea.

The suit seems a bit tight in the front, though. The Optima grille, a sharp-angled chrome bezel surrounding a black mesh screen, arouses opposite opinions. One correspondent called it elegantly simple, comparing it to Jaguar and Bentley, but most of us think it looks like it came out of an aftermarket catalog.

The racy wraparound headlamps, and low wide stance, imply athleticism. The front air dam is low enough to scrape in surprising places for a so-called sedate sedan like this, and gives the nose an aggressive look while helping fuel mileage. Scraping can be annoying if your driveway or a nearby intersection you use is severe enough to cause the nose to drag.

The sides of the car are admirably clean, with three horizontal character lines giving them form and flow. Handsome flared fenders add muscularity to the Optima's flanks.

Wraparound red taillights complete the dynamic look, with dual chrome exhausts, one at each side, fulfilling the sporty image by gilding the rose, since dual exhausts on an inline four-cylinder are pure styling, like snowshoes on a duck. Still, the imagery is enticing.

## **Interior Features**

Optima's interior concedes nothing to its European or American competitors, except for its black plastic trim. The dashboard uses pebble-grain black leather, handsomely stitched with French seams. Optional leather spreads to the seats, trimmed with fabric.

The instrument panel is clean, including four handsome horizontal climate vents. Instruments use a clear font. The lettering on the tachometer and speedometer is organic white with a red needle.

The leather-wrapped four-spoke steering wheel is thick, feels good in the hands. It tilts and telescopes, and contains controls for audio, cruise control, phone and a big green button for Eco. Heating is optional.

The five-passenger seating is excellent, with a full range of adjustability available in the driver's seat. The seats are firm, well-bolstered, and deliver snug lateral support for more vigorous driving. However, the center-rear passenger must ride the camel's hump, and the rear legroom is on the low side of average, at 34.7 inches. Heated front and rear seating is available, as is front cooling and a cooled glovebox for drinks.

The panoramic sunroof, on cars so equipped, is huge, airy and truly bright. When closing it, the sunscreen panel closes automatically. A separate function opens only the screen and tilt roof. Nice, as with the controls on the center console, angled slightly towards the driver.

Navigation is fairly easy to set, and you can operate it while the car is moving, though we recommend your co-driver perform this duty. The display for the Hybrid is slightly strange, with growing flowers in Eco mode, that get bigger as you drive more efficiently. In the center of the speedo a display shows average and instant fuel mileage, with blue bars that move with the throttle position. It also scores your efficiency. There's a big round instrument on the left that's an Eco guide, with white, green and red zones. You can see energy flow back and forth between the wheels, battery, and engine.

The Hybrid offers a Microsoft voice-activated infotainment system with its audio system, incorporating Bluetooth and back-up camera. Infinity's deluxe 12-speaker audio system, with stylish speakers in the doors and dash, delivered superb sound.

A Virtual Engine Sound System (VESS) plays an engine sound during electric-only operation up to 12 miles per hour, to help notify people outside the vehicle that it is approaching. We would have liked to hear this mock buzz, but we couldn't get the Hybrid to run on electric only. It took the internal combustion engine just to back downhill out of our driveway. Nothing new with hybrids.

The Hybrid's air conditioning system uses an electric compressor, reducing the losses in belt-driven systems and allowing cool air to flow, even with the engine off in Idle-Stop mode. We didn't test it because it was freezing outside. So far, we've found that when they say cool air, they mean exactly that, as in not hot. Don't expect air-conditioning cold, in summer.

Cargo space is vast in the Optima EX and SX (15.4 cubic feet), but not so vast with the Hybrid (9.9 cubic feet) because of battery placement. We also noticed the right side B pillar creates a blind spot over the driver's shoulder.

## **Driving Impressions**

The Optima LX and EX use 200-hp 2.4-liter four cylinder engine, which we found flexible, very quiet, and reasonably powerful. As the engine most Optima buyers will choose, it is well suited to family duties both in daily traffic and at highway and commute speeds.

Even at middle throttle, accelerating from a stop, the engine is only distantly audible. Only under full acceleration does this engine remind you that it's a small four-cylinder, with an agonized yowl. At the more common task of accelerating away from an intersection, the Optima EX excels, smoothly and predictably gaining speed with no drama. In other words, throttle tip-in at slow speeds is linear and without surges; many cars nowadays jump off the line with overly sensitive throttles.

Ride quality is good, and the suspension soaks up roughness while delivering necessary road information to the driver. Chassis dynamics are excellent for a family mid-size car. Steering is accurate, firm and provided good feedback over twisting terrain. Pushing harder, there is good front-wheel grip, and when we hit a long curve at high speed, the multi-link rear end hooked up nicely. The usual ride responses experienced in vigorous driving, such as body roll, dive and squat, are well controlled, thanks to the car's rigid chassis.

The Optima SX is a sweet performance star with a classy ride. The turbo's performance, stability and agility are first rate. The engine is shared with the Hyundai Sonata. What's more, if you get the EPA estimate of 22/34 mpg City/Highway, it'll be as good as we got in our real world with the Optima Hybrid.

The Optima Hybrid delivered unimpressive fuel mileage when we drove it with no babying. EPA rates the Optima Hybrid 35/40 miles per gallon City/Highway. But our combined average, after 240 around-town and fast freeway miles, was 25.5 mpg. Around town we got just 20.5 mpg. Highest we reached was 39.4 mpg, in Eco mode at 60 mph; that's how to match the claims or EPA estimate. At 78 mph, with the Eco button amusingly still pressed, the average was 25.0 mpg.

The standard 6-speed automatic transmission is smooth in the gasoline-powered models, but we found the Optima Hybrid transmission, which is programmed for better fuel efficiency, awful. When it's changing gears, sometimes it feels like it's slipping, other times like it's snatching.

The Hybrid uses a 2.4-liter four-cylinder Atkinson cycle gas engine that produces 166 horsepower connected by a wet clutch to an Interior Permanent Magnet (IPM) synchronous electric motor producing 40 horsepower and 151 pound-feet of torque up to 1400 rpm in electric mode. Kia claims it can be driven in full-electric mode at speeds up to 62 miles per hour. Supposedly when the car comes to a stop and the electrical load is low, the engine shuts off to completely eliminate idle fuel consumption and emissions. Ours never did that.

The battery that powers the electric motor is a 270V lithium-polymer (Li-PB) battery. Compared to a nickel metal hydride system, this 95-pound Li-PB system is 20-30 percent lighter, 40 percent smaller, holds a charge 25 percent longer, is 10 percent more efficient, and offers twice the power density. The warranty is good for up to 10 years or 150,000 miles.

Wintry conditions do not suit the Optima. When we drove the Hybrid in snow we found little traction. We'll remember this Optima as the one-wheel-drive car. On our sloping driveway with a couple inches of snow, left front tire on asphalt and right front on ice, the power went to the tire on the ice, which just spun, as the car went nowhere. If you live in the Snow Belt, look elsewhere.

## **Summary**

The Kia Optima EX and LX are well suited to family duties, with decent acceleration, a good ride, and generous creature comforts. The turbocharged Optima SX is an impressive underdog against European sports sedans. The Optima Hybrid needs work, with its rough transmission and uninspired fuel mileage.

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