



KOREA PROGRESSION

WITH TWO KOREANS DESIGNED TO WALLOW IN THE MIRE, ROD SHUTTLEWORTH DISCOVERS 4X4 OWNERS WITH MUCH TO ADMIRE

YOU'VE been asked to design the ideal towcar. You'll need something heavy enough to tow today's weighty caravans and big enough to hold awnings, dogs, kids etc. You'll probably want four-wheel drive for leaving muddy sites, a high driving position for visibility and a turbodiesel engine that combines buckets of torque with reasonable fuel economy. Chances are you've drawn an SUV, and despite the pillorying 'Chelsea Tractors' receive in the press, no other car type beats the SUV's formula for towing. Now, what if that SUV costs little more than an average family saloon? Enter the Kia Sorento and the ccuRiously nnaMed SsangYong Rexton, reported on by 130 and 33 members respectively. These two have

met before, in our TCoY competition, and the Kia kicked the SsangYong's bottom.

PERFORMANCE

Both these cars have recently been revamped, so it's the pre-2007 models owners are reporting on. The Rexton, based on Mercedes-Benz running gear, was originally offered with a 2.9-litre naturally-aspirated diesel producing a dismal 118bhp and not-much-better 190lb ft of torque. Given solo acceleration scores of 57% (manual gearbox) and 42% (automatic) for 2.9-litre Rextons, this engine was dropped in favour of a more robust 163bhp 2.7-litre turbodiesel. Thus equipped, Rextons were awarded a stunning 91% for solo acceleration, and 78% for towing

acceleration, while owners described the engine as "effortless", "smooth" and even "free-revving" – not something you usually hear about a diesel. On the other hand, one owner considered the gear ratios too high in the manual, and others complained of a lack of urgency below 1800rpm.

The Sorento fields a 2.5-litre turbo with 139bhp (though Kia has found an additional 30bhp for the 2007 model) and 236lb ft. of torque, 15lb ft less than the 2.7-litre Rexton. Combine that with the Kia's additional weight, and it's not surprising to find it lagging for solo performance, with an acceleration score of 69%. But towing levels the playing field, and the Sorento beat the Rexton for towing torque (by 87% to 84%), hill climbing and hill starting, presumably

ABOVE: The original model Kia Sorento

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ABOVE: SsangYong's Mercedes-powered Rexton

due to a smoother delivery of all that low-end grunt. Of the Kia owners, 42% praised their car's towing ability, pulling power and torque. Manuals and automatics were fairly evenly matched, though some owners found the manual box to be a little "crunchy", while auto-owners liked the manual-override feature.

Kia owners were divided about their cars' fuel consumption. A few considered it acceptable for the size and weight of vehicle, but many were incensed that they were failing to achieve the Kia brochure's optimistic claims for fuel economy. Some even returned to dealers to have them checked. The Kia's real-world solo/long run/towing consumption averaged a not-unreasonable 30.6/34.6/25.8mpg for manual cars and 28.0/30.9/22.7 for autos. The Rexton 2.7 managed similar numbers: 30.4/35.0/26.1 for manuals and autos 27.9/32.4/23.5.

HANDLING AND RIDE

Several Kia owners commented that the Sorento "drives like a car" but the Rexton scores higher for most of our solo handling and ride markers, including road holding (84% to 77%), braking (92% to 81%) and steering (93% to 91%). Add a caravan though, and the Sorento takes the lead, out-scoring the Rexton for both stability (90% to 79%) and road holding (83% to 78%). The trick lies in the Kia's firm suspension, (self-levelling on plusher versions) and its towing handling prowess comes at the expense of a solo ride that was variously described as "harsh", "lumpy" and "unforgiving". The Sorento scored only 74%/54% for smooth/rough-surface ride solo to the Rexton's 83%/67%, though the Kia's ride score actually improved for towing, while the softer-sprung SsangYong's deteriorated a little.

While weight helps stability, the 4WD systems result in towing traction scores of 86% (Rexton) and 89% (Sorento) but not at the expense of manoeuvrability: both cars won praise for tight turning circles. Both camps also appreciated high permissible towing and noseweights, though one Rexton owner reported some rear-end sag when hitching up.

COMFORT AND CONVENIENCE

One of the black marks against the Rexton in TCoY was its loudness, which several owners felt was unfair. Here, the 2.7-litre Rexton scored 80% and 78% for engine and 'other' (road, wind) noise, the Sorento 66% and 69%. Perhaps the judges had the Rexton's window open.

Both cars made friends for their seat comfort and interior space and flexibility, SsangYongs with only five seats (seven can be specified) being particularly appreciated for their cargo space. Both offer elevated driving positions for enhanced all-round visibility, but both suffer some blind-spots from thick pillars, while Kias with rear parking sensors partially overcame the

problem of poor reversing visibility caused by a high and heavily-tinted rear window.

A couple of Sorento owners found the driving position too elevated for comfortable access, while others grumbled about "back to front" wiper/indicator stalks, short rear mud-flaps, fiddly radio controls, dash trim that reflects in the windscreen and clumsy "ergonomics". Both cars were liked for their high levels of standard equipment, though the Kia's "useless" multi-meter (altimeter, barometer, compass) was a little OTT for some.

SsangYong owners enjoyed the ample interior storage and "distinctive" looks, but were less enamoured with the fake wood trim, hard-to-read heater controls and lack of a driver's left foot rest.

QUALITY AND RELIABILITY

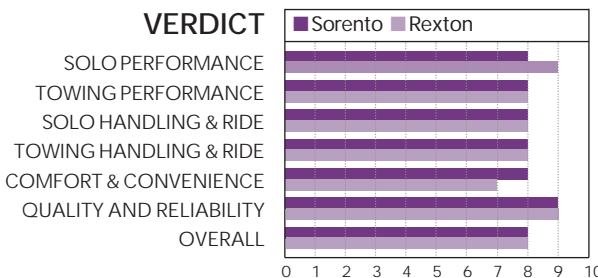
Neither car was entirely fault free, the SsangYong averaging one reported fault for every 75,305 miles travelled, the Kia one fault per 54,415 miles. The good news is that almost all upsets were minor, and most were dealt with under generous warranty programs. The Kia's main problems were almost all electrical: various switches, sensors, relays and wiring components giving up the ghost. One Kia caveat is an oil-cooler pipe on the automatics attached by flimsy spring-clips, potentially resulting in sudden and complete transmission fluid loss. Jubilee clips might be a worthwhile preventative measure. Both cars were praised for build quality and safety, including by one owner whose first Sorento ended its days upside-down on a French autoroute. He and his wife went home with one broken wrist and some bruises between them and bought another one.

VERDICT

Both Kia and SsangYong owners were quick to cite "value for money" as a major buying motive, and it's hard to imagine many other cars that combine the size, pulling power, features and reliability of these two in such a reasonably-priced package, especially when purchased nearly new. Interestingly, two Kia owners suggested they would recommend the Sorento as a towcar, but not as "everyday transport", and the closeness of the scores hides an unusual anomaly: while the 2.7-litre SsangYong was marginally the winner in most solo categories, the Kia edged ahead for towing. With its punchy engine and stiff suspension, the Sorento comes closest to our 'ideal tow car' and thereby justifies its TCoY crown. But the more user-friendly Rexton might just be the better car... ■

Technical	Kia Sorento	SsangYong Rexton
Engine	4-cyl 2497cc	5-cyl 2696cc
BHP@RPM	139 @ 3800	163 @ 4000
LB FT@RPM	236 @ 2000	251 @ 1800
Kerbweight	2000kg	1850kg
COSTS	£17,360	£19,796
AVERAGE USED PRICES		
2003	£7500	N/A
2004	£8600	£8250
2005	£10,000	£9000
2006	£11,350	£10,000

VERDICT



Info: kia.co.uk
Info: syukcars.co.uk