

Will Sorento in two-wheel drive format be as popular a towcar as its four-wheel drive sibling?



WHEN TWO WILL DO

Want an off-roader without the complexity of all-wheel drive? Clive White samples another of the growing breed of 2WD SUVs

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A year or two ago, anyone suggesting that an off-roader or SUV could be had with two-wheel drive would have been received with a fair amount of eyebrow raising, to say the least. For a long time, the off-roader has been the tool of choice for the school run with the majority of 4x4s spending their time on tarmac roads rather than farm tracks. In these urban situations, where having all wheels driving is rarely a necessity, it makes sense to do away with the unused engineering, thus reducing weight, complication, running costs and emissions. But it was a brave SUV maker who pioneered the 2WD approach, and if

Kia had done it with the previous-model Sorento, I can imagine there would have been an outcry among its many fans. Now, though, in these more flexible times where even Land Rover – the company synonymous with AWD – accepts the 2x4 drive format in a couple of its models, there is really little to argue against if the vehicle is destined to solely pound the asphalt.

CABIN COMFORT

The '1' in our Sorento's name tag is a discreet way of saying 'budget' model, but it doesn't feel basic. Interior décor is smart, fresh and modern, while definitely avoiding the swooping, plunging lines of some of its contemporaries.

The fascia is business-like, featuring logically-placed switches whose large, clear graphics make them easy to locate and use. Analogue instruments comprise a large circular speedo flanked by a pair of conjoined semi-circular binnacles housing tachometer, fuel and coolant-temperature gauges. They're simple and devoid of technical trickery or visual frippery, but remain an attractive enough means of keeping check on Sorento's status.

Digital clock, audio system and dual-zone climate controls stack neatly and conventionally in the fascia's centre above a usefully-large storage bin. Another good-sized storage area can be found beneath the centre armrest.

“The 2WD models' weight and cost savings are not to be sneezed at”

Leather adds a classy touch to the gear lever and reach/tilt-adjustable steering, though seat upholstery in the '1' is cloth. That's little disadvantage in my book, as fabric is more stretchy and clingy than leather, taking better advantage of the seat cushioning to make you feel more cosseted and securely located. Sorento's seating is supportive and although the fronts have basic manual adjustments (including stepped recline), there's ample seat travel and it wasn't difficult to get comfortable.

Perhaps confusingly, there are two '1's, (three including the auto) ours being the entry-level 2.0-litre with just the five seats. The other '1' has a 2.2 engine, seven seats and costs £900 more (manual), but is obviously the one (or '1') to have as an MPV substitute. In either case, Sorento's cabin offers ample space in which to travel.

The generous boot has a useful false floor covering storage spaces for concealing valuables. Access to the externally-cradled (full-size) spare is via the release in the base of the tailgate door-jam, so no need to evacuate the boot's contents. Not so sure about the tools...

DRIVING DYNAMICS

The 2WD models' weight and cost savings are not to be sneezed at, so if you're going to eschew 4WD in your SUV, you might as well go the whole hog and eschew the extra point two of a litre of the rest of the Sorento range. Bless you!

But the 2.0-litre turbodiesel did well enough in providing reasonably lively performance in all situations. The engine felt quite torquey and flexible, though the rev band seemed a little narrow and there was little point in running the engine up to high speeds. Far better to change up early and let the torque provide the necessary flexibility and performance – probably better for fuel economy, too.

Despite the gear stick's long-ish throw, shifting was quite easy and slick. The clutch, though, while disengaging sufficiently to facilitate unhindered gear changing, often gave the impression that it was dragging slightly. Most noticeable when stationary, if left in gear Sorento would creep forward even if the clutch pedal was pressed hard to the floor. Without detailed

examination it was difficult to determine if this was caused by wear or if related to the Hill-start Assist Control (HAC) function.

For quite a bulky car, Sorento is reasonably adept at changing direction, though not quite the agile athlete I expected having shed 60kg of 4WD machinery. Feeling a touch nose heavy (or tail light?), a little of the balance I remember from the 4WD version seemed to be absent. This may have been magnified by the slightly 'springy' resistance in the steering from the straight-ahead position.

PULLING PERFORMANCE

Despite the neatness of a detachable towball, there's no denying the 'ever-ready' convenience of a fixed ball, and with easily fitted towing mirrors, the Kia was simplicity itself to set up.

Perhaps the one hint that it might have been better to have the 2.2-litre engine for towing was during acceleration: 0-60mph took 18 seconds and 0-50mph lasted for 13 – not desperately slow, but maybe just enough to persuade you to wait at a junction or roundabout rather than go for a gap. Urgent getaways or hill-starts produced a touch of tyre scabble that you wouldn't expect with the AWD version, but 2WD coped well.

Otherwise the 2.0-litre was well up to the task, returning a 30-50mph time of 7sec in third gear and performing well in all situations. Sixth gear was easily usable for motorway cruising and able to tackle many of the inclines. The engine's ample pulling power also ensured good progress on the twistier byways in fourth and fifth gears without needing to stir the cogs too much.

Stability was generally good, with just a twitch or two when passed by HGVs, and cornering control was quite satisfactory. The firm ride could become a touch jiggly when the caravan reacted to bumpy surfaces, but it also endowed the Sorento with competent handling. ■

VERDICT

Much of the time, the 2WD Sorento is just like its AWD siblings: a capable, comfortable, economical and well-equipped SUV with a very attractive warranty package. Only when a 4x4 is needed to tow it off a soggy grass pitch might it be a little embarrassing...



Business-like cockpit



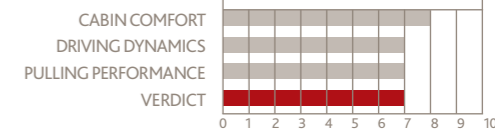
Sorento is pleasing on the eye



Good boot has useful false floor

TECHNICAL

RATINGS



| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| RRP | £23,095 OTR |
| Engine | 1,995cc, in-line 4-cyl, common-rail turbodiesel. Transverse |
| Power | 148bhp (110kW) @ 4,000rpm |
| Torque | 282lb ft (382Nm) @ 2,000-2,500rpm |
| CO ₂ | 169g/km |
| Transmission | Six-speed manual, FWD |
| Fuel/tank/econ | Diesel/15.4gal (70 litre)/40.2mpg solo/25.5mpg towing 1,560kg |
| Kerbweight | 1,840kg (85% = 1,564kg) |
| Gross vehicle weight | 2,510kg |
| Gross train weight | 5,010kg |
| Noseweight limit | 100kg |
| Towing equipment | Detachable towbar £290; 13-pin electrics £199 inc VAT, plus fitting |
| Spare wheel | Full size |
| Insurance | Group 24 |
| Sorento '1' model-range | £23,095 (2.0 CRDi) to £25,495 (2.2 CRDi auto) |

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