

CHEAP CHEROKEE

Kia Sorento (2003- To Date)

Introduction

Kia took a big step upmarket with the launch of the Sorento. Previously known for their small, cheap cars, the South East Asian manufacturer first branched into 4x4s and MPVs before taking the plunge in 2003 with a proper family sized 4x4. The Sorento was good, worryingly so for quite a few other manufacturers who traded on badge equity more than actual talent. With an excellent reliability record, sound build quality and stylish good looks, the Sorento is an interesting buy if you want a family 4x4 without typical family 4x4 pricing.

History

The Kia Sorento was launched at what proved to be a rather fortuitous moment. Just when it looked as if Kia had been beaten to the punch by SsangYong with their Rexton 4x4, wranglings as to who was going to import the car left the way open for Kia to clear up in the budget family 4x4 sector. In truth, the Sorento probably outstripped even Kia's most optimistic sales projections, the 2.5-litre diesel variants proving a good deal more popular than the rather thirsty 3.5-litre petrol model.

Why should I buy?

Those familiar with the Amalfi coast may feel the Sorento to be starting at something of a disadvantage in being bereft of an R but after the slightly odd name, things get a lot better. For a start, the Sorento looks the part, which is the next big battle won. In certain respects, it shamelessly apes the Mercedes M-Class but when you're set to be paying around £18,500, this is no bad thing. Walk around the car and there's not one duff angle, no botched panel fits, no awkward juxtaposition of detailing, although one can't help but feel this is a car that would look far happier on Santa Monica Boulevard than Streatham High Street.

Equipment levels are good, with all models being fitted with anti-lock brakes with electronic brakeforce distribution, twin front and side airbags, air conditioning, electric windows and self-levelling rear suspension. As well as a limited slip differential, there are neatly integrated front fog lamps, some respectable alloy wheel designs and blade-profile roof rails. Top end models feature some quality electronic options such as in-car DVD and satellite navigation.

Two different 4x4 systems are offered, depending on which of the three trim levels are chosen. Upspec models get a full-time all-wheel drive system whilst budget models feature a system whereby drive to the front wheels can be selected manually. Either way both have a proper low ratio gearset for serious off-roading.

It's the interior quality of the Sorento that sets it apart from so many wannabes in this tough corner of the market. We expected brittle elephant-hued plastics and chintzy trim but instead got soft touch materials and a quality feel. Only the slightly cheesy veneer trim fitted to some luxury models can be called into question and even then, the clean overall feel of the rest of the cabin design redeems it.

How much could I expect to pay?

Prices for a 2.5-litre CRD diesel XE model kick off at £13,500 for a slightly above average mileage 03 plate model. XS versions tack another £600 onto these price but there are good number around the Kia dealer network from which to choose. Choice evaporates a little if you're set on a 3.5-litre XS petrol engined car. These are far rarer than the oil-burners and if you can find one, it's probably best to price it on an individual basis. Insurance for the Sorento is affordable, the 2.5-litre cars falling into Group 12 with the grunty 3.5-litre rated at Group 14.

What should I look out for?

The Sorento offers a welcome relief to that perennial Kia complaint of insubstantial cabin quality, feeling a good deal more thoughtfully put together than Kias of yore. As with all vehicles that purport to have off road capabilities, get underneath and take a good look for damage to the exhaust or suspension and listen for whining differentials. Inspect the luggage bay and the seat backs for signs of damage when loading. Mechanically the Sorento benefits from Kia's usual reputation for excellence. Otherwise insist on a full service record and contact a few franchised dealers to try to find the best bargain available.

Are parts expensive?

(approx based on a 2003 Sorento 2.5 diesel) Kia spares have gained an enviable reputation for good value, and replacement parts for the Sorento are no exception. Front and rear brake pads both cost around £51 a set while a radiator will be around £155. An alternator is approximately £280 and a starter motor is £175. A complete exhaust system minus catalytic converter is about £560.

What is it like to drive?

Beneath the well-executed lines lies something of a hardcore philosophy. Rather than adopt the current Trend for more car-like monocoque



chassis, the Kia has a ladder-framed separate chassis and a solid rear axle instead of independent rear suspension. Those tempted to dismiss the Sorento as just another in a long line of effete 'Barbie trucks' are now starting to eat their words. The heavy-duty chassis and suspension set up mean that the Sorento can tow far heavier loads than a Land Rover Freelander or a Nissan X-Trail but it can't hope to rival their on-road nimbleness.

Having said that, it doesn't make a bad fist of things on the blacktop. The suspension has been fettled by Porsche and whilst you won't be clamouring to part-exchange your Porsche Cayenne after a spin round the block, the Sorento is far from agricultural. Big transverse ridges can still send tremors through the bodyshell but it's a decent showing. It certainly corners harder than you'd at first give it credit for and without the oscillating steering response that many such 4x4s are plagued with.

Two engines are offered - a 192bhp 3.5-litre V6 petrol range-topper and one that may be more pertinent to UK buyers, the 2.5-litre CRD common-rail diesel. This engine is new to Kia and features fuel injection technology from Bosch to promote smoothness and efficiency. Any 138bhp engine that has to propel something the size of a Sorento isn't going to generate headline-grabbing performance figures and this one is no exception, but quoting sprints to 60mph seems vaguely churlish when it comes to this market. Of more importance is the chunky 343Nm of torque and the fact that the Sorento CRD will return an average of 36.2mpg with a manual gearbox or 33.6mpg in H-Matic automatic form.

Of the two gearboxes, the automatic is probably the better bet you can change gears yourself with a flick of the lever or leave the car to do the hardwork. It's worth sacrificing a couple of miles per gallon and a few zeppelins worth of CO2 per year in order to access the self-shifter's relaxed nature and effortless way of plugging you right into the meat of the torque curve. Opt for the V6 and the auto is standard.

Summary

The Sorento has filled a market niche that few at first even believed existed. Family sized 4x4s were traditionally bought on the strength of their image, but buyers have seen these vehicles improve massively over the past few years and now represent a viable alternative to more staid MPV style vehicles. The Sorento managed to catch the imagination of this new wave of buyers and it makes a good used buy. Choose your paint finish carefully as the Sorento is quite colour sensitive but otherwise there's little to grouse about.

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