weekend warriors

For around $40,000, there’s a veritable smorgasbord of recreational four-wheel-drive vehicles from which to choose. We put four of the newer diesel-powered examples to the test, on and off road.

STORY BARRY GREEN | PHOTOS JIM MCEWAN
THE POPULARITY OF compact/medium sized Sports Utility Vehicles (SUVs) seems to know no bounds. Even the apocalyptic arm of the Global Financial Crisis last year failed to pull the handbrake on sales of ‘soft roaders’ in Queensland.

But now buyers have been further spoiled for choice with the release of new offerings from Mazda, Hyundai and Kia, along with a model refresh from Skoda.

While the Korean duo ushered in a fresh range of re-engined, revved-up diesel variants with familiar names, Mazda delivered an addition to its CX-7 ranks, the Diesel Sports. Powered by a 2.2 litre, common rail diesel (CRD), turbo, four-cylinder engine (with six-speed manual gearbox only) and Active Torque-Split all-wheel drive (AWD) system, the Diesel Sports boasts a refreshed interior and exterior and more equipment.

Kia’s Sorento is a new monoconique construction with multi-link rear suspension and seven seats as standard. Its low-range transfer case has been dropped in favour of a torque-on-demand AWD system with lock mode, and a new 2.2 litre, CRD turbo-four-cylinder engine provides the motivation.

Sharing the same powerplant, Hyundai’s latest Santa Fe, in receiving a subtle design update. The Scout joined its brothers in arms, the Octavia and Sorento, in front to rear.

Our test quartet fairly bristles with standard features. As with most offerings with a third row of fold-flat seats, the Kia and Hyundai are better suited to children or smaller adults. But measured up, Sorento provides the better head and leg room and Santa Fe the broader seats and cushion.

With the third row in use, cargo space is understandably compromised, an outcome common among seven-seater vehicles other than those people movers based on larger commercial van underpinnings. Yet fold down the third row and the Korean pair accommodate nicely. The surprise, though, is the Skoda, which improves for length and height.

Santa Fe wins on practicality, narrowly bettering Sorento essentially by having dual adjustment on the front headrests, but it’s a close thing. Both are extremely user friendly in having flat floors, hidden rear hinges and no internal load tips or intrusions to the cargo area. There is also rear ventilation, a full size spare and, as mentioned, extra seating capacity. All four come with three child restraint mounts fitted.

Our quartet does ergonomics well, but the Japanese car is a point clear of Santa Fe and Scout. Although height adjustment for the driver’s seat is standard on each, Sorento misses out on lumbar support. And its seat adjustment, as with Scout, is manual, whereas Santa Fe and CX-7 boast the convenience of eight-way power. Although, Scout offers eight-way adjustment, as with Scout, is manual, whereas Santa Fe and CX-7 boast the convenience of eight-way power.

Build and finish quality would appear to be a work in progress for the Hyundai and Kia. White panel margins were uniform, look closely and there’s some variation in the paintwork to the secondary panels such as tailgate opening and doorsills.

ON & OFF THE ROAD

It was a Korean KO in our six acceleration tests, with both Kia and Hyundai being a point clear of Santa Fe and Scout. Although the latter offers rear fog lamps, the Kia’s front fog lights (except Scout, which lacks the latter), MP3 compatibility and auxiliary input, tinted windows, trip computer, ‘auto off’ headlights, front fog lamps, heated and powered rear vision mirrors (Santa Fe and Sorento also fold), powered windows and intermittent wipers.

Neither Korean car has a ski port and CX-7 doesn’t offer deadlocking, but is alone in having satellite navigation, a Rose 140 watt audio system and bluesooth hands-free compatibility. Scout boasts lock nuts for its alloy wheels, cargo net, coated glovebox and console, and rear parking sensors. Santa Fe also comes with the latter and offers rear fog lamps. Like its Korean kindred brother, Sorento claims a lockable glovebox.

DESIGN & FUNCTION

Testers agreed the Skoda has the edge in comfort, ahead of the Mazda, Hyundai and Kia in that order. The seats are typically Euro – firm, but nicely supportive. The fronts are endowed with ample bolstering on the cushion and backrest, as are the outer ears, although the middle seat is narrow and not as accommodating.

That said, our measurements show CX-7 to offer the most space by way of head and leg room and travel (seat slide) for the driver ahead of Scout. For rear passengers, the Mazda is tops in headroom, Santa Fe on leg room and width.

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Sorento: The Mazda proved it has the measure of the Skoda, except in roll on where Scout got cracking to finish second.

The Hyundai and Kia are also good everyday drivers, around town and out on the road, with the former benefiting from the combination of a higher torque output and six-speed auto which shifts smoothly and kicks down freely.

Koreans can’t match the agility of the other two, but they are the best handling dynamics. The Czech-built car steers, damping and suspension settings help endow Scout with are well tied down, if a little firm, the Skoda more so.

Under undulations out on typical Australian back block roads. The challenges of the adventure park quickly reinforced their limited off road capabilities by way of no low range, restricted suspension travel and road biased tyres. The Hyundai, by dint of its slightly superior ground clearance and auto gearbox, best handled the going. The Kia got caught out, literally, with its plastic ground clearance and auto gearbox, best handled the going. The Kia got caught out, literally, with its plastic

Our noise meter tests produced a mixed bag, with Santa Fe quietest at idle ahead of Skoda, CX-7 and Scout. From 50-80 km/h, with the engine working in third gear, the Mazda took the honours from the Kia, Skoda and Hyundai. But cruising at a steady 80 km/h, CX-7 slipped to second behind Sorento. All exhibit some tyre roar over coarse chip roads, but we seem to be saying this about most cars these days.

We suspect not too many softroaders get their wheels dirty by going seriously off road. However, we exercised our fourseamer at the Scenic Rim Adventure Park near Beaudesert (www.sorcinadventurepark.com.au) and along the unsealed Condamine Gorge Road above Killarney to see how they might cope.

The CX-7 seems a little lethargic to get going, let alone climbing up along the Condamine Gorge Road, making a statement of no low range, restricted suspension travel and road biased tyres. The Hyundai, by dint of its slightly superior ground clearance and auto gearbox, best handled the going. The Kia got caught out, literally, with its plastic ground clearance and auto gearbox, best handled the going. The Kia got caught out, literally, with its plastic

CONCLUSION

Count the numbers and the Kia and Skoda have a fair bit in hand over the others. For value for money, but the former digs out a little in design and function where it’s line ball between the Hyundai, Mazda and Skoda.

On the road, it’s Scout’s honour with Santa Fe, CX-7 and Sorento hard to split. So it’s a close run thing, but we continue to be impressed with Skoda’s rollout of its ever-improving

How they stack up!

PHOTOS, ABOVE, FROM LEFT:
- Scout, CX-7, Santa Fe and Sorento.

Santa Fe possesses the softer ride of our quartet, along the Condamine Gorge Road above Beaudesert (www.sorcinadventurepark.com.au) and along the unsealed Condamine Gorge Road above Killarney to see how they might cope.

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