
Auto Perspective

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**Retroactive glance at one of the fastest
growing automotive brands in America**

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KIA *Sportage* *at 30*

The Kia Sportage is all grown up and ready to take the world by storm

Happy Birthday Sportage! The Kia Sportage turns 30 this year. But age is only a number. This SUV is nowhere close to being over the hill, stronger than ever after five generations of design improvements. The Sportage is a model of compact/crossover SUV manufactured by South Korean Automotive company Kia. It is one of the fastest growing automobile models in the United States, and has remained the best selling Kia model since 2016. According to Kelly Blue Book, the Sportage sold over 125,000 units in 2022, a 40% increase over the previous year. But prior to reading the headline of this article, did you know that the Sportage had been around since 1993? The answer is probably not. Several individuals we spoke with while conducting our research for this piece, including Sportage owners themselves, also did not. In fact, many believed it was a newer offering by the car company, not a model



2023 KIA Sportage HEV



2023 KIA Sportage HEV interior

“it’s very important that you are able to recognise a Kia at first sight”

-Peter Schreyer



2023 KIA Sportage HEV

line that has been an integral part of Kia’s history and tremendous success. Perhaps this is a testimony with regards to Kia management’s ongoing commitment to forward design and the fact that the Sportage has seen so many strong improvements in its lifetime it is hard to keep up with them all. In this article, we will look back at the history of where the model has been, along with where it might tread in the future.

HUMBLE BEGININGS

Kia itself was founded in 1944 as the Korean company Kyungsung Precision Industry. Originally the company manufactured steel tubing and other various bicycle parts. In 1951, they introduced a bicycle called the Samchully, which holds the distinction of being South Korea’s first domestically produced bicycle. Things would soon change for the company however, and in 1952 the name was formally switched from Kyungsung Precision Industry to Kia Industries. In 1957, through a licensing deal with the Honda Motor Company, Kia Industries took a big step forward and began to manufacture small motorcycles. Then in 1962 under another licensing agreement, this time with Mazda (formally known

“Trust in the Kia brand in the US market continues to grow as a direct result of our concerted effort to provide customers with compelling design, reliable products, superior quality and best-ever residual values,”

Eric Watson

*Vice president sales operations
Kia America.*





1987–2000 KIA Pride



KIA Birsa on the assembly line

“Undoubtedly, the best way for a consumer to have a good time in the 2010s was to turn to Korean products: for a car, Kia and Hyundai; for electronics, LG and Samsung.

-Author Michel Houellebecq

at that time as Toyo Kogyo Company), Kia began to manufacture the K-360, the country’s first domestic truck. 1973 brought a milestone for the company, the grand opening of Sohori in Soha-dong, Gwangmyeong, its first large scale automobile manufacturing plant and by 1974 they introduced the Brisa S-1000, Kia’s first passenger car. The Brisa was well received by Korean consumers and was very popular among taxicab drivers looking for efficiency and reliability. However, in 1981 a military dictatorship under Chun Doo-hwan enacted involuntary corporate consolidation within the country forcing Kia to cease production of the vehicle in favor of small trucks. It was not until 1986 under a partnership with the Ford Motor Company did Kia begin to manufacture passenger cars again. They only produced a total of 26 vehicles that year, but in 1987 over 95,000 cars would roll out of the factory. For the next few years Kia would fortify its passenger vehicle line up with successful models such as the Pride and the Avella.

BREAKING INTO NEW MARKETS

1992 saw a new U.S. division of the brand incorporated as Kia Motors America. At first, the vehicles were sold only at four auto dealerships located in Portland, Oregon. But growth was steady thanks in large part to the company’s brilliant strategy of expanding one region at a time and by 1995 there were well over 100 dealerships found in 30 states. Other strong contributors to rapid growth included the introduction of well received models like the Sephia, the first car that was truly designed by Kia on an independent chassis.



1994–1997 KIA Sephia

ENTER THE SPORTAGE

The Sportage was born in 1993, but the model’s rise to the top of Kia sales charts was not easy, nor fast. Both the new model and the company as a whole struggled during this time. Like most companies in Asia, Kia was devastated by the 1997 Asian financial crisis that brought about bankruptcy for the company. In addition to the overall struggles of Kia, the Sportage was dogged with slow initial sales on both sides of the pacific. In fact, according to Kia Media, the Sportage only sold a total of about 240,000 units in the United States from 1998, the post Hyundai acquisition, until 2003. Early models were plagued with recalls and safety concerns, all of which were found off putting to discerning American consumers. This culminated with the decision for Kia to temporarily discontinue the Sportage after the 2002 model year.



First Generation KIA Sportage 1993-2002 NB-7



First Generation KIA Sportage 1993-2002 NB-7

GROWING CONSUMER CONFIDENCE AND EARNING TRUST

Going back to the drawing board, the second generation of the Sportage was introduced into the North American market for the 2005 model year. With numerous improvements over the first generation, this was for all intent and purposes an entirely new automobile. Once again though, initial sales didn’t quite shatter any industry records. Still with a bad taste in their mouths and in conjunction with an unwillingness to gamble on unfamiliar car brands, consumers in the United States purchased only 29,000 units that year. The complaints from previous owners of the first generation Sportage spilled into the media, some citing the new model’s larger size and its lack of off-road capabilities. Automotive Critics were also mixed at best, with most reviews unwilling to move past the fledgling automakers previous perceived missteps, although some liked the new improved 173 bhp engine. Nevertheless, even the harshest critics of the Sportage had to concede one point, the second generation of the vehicle was a vastly better automobile than the first.



2005-08 KIA Sportage



2005-08 KIA Sportage

*“The new Sportage is
a giant leap ahead of
its predecessor offering
more interior room,
equipment, sophistica-
tion and practicality.”*

Isaac Bober

Automotive Journalist

Press Reviewing the 2016 Sportage



2023 KIA Sportage Cabin



Third Generation 2013 Kia Sportage

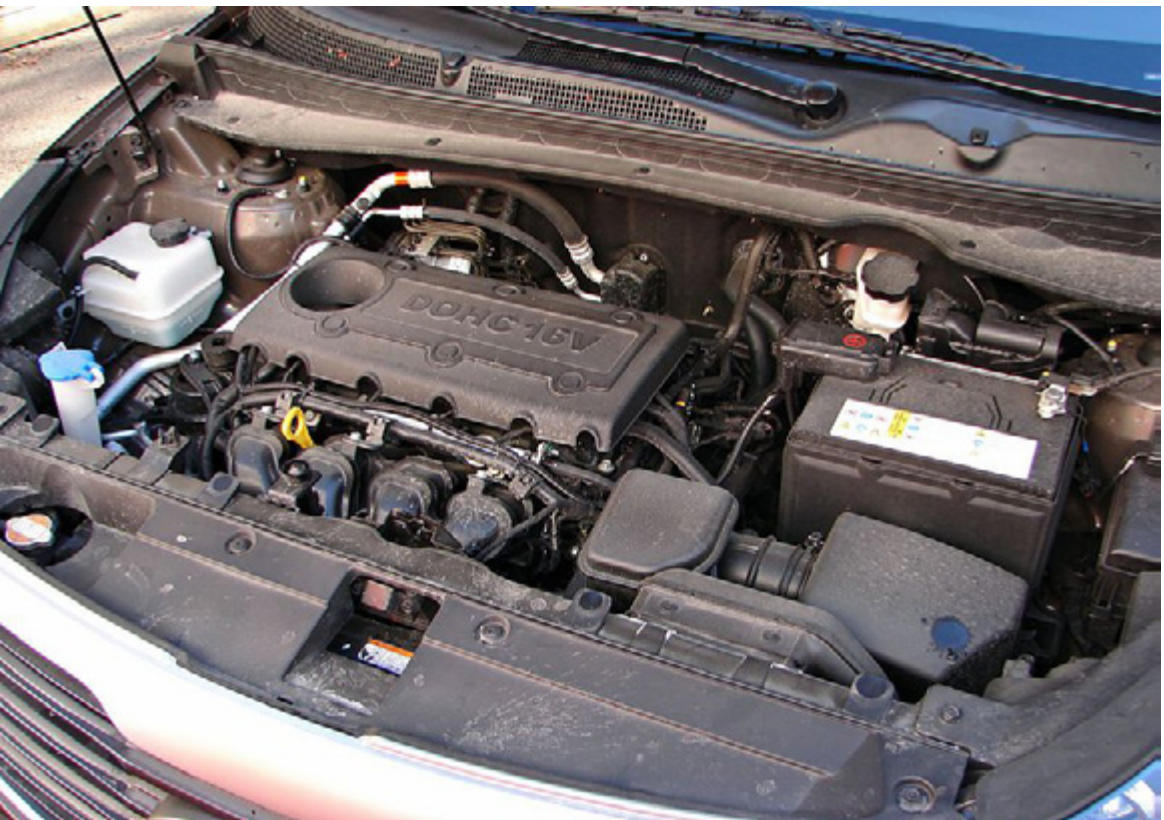


Third Generation 2013 Kia Sportage

ward design achievements, the third gen Sportage topped the 2012 J.D. Power Survey. Point of fact, it was the only automobile within that survey to attract a coveted five star rating broadly across all categories including in mechanical reliability, dealer experience and low ownership costs. Providing another boost to the gaining momentum for the Sportage was the vehicle’s tremendous improvements in safety design. While Kia had made notable, even historic advancements in safety engineering like being the first automaker to manufacture an automobile equipped with a knee airbag which was included with the 1997 Sportage, early Kia vehicles had a poor reputation for safety. But things had come a long, long way for the company, and the new third generation of Sportages earned the “Top Safety Pick” rating from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. Word was starting to get around about the Sportage, and in 2016 it sold 81,000 units, replacing the Rio as Kia’s best selling vehicle.

MARCHING TO THE TOP OF THE SALES CHARTS AND WINNING CRITIC ACCOLADES

Kia introduced the third generation Sportage in time for the 2011 model year. The model fared much better than in contemporary years, nearly doubling the previous model year sales at over 47,000. Growth was spurred by positive word of mouth from satisfied Kia customers and on the strength of being named in the 2009 Consumer Reports reliability survey recognizing the Sportage as one of the most reliable vehicles on the road. Sales leveled out a bit afterwards in the states, but were still considerably better than in previous years. Across the pond however, the car was a big hit with better than anticipated European sales. More so, critical praise kept rolling in. Unsurprising to some within the industry who were aware of the brand’s forward design achievements, the



Third Generation Kia Sportage engine



Third Generation Kia Sportage



Third Generation Kia Sportage



Fourth Gen KIA Sportage



2017 KIA Sportage

”Once again the 2017 Sportage earned a “Top Safety Pick” nod from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, showcasing the company’s commitment to improving safety standards.”

**CONTINUED SAFETY IMPROVEMENTS
AND RISE OF A LOYAL FOLLOWING**

The Fourth generation Sportage was in showrooms for the 2017 model year. It was a moderate hit right out of the gate, especially in Europe where it would exceed 125,000 in unit sales, but the best was yet to come. Once again the 2017 Sportage earned a “Top Safety Pick” nod from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, showcasing the company’s commitment to improving safety standards. According to company literature, the fourth gen Sportage was inspired by state of the art fighter jet design. Three well received trim packages, continued design improvements and optional AWD configurations propelled Sportages sales over 80,000 three consecutive years for the first time, and even hit 94,000 cars sold in the U.S. for the 2021 model year. In what is now a seemingly automatic accolade, the 2022 Sportage received the “Top Safety Pick” rating from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, helping to launch sales over the 125.000 mark in the United States.



2023 KIA Sportage HEV



2023 KIA Sportage PHEV

GEN 5

Kia unveiled the fifth generation Sportage to a pandemic weary public in June 2021. It is based on



Interior cargo space 74.1 cubic feet



Eco-Conscious 2023 Kia Sportage PHEV



New Infotainmet System



2023 Kia Sportage PHEV



Fifth Generation 2023 KIA Sportage



2023 Kia Sportage SX

THE FUTURE OF SPORTAGE AND BEYOND

In 2006, Kia executives identified automotive design as being the “core future growth engine” of the company. Shortly afterwards, Kia hired master designer Peter Schreyer, pivotal contributor of the Audi TT, to serve as Chief Design Officer. This was a tremendous push towards the new direction in which executives wished to take the company, a direction with a major emphasis for modern design. One of Schreyer’s first moves was to create the Kia ‘tiger nose’ grill (now that you have read and comprehend that last line, you will see the stylish innovation every time you look at a Kia, forever). It was a truly brilliant move by him, fueling an early spark that became the company we know today. If Schreyer’s tenure thus far, now serving an even greater capacity as President of design management for Hyundai Motor Group, is any indication of what may be in store, Kia fans may have much about the Sportages future to be happy about. Now offering EV, Hybrid and plug-in hybrid models combined with cutting edge comfort & safety updates, the Sportage certainly seems poised to see a sixth generation, if not a seventh and eighth as well.

the successful N3 platform and has received numerous critical praises. Points of note from automotive critics have been the model’s Terrain Mode which, depending on conditions, automatically adjusts various vehicle settings for optimal safety. Also receiving raves from both critics and owners alike is a three inch increase in legroom with a bit more headroom to boot. The fifth gen Sportage is also American made, produced at Kia Motors Manufacturing in West Point, Georgia, representing a \$1 billion investment into U.S. infrastructure that opened in February 2010. You may be asking “Did the 2023 Sportage earn a Top Safety Pick award from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety?” You bet your bottom dollar it did. As a matter of fact, the Kia Sportage earned its best safety score ever for this model year.



The Kia Sportage climbing a steep hill



Fifth Generation 2023 KIA Sportage



Powerful 2023 Kia Sportage HEV motor

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