



Hyundai Santa Fe

Featured model: 2.4



THE PURPOSEFUL LOOKING new Santa Fe is Hyundai's first entry into the SUV (sports utility vehicle) market. It's also the South Korean company's first four-wheel drive vehicle available in the UK.

Although with ambitions as a Freelander/RAV4 rival, it's claimed to be more of a soft-roader than a serious mud-plugger. We only drove along dry and undemanding tracks on the launch, but no doubt the double differential units and torque apportioning viscous coupling will ensure a fair helping of on-demand traction over trickier terrain.

There's a choice of two petrol engines, a 2.4 or a 2.7 V6, with a two-litre diesel due later in the year. Provided you don't let the revs drop below 3000, the smaller-engined model is reasonably lively, but it's growly on hard acceleration. Fortunately it settles to a comfortable motorway cruise with only modest tyre and wind noise.

An extra £2000 gets you into the sweeter revving and more melodic 177bhp V6. It's no quicker to 60mph, but comes with a smooth-shifting Tiptronic-style automatic transmission. In contrast, the 2.4's manual shift feels clumsy.

The Santa Fe sells well in the States, partly due, no doubt, to its supple, boulevard ride. It's really good at soaking up faults in broken tarmac, as well as rough country tracks. It's a less happy bend-swinger, though, when body roll and steering vagueness remind you that with this SUV the emphasis is on utility rather than sports.

Inside, smooth grey plastic abounds, but the fit and finish are well executed. We particularly like the sensible layout of the switches (radio excepted), clear instruments, seat height and steering height adjustments and the good all-round vision – but only once the rear head restraints have been removed.

Satellite navigation is about the only item missing from the extensive list of standard equipment that's virtually the same on both models. The only difference is that the 2.7 V6 is trimmed with leather.

The wheelarches don't allow rear passengers to enter and leave elegantly but, once aboard, occupants are treated to comfortable seats with adjustable backrests and plenty of room all round – except that headroom is modest.

Those wheelarches also steal some load space width. A generous area remains, however, and it can be loaded either via the tailgate or through the separate lift-up window – useful for long loads. Folding the 60/40 split back seats gives a long and flat carpeted load deck.

VERDICT

Hyundai's image isn't as impressive as the reliability of its products. This and the fact that the Santa Fe isn't a particularly rewarding vehicle to drive may hold it back. Nevertheless, it possesses sufficient off-road ability to meet most needs here, and is superbly equipped as well as surprisingly comfortable. It all adds up to good value for money.

AT A GLANCE

considering size, price and rivals

Controls/displays	☆☆☆☆○
Handling/steering	☆☆○○○
Comfort	☆☆☆☆○
Space/practicality	☆☆☆☆○

BRIEF SPECIFICATION

engine 2351cc, petrol, 16 valves
143bhp/148 lb ft with double overhead camshafts. 65-litre fuel tank
drive 5-speed manual, permanent four-wheel drive with viscous coupling and limited slip differential
suspension front: independent coil spring/damper struts, anti-roll bar
Rear: double wishbones, dual trailing arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar
wheels/tyres 6½J alloy with 225/70R16 tyres
brakes ventilated discs front, solid discs rear with anti-lock (ABS) control
0-62mph* 11.4 sec
max speed* 108mph **maker's figures*
official (combined) mpg 28.8

LIKES ...

terrific tally of equipment
roof lamps front, centre and rear
rear wiper blade parks off the glass
aerial built into rear side window
compartmented tray under boot floor
and GRIPES
facia top can reflect badly in screen
lap belt only for rear centre occupant
radio controls small and fiddly
rear backrest release knobs stiff
underslung spare wheel will get filthy

THE SANTA FE RANGE

size and type upper medium (mid-priced) 5-door sports utility vehicle
trim levels 2.4 : cloth trim, 2.7 : leather trim
engines petrol: 4 cylinder/2.4 litre/143bhp, V6/2.7/177; diesel: due late 2001
drive permanent four-wheel drive, 2.4: 5-speed manual, 2.7: 4-speed stepped automatic with H-tronic manual sequential shift facility
notable features 2.4: ABS/EBD, alloy wheels, metallic paint, air conditioning, electric sunroof, reclining back seat. V6 adds: H-tronic automatic transmission, leather trim