

Automobiles

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Section 12

AROUND THE BLOCK

A Minivan That Is Actually Mini

TESTED 2007 Kia Rondo

WHAT IS IT? Compact minivan (what is called a "space wagon" overseas).

HOW MUCH? \$16,995 base; \$18,880 for tested LX with cruise control and keyless locking.

WHAT MAKES IT RUN? 2.4-liter in-line 4 with four-speed automatic (or 2.7-liter V-6 with a five-speed); front-wheel drive.

IS IT SAFE? Rondo received the top rating (five stars) in government front-crash tests.

IS IT THIRSTY? E.P.A. mileage rating is 21 m.p.g. in town, 29 on the highway.

ALTERNATIVES: Mazda 5, \$19,230; Toyota Matrix, \$19,310; Chevrolet HHR, \$17,685. (All similarly equipped.)

WHAT you call the Kia Rondo depends on how far you bend to the fickle winds of autospeak. The

boxy upright shape shouts minivan, even if marketers prefer hipper labels like "crossover utility" or "multi-purpose vehicle."

Technically, the E.P.A. classifies the Rondo as a compact wagon. Based on a modified platform from the midsize Kia Optima sedan, the Rondo has conventional hinged doors rather than the rear sliders on

most minivans. Just shy of 15 feet long, the pert Rondo is nearly two feet shorter than mainstream vans like the Honda Odyssey.

Available in three trim levels and with five- or seven-passenger seat configurations, buyers on a budget will appreciate the sub-\$17,000 starting price. Adding air-conditioning (\$900) and a few other options bumps the sticker, but you'd be hard pressed to spend more than \$25,000, whereas an Odyssey can top \$40,000.

My test vehicle was a five-passenger LX with the standard 162-horsepower 4. The optional V-6 puts out 182 horsepower.

My week with a Rondo LX coincided with a test of its only direct competitor, the sporty Mazda 5. Since the two vans have similar power, curb weights and shoebox styling, you'd think they would feel quite similar, but that is not the case.

With sharp steering and a firm suspension, the Mazda's crisp handling outshines the Rondo's laid-back demeanor. Still, while darty steering is fun in a sports car like the

Miata, in a people mover like the Mazda 5 you may come to feel you are being pulled by an overeager puppy on a short leash.

Though the Rondo's steering is more relaxed, it is fairly precise. Even with the smaller engine, power is adequate. The stronger but slightly less fuel-efficient V-6 hardly seems worth the extra cost (\$1,000). The same is true for the optional third row, suitable only for children.

When that row is raised, cargo space drops to only 6.5 cubic feet from nearly 32.

A 15.8-gallon fuel tank provides a handy range of up to 450 miles between fill-ups.

Like other recent Kias, the Rondo has an attractive and functional interior. The cloth seats are comfortable, visibility is excellent and there is ample space in the second row.

The suspension is composed and quiet on the highway, though one outspoken passen-



ger complained that bumps and potholes on New Jersey roads caused the Rondo (like the Mazda 5) to ride like "hay wagons." When I tried to tune out the complainer by cranking up the base four-speaker audio system, it sounded a bit flat. A six-speaker unit, which also plays MP3 files, is available only in the pricier EX. Power windows and power locks are standard on all versions.

Kia has loaded an impressive number of standard safety features into this inexpensive family hauler, including electronic stability control, tire-pressure monitors, four-wheel antilock disc brakes and six air bags, including full-length side curtain bags. The Rondo also comes with Kia's limited powertrain warranty of 10 years or 100,000 miles.

With an attractive design, good road manners and a long list of safety features, the Rondo has a lot to offer young families on a budget. No matter what you call it, it is more roomy and versatile than a sedan and lacks the baggage of a too-square too-big minivan.

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WHEELSPIN: Hard Day's Night at Le Mans

Spending 24 hours in the Corvette pit and loving every minute. By Nick Kurczewski.
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