

Hyundai's Mini Wagon

By Roger Witherspoon

There was a time when the station wagon was ubiquitous on American highways. Back in the 60s, the Beach Boys sang about their “Woody’s” – station wagons with pinewood panels on the side and enough room to hold a pack of surfboards. If you liked the outdoors, large families or had lots of friends, you had to have a station wagon. Their ungainly look, unbalanced, big-box, rear-heavy drive was part of their ambiance. It was more rolling statement than style.

That went out of favor with the advent of the small sport utility vehicles, which could go places the old station wagons could not and, of course, looked and handled a lot better. So the station wagon fell way out of favor. But there was still a niche for families or young people who wanted a versatile, dependable car – not a small truck – which could occasionally haul a lot of stuff and have plenty of room inside.

For the folks with the crayons at Hyundai, that meant taking their standard Elantra sedan, stretching the roof, rebalancing the power train, and morphing it into a station wagon they renamed the Elantra Touring car. It doesn't resemble the old station wagons. In front, it is still the sedan, with the low grill curved into a thin smile around the fog lights and curved headlights. They avoided the boxy look by curving the rear part of the roof downwards and pulling the sides in slightly. The effect is the look of a compact sedan, though the Elantra has the interior space of a compact SUV.



And unlike the station wagons of old, you actually can tour in this thing.

It was the summer of 1968. The Vietnam War was raging, the presidential race between Vice President Hubert Humphrey and former vice president Richard Nixon was heating up, and the civil rights movement had morphed from hopeful action to angry street reactions. But the five of us who crammed into an old Chevy station wagon to drive to the Newport Jazz Festival couldn't have cared less about the rest of the world that week end. We were more concerned about making it safely to the festival since every time the driver changed lanes, the unbalanced rear would sway into the adjacent lanes like a drunken sailor on roller skates. We went off the road more than once and renamed the Chevy the “Death-wagon” since we were convinced it was trying to kill us.

Fast forward to the last sunny weekend in October, 2009, when the sun was bright after two days of rain, and this was the last chance to see the Hudson River Valley in a colorful riot of full fall foliage before the leaves dropped for the season. The Taconic Highway is an ungainly, sharply curving road snaking through the Hudson River Highlands. Sometimes it had shoulders as it sliced through farmland, and sometimes it didn't as it rode the side of mountains.

It's the kind of road you usually drive around 50 miles per hour or less, unless you have a sports car which hugs serious curves without straining. On this occasion, however, the speedometer of the Elantra hovered between 70 and 80 as the five speed touring car sliced through the kaleidoscope of fall colors. This was nothing like the woodys of old. Downshifting to fourth gear provided extra torque on the sharper curves and the peppy little sports car jumped forward on the brief straight-aways. The Elantra is never going to be mistaken for a sports car. It is only powered by a 2.0-liter, four-cylinder engine cranking out just 138 horsepower. But in a short slalom course, where maneuverability and handling count as much as horsepower, the little wagon more than holds its own. And the little engine that could carries a 10 year, 100,000 mile warranty, which means it is not likely to wear out quickly.

As a "touring" car, the Elantra will not be mistaken for the cars you usually think of in that category: Bentley, Jaguar, or Rolls Royce. But inside this wagon are a lot of thoughtful touches not always available in a \$20,000 car, which can make the cross country trek in an Elantra an enjoyable one.

The dash contains a small compartment on top, capable of holding small items such as electronic toll passes, and the extra deep glove compartment has an air conditioning mode in case you want to keep cans of soda chilled. The three spoke, leather wrapped steering wheel tilts and telescopes, and has fingertip controls for the audio system and cruise control.

The seats are covered in cloth, as one would expect in a car in this price range. But the Elantra's front seats can be heated. The rear seats, which can fold flat to enlarge the cargo area, provide enough head and leg room for anyone under about six-foot five. NBA players will probably need to sit in the front.

The entertainment system features an in dash CD player as well as connections for an iPod, MP3 player, and USB port in case you want to bring along 1,000 or so of your favorite tunes. There is also XM satellite radio. And the large, powered sunroof lets you enjoy the foliage and sky above you.

The Beach boys have long since retired. But if you and your crew have surf boards to transport, or want a comfortable road trip without spending a small fortune to enjoy it, you might consider Hyundai's updated station wagon.



2010 Hyundai Elantra Touring SE

MSRP:

\$19,845

EPA Mileage: 23 MPG City

31 MPG Highway

Performance / Safety:

2.0-Liter DOHC 4-cylinder engine producing 138 horsepower and 136 pound-feet of torque; 5-speed manual transmission; 17-inch alloy wheels; anti-lock brakes; electronic stability and traction controls; independent front and rear suspensions; dual front and seat-mounted side impact airbags; roof-mounted side curtain airbags; fog lights.

Interior / Comfort:

AM/FM/ XM satellite radio; MP3 and CD player; iPod and USB ports; tilt and telescope steering wheel, with fingertip audio and cruise controls; heated front seats; cooled glove box; powered sun roof.