

4x4 OF THE YEAR

2004 • LARGE GROUP •

1st

KIA SORENTO CRDI XE



Coming from a manufacturer best known for cheap remakes of old Mazdas, the Sorento came as a surprise. It looks, feels and drives like an excellent, thoroughly modern car. Kia has shed its second-rate image and in a quest to become one of the world's top carmakers has concentrated on build quality, high-tech design and materials and state-of-the-art power plants in a series of key new models encompassing ordinary road cars as well as MPVs and, of course, the particularly high-image world of modern SUVs. What impresses most about the Sorento is that Kia shunned the trend towards style-led crossover vehicles which make only a token nod towards off-road ability. The Sorento stays true to the traditional Japanese-style off-road package using a separate steel chassis, torsion-bar independent suspension up front and a rigid rear axle hung on coil springs, with high and low-range gearing.

VALUE LEADER

Though styled in Korea the Sorento is aimed at the US and Europe, so the lines are reminiscent of other modern off-roaders, like the Mercedes ML and Lexus RX300, but with subtle sculpting giving it a distinctive appearance of its own – sleek yet, unlike so many others, hinting at off-road prowess.

The interior also has a touch of the Orient about it, but it is pleasingly styled in quality materials and the panel fit and finish is as good as anything else in the class. The high-roof styling and wide stance give it a comfortable airy five-seater cabin which is exceptionally well equipped for the

money – even the base XE version sports air conditioning, all-electric windows, remote central locking, CD system, alloys and tinted glass, while the range-topping XS has climate control and leather upholstery with heating and electric driver's seat adjustment. Safety is right up to scratch, with side airbags and three-point seatbelts for all five seats standard in all versions.

Power is provided by a modern turbodiesel using second-generation common-rail fuel injection, a punchy 2.5-litre unit capable of delivering 138 horsepower and a beefy 232lb ft of torque – compare that with the 136 horsepower and 220lb ft of torque from the Discovery's TD5 – but with efficiency that returns 33.2mpg on the Euro combined cycle.

Oddly, the Sorento offers two types of four-wheel-drive system, selectable on the XE model and permanent on the higher-specification XS, presumably in the belief that budget-conscious buyers seek the perceived economy benefits of running in two-wheel drive on the road, while the more image-conscious will wish to emulate the permanent-4WD status of the BMW X5, Mercedes ML and Land Rover Discovery. Either way, the system works well, as we discovered in our 'bomb-hole' test area, where the Sorento, with its low range engaged merely by twiddling the dash-mounted selector switch, trugged happily around a route that in some parts had defeated even the Jeep Wrangler. With its excellent equipment, good build quality, fine road manners and true off-road capability the Sorento has good reason to earn a high score in this contest, even without considering the ridiculously good value pricing.

SPECIFICATIONS

Price:	£17,995
Engine cc/bhp:	2497/138
Transmission:	Five-speed automatic, dual range, selectable 4WD

RATINGS (0-10)

Comfort:	9
Refinement:	8
Off-road:	7
Value:	10
Style:	8
TOTAL:	42

WE LIKED:
Self-leveling suspension
WE DISLIKED:
Fashion-look central console, slightly wallopy cornering

