Pretty Picanto brings character to city car segment

By Henrie Geyser

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The latest Kia Picanto - one of the best-selling cars in its class with more than 1.4-million sales behind its name - has moved up several notches from the previous model in terms of looks, cabin refinement, practicality, safety and ride quality.



Already firmly entrenched as one of the prettiest pikkies on the road, the new Kia looks even more youthful and energetic than the previous model, thanks to its attractive body lines and cocky stance. It also lifts the bar in terms of cabin space, practicality, safety and sheer driving fun.

Kia has wisely retained the sprightly 1.0-litre and 1.25-litre naturally aspirated multi-point injection (MPI) petrol engines of the outgoing range but have tweaked them to improve efficiency, driveability and overall responsiveness. Both engines are paired with a five-speed manual transmission delivering power to the front wheels. Some models are also available with an optional four-speed automatic transmission.

The 1.0-litre, three-cylinder engine produces 49kW and 96Nm and the four-cylinder 1.25-litre engine churns out 61kW and 122Nm. The lineup has been expanded to eight models and four specification grades.

Models

At the entry level, the Start models come with manual air-conditioning, tilt-adjustable steering, a radio with RDS and MP3 capability, Aux and USB connector jacks, Bluetooth connectivity and two speakers.

Moving up in the lineup, the Street models have all the above but add electric front windows, steering wheel-mounted audio remote controls, remote central locking with an alarm and immobiliser, as well as driver seat height adjustment.

The Style models see the Street specification extended with the addition of front projection fog lamps, daytime running lights, automatic light control, a rear window wiper, and front seat back pockets.



Top of the range Picanto Smart models also gain bi-function projection headlights, LED daytime running lights, LED rear combination lights, electrically-folding, heated side mirrors with integrated LED indicator lamps, aluminium pedals, two-tone cloth and leather upholstery, a leather-upholstered steering wheel and gear knob, the seven-inch full colour infotainment system, Bluetooth with voice recognition and a rear park distance control system with integrated reverse camera.

Exterior eye candy

New exterior eye candy comes in the shape of wrap-around headlights and distinctive lines running along the side skirts, shoulder, and around the wheel arches.

The living quarters have also been attractively spruced up with black cloth seats or, in the higher specification models, two-tone black and grey leather upholstery. The dashboard layout is now also more centrally aligned for driver convenience and occupant comfort.

The new Picanto now also boasts more leg- and headroom than best-selling rivals in this segment.

The boot grows from 200 litres (VDA) to a maximum 255 litres – the most of any car in the class – and is available with a two-step boot floor, which can be raised or lowered by 145mm to create additional space as required, as well as create an under-floor storage area. The rear seat bench can be folded down with a one-touch lever for ease of use, boosting cargo capacity to 1,010 litres. 60:40 split rear-folding seat backs are a standard feature on all models.



I drove the 1.0-litre version on an undulating route at the media launch in the Western Cape and was pleasantly surprised by the enthusiastic performance of this teeny engine. We cruised effortlessly at the maximum legal speed (and at times a tad more) and overtaking was no sweat, even when cruising uphill in top gear. The little Korean moved energetically off the mark and handled the corners with dignity and the poise one would expect from a larger, pricier car.

Sharp handling, comfortable ride

The outgoing KIA Picanto won plaudits for its combination of sharp handling and comfortable ride and this has been tweaked to make it even better in the latest version.

The five-speed manual transmission is slick, the brakes are good and the steering is well-weighted. Finding a comfortable driving position is also surprisingly easy, considering the car's diminutive stature.



In lower specification models, the large, 'floating' HMI at the centre of the dashboard houses a 3,8-inch monochrome TFT LCD audio system, with buttons to control the system's functions.

Smartphone integration

High specification models feature a seven-inch full-colour touchscreen infotainment system offering a Bluetooth connection to smartphones to play music on the go. The seven-inch touchscreen HMI system also supports Apple CarPlay and Android

Auto for full smartphone integration.

These systems offer not only a convenience benefit to users, but also a significant safety benefit in that it curbs the growing hazard of distracted driving. In both instances, only the most important apps (such as telephony functions, messaging, music and maps) are available to use while the vehicle is in operation. As vehicles featuring Apple CarPlay and Android Auto are also equipped with Bluetooth incorporating voice recognition, drivers never have to move their hands from the steering wheel or their eyes off the road.

Auxiliary and USB ports are located at the base of the centre console, ensuring drivers can play music directly from a smartphone or MP3 player, and keep mobile devices charged on the move.

High specification models also feature a rear-view parking assist system, incorporating a rear-view parking camera with dynamic guidelines, as well as electrically folding, and heated side door mirrors. A sunroof is available as an option on high specification models.

Extra safety features

The new Picanto has a number of extra safety features including the liberal use of advanced high strength steel (AHSS), ABS brakes (on all models other than the entry-level variants), driver and passenger airbags and ISOFIX child seat anchors.

In its latest guise, the new Picanto brings a funky, young, and zesty character to the tightly contested city car segment at prices virtually unchanged from the previous model range. It goes up against the likes of the Datsun Go, Chevrolet Spark, Suzuki Celerio, Renault Kwid, Toyota Aygo and Hyundai i10, but even in this competitive company, Kia says it expects sales of around 650 units a month.

The models and prices, inclusive of a class-leading five-year, unlimited kilometre warranty and three-years/unlimited kilometres roadside assistance, are:

Picanto 1.0 START Manual: R134,995
Picanto 1.0 STREET Manual: R149,995
Picanto 1.0 STYLE Manual: R159,995
Picanto 1.0 STYLE Auto: R172,995
Picanto 1.0 SMART Manual: R179,995
Picanto 1.2 START Manual: R150,995
Picanto 1.2 START Auto: R163,995
Picanto 1.2 STREET Manual: R165,995
Picanto 1.2 STYLE Manual: R175,995
Picanto 1.2 STYLE Auto: R188,995
Picanto 1.2 SMART Manual: R195,995

ABOUT HENRIE GEYSER

Henrie Geyser joined the online publishing industry through iafrica.com, where he worked for five years as news editor and editor. He now freelances for a variety of print and online publications, on the subjects of cars, food, and travel, among others; and is a member of the South African Guild of Motoring Journalists. henrieg@iafrica.com

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