By Steve Schaefer

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The Toyota RAV4 and Honda CR-V are widely celebrated for being the first small crossovers in the U.S. market, but the Kia Sportage actually came out first — in 1993. That first-generation model was sold into the 21st Century.

After a short hiatus, the updated second generation arrived in 2005. But it's the third generation that concerns us here. Debuting in 2011, it introduced a whole new look and feel to Kia crossovers, based on the Kue concept car. You can thank the team at Kia's U.S.-based design center in Irvine, California. Presumably they were inspired by Kia chief designer Peter Schreyer, who formerly directed design for Audi.

The first two Sportages wore the look set by the landmark Ford Explorer SUV in 1990 — the two box shape. As these (sometimes) four-wheel-drive models have morphed more and more into car-based crossovers, there's no reason to stick to this rigid design template any longer.

The Sportage's upswept nose matches other Kias. With the now recognizable tab grille and grinning slivers of headlamps, it's a friendly face (but without the grin worn by recent Mazdas). The side sculpting, high window line and blocky rear pillar are fresh developments.

You can get your Sportage in four levels, starting with the base model and moving up through LX, EX and SX. Each level gets significant upgrades, so you can pick exactly the Sportage you want and can afford. The LX upsizes the base car's 16-inch alloys to 17-inchers, places LED turn signals on the outside mirrors, adds keyless entry with folding key and, most significantly, a six-speed electronically controlled Sportmatic™ automatic transmission, along with solar and privacy glass.

The EX, like my Signal Red test car, bumps the wheels to 18-inch alloys, and slips in

high-performance dampers, LED daytime running lights, roof rails, a rear spoiler, fog lamps and chrome body trim and door handles. The top-of-the-line SX keeps the 18-inch wheels but makes them a special design. Most importantly, it features a powerful yet fuel-efficient 2.0-liter turbocharged GDI engine that produces 260 horsepower and 269 lb.-ft. of torque. This model rates dual exhausts, and stands out with sculpted side sill moldings and a unique grille.

Inside, my tester was pretty much all gray, and many of the surfaces were hard, as befits a truck. However, the armrests and center console bin were padded, and there are enough black panels and silver and chrome accents to keep the passenger space from feeling low budget. There is no mistaking this for a Mercedes-Benz, however.

The twin grab handles on the center console reminded me of those in the first Audi TT. A bold forward-jutting section atop the instrument panel, in front of the driver, added some flair but no additional function. The windshield pillars are shockingly thick, but this is part of making the newest Sportage crashworthy. They surely helped the new model gain recognition as a 2011 “Top Safety Pick” by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS).

All Sportages come well equipped, including air conditioning, power windows with one-touch down functionality, electronically adjustable side mirrors, 12-volt power outlets in the passenger and cargo compartments, tilt-adjustable steering wheel, and six-way adjustable front seats.

The EX receives a raft of upgrades, starting with the audio system — it gets an external amplifier and sub-woofer and HD Radio. There's also a rearview back-up camera, automatic dual-zone climate control, a power driver's seat with lumbar support, automatic headlamps, automatic folding second-row seats, a leather-wrapped steering wheel and shift knob, and more. You even get an illuminated and cooled glovebox!

Besides the more powerful engine, the SX spoils you with leather seats, push button start with Smart Key, aluminum scuff plates and a snazzy Supervision gauge cluster.

The standard engine in every level but the SX is a 2.4-liter DOHC 16-valve four-cylinder engine with Continuously Variable Valve Timing. It provides 176 horsepower and has been tuned to deliver a one mpg improvement on the highway over last year's model. Its mpg is rated at 22 City, 32 Highway, 25 Average, but I scored only 19.3 during my test week.

The EPA's Green Vehicle Guide gives the 2.4-liter a 6 for Air Pollution and 6 for Greenhouse Gas. There is one model with a 9 for Air Pollution — probably sold in California and other

smog-legislated states. Both are SmartWay vehicles.

The base car, which comes only in two-wheel drive with manual transmission, starts at $19,300. Moving up through the levels, it’s possible to cross the $30,000 line if you add in option packages. My two-wheel-drive EX with the Premium Package came to $28,800. These prices include freight and handling.

The re-imagined Sportage is a pleasant and useful vehicle, part of an overall upgrade of everything with the Kia name on its nose.