

Pricey Plug-In Polish

Sportage PHEV Looks Premium, But Value Gets Complicated

By Derek Price

CARGAZING.COM

When did the Kia Sportage start looking this expensive?

That was my first thought every time I walked up to the 2026 Sportage PHEV X-Line Prestige in my driveway. My tester's matte gray paint had the kind of presence that usually comes with a luxury badge.

The Sportage absolutely looked and felt premium during my week with it. It also carried a window sticker of \$49,730, which puts it in a strange position for a Kia compact SUV.

I like the Sportage a lot. I like the size, the shape, the cabin and the way Kia has turned what used to be a small, forgettable crossover into something genuinely desirable. I'm just not sure this is the version I would buy.

That's not because the plug-in hybrid powertrain lacks appeal. Quite the opposite. The Sportage PHEV pairs a 1.6-liter turbocharged engine with electric assist for a combined 268 horsepower and 271 pound-feet of torque. It drives smoothly, feels strong around town and can travel an estimated 34 miles on electricity before behaving like a normal hybrid.

For the right buyer, that's a brilliant formula. If your commute is short and you



The 2026 Kia Sportage wears angular lighting, crisp bodywork and confident proportions that help it look more expensive than its badge suggests.

can plug in at home, you could use very little gasoline during the week. Then, when it's time for a road trip, you still have a gas engine and a six-speed automatic transmission instead of charging stops planned around meal breaks.

The Sportage itself makes a strong case as a family-friendly two-row SUV. Kia calls it compact, but that word feels about as accurate as calling a modern smartphone pocket-sized. This thing is roomy.

Rear-seat passengers get real space, and the cargo area is impressively generous. The whole cabin has an airy, relaxed feel that older Sportage owners might find shocking.

It's grown up, and I mean that as a compliment.

The cabin also feels quiet and well insulated, more like a premium product than a value-minded crossover. The seats are comfortable, and the overall road manners are calm rather than sporty. It is not trying to be a Mazda CX-5 on a winding road, and that's fine. The Kia's mission is comfort, technology and efficiency.

The most unusual part of the interior is the control panel below the screen. Kia uses two physical knobs that can operate either the climate control or the audio system, depending on which mode you select. Tap a switch and the same knobs change jobs.

At first, it feels like a

magic trick performed by an engineer with too much free time. I kept reaching for the volume and changing the temperature instead, or doing the opposite. After a few days, though, the logic started to make sense.

It is a compromise between two modern extremes. Some designers want to eliminate nearly every button, which looks clean in photographs and drives actual owners crazy. Others cover the dash with so many switches that it feels like starting a small aircraft. Kia found a middle path. It is weird, but it is not dumb.

Value is the bigger question. The Sportage starts under \$29,000, and that version interests me a

lot because it reflects what Kia has traditionally done best: deliver a sharp-looking, well-equipped vehicle for thousands less than you expect. The plug-in hybrid starts at \$40,490, which also makes sense for frugal commuters or buyers who want to use less fuel without going fully electric.

But close to \$50,000, the conversation changes. At that point, shoppers can look at larger SUVs, premium-brand crossovers or plug-in rivals such as the Toyota RAV4 Plug-In Hybrid and Mitsubishi Outlander PHEV. The Sportage still offers a lot of equipment for the money, but it no longer feels like an obvious bargain.

That is the tension running through this vehicle. The loaded Sportage PHEV is good enough to justify being compared with more expensive machines, but that also means it has wandered away from the simple value argument that makes the Sportage so appealing in the first place.

Still, I came away impressed. This Kia looks fantastic, drives with polish and gives buyers a useful electric range without asking them to commit to a full EV lifestyle. It is practical, comfortable and surprisingly upscale.

The Sportage PHEV X-Line Prestige proves Kia can build a compact SUV that feels close to premium.

AT A GLANCE

WHAT WAS TESTED?

2026 Kia Sportage PHEV X-Line Prestige AWD (\$47,190). Options: Premium paint (\$595), cargo mat (\$110), carpeted floor mats (\$200), cargo cover (\$190). Price as tested (including \$1,445 destination charge): \$49,730

BY THE NUMBERS

Wheelbase: 108.5 in.
Length: 184.4 in.
Width: 73.4 in.
Height: 66.9 in.
Engine: 1.6-liter turbocharged plug-in hybrid four-cylinder (268 hp, 271 lb.-ft.)
Transmission: Six-speed automatic
MPG: 36 combined, 83 MPGe, 34-mile electric range

RATINGS

Style: 9
Performance: 8
Price: 6
Handling: 7
Ride: 8
Comfort: 8
Quality: 8
Overall: 8

WHY BUY IT?

The Sportage PHEV is for buyers who want real electric commuting range, generous space and a near-luxury feel in a practical two-row SUV.

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Inside, the Sportage features a wide digital dashboard, generous passenger space and a clever control layout that blends touch-sensitive surfaces with real knobs.

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A CLOSER LOOK



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FACTS, FIGURES AND RATINGS

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