

Kia Cee'd Sportswagon 1.6 CRDi 3

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IT REALLY is quite astonishing how quickly Kia has risen from producing dull budget motors to making desirable cars that are now serious competition to the likes of Ford and Volkswagen.

Only last year the new version of the Picanto was launched in the UK; then the latest Rio and, more recently, the gorgeous new Optima - and I haven't even mentioned the sexy Sportage SUV or the latest cee'd. I've been to many of these car launches set up for the motoring press and I can honestly say Kia seems unstoppable in its quest to 'wow' the European motoring market.

Now, just three months after the arrival of the stylish all-new Kia cee'd hatchback, another model joins the family - the cee'd Sportswagon. Replacing the former cee'd SW, it introduces a fresh model name to reflect the new car's character: adventurous, sporty, modern and technologically advanced, but with even more of the practicality and value which made its predecessor a success in the British fleet and business market.

Like its forerunner, it was designed and engineered at Kia's Frankfurt design studios and technical centre, and is made at the company's Žilina plant in Slovakia, which is where I flew to test the car before it hit British showrooms.

I drove the 126 bhp 1.6 CRDi 3 version. Its steering is direct and well-weighted, and the six speed manual gearbox is smooth. The cee'd Sportswagon won't blow you away with excitement but then you'd be naïve to expect an estate car with a mid capacity diesel engine to do that. What the Kia does do, though, is transport you from A to B with minimum fuss in an economical, comfortable and practical way.

And I don't use the word 'practical' lightly. This car actually offers more luggage capacity than the majority of the competition - 528 litres up to the load cover with all seats upright and 1642 litres up to the roof with the 60:40 split rear seats folded flat. This means motors such as the Ford Focus Estate and Golf Estate now have a serious rival.

Looks-wise I was struck by how attractive the front of the car is. LED lights give the cee'd a very streetwise, modern appearance, while the rest of the Sportswagon simply appears stylish without appearing 'boxy' - as is the case with some estate cars. The dash material (which resembles 'elephant hide' in looks, texture and colour) doesn't quite match up to the pleasing aesthetics of the exterior, but everything is well screwed together and the switches and dials are clear and logically set out. The doors and the boot close with a reassuring 'thunk' rather than a clang - again, an indication of a marque that has evolved well beyond 'budget'.

The turn-around in Kia's new look is thanks to the company's Chief Design Officer, Peter Schreyer. His plan with the cee'd sportswagon was to "build on the strengths that made the first-generation model such a success, but with added emotion and character and improved proportions and stance". I think it's fair to say that he's achieved that.

The cee'd Sportswagon is available in four trim grades - named '1', '2', '3' and '4', with the option of a '4 Tech' version. As with every Kia, the latest model comes with a fully transferable seven-year, 100,000-mile warranty.

PROS 'N' CONS

• Attractive ✓ • Comfortable ✓ • Practical ✓ • Spacious ✓ • Dash material X • Tame performance X

FAST FACTS

• Max speed: 120 mph • 0-62 mph: 10.8 secs • Combined mpg: 64.2
• Engine: 1582 cc 4 cylinder 16 valve turbo diesel • Max. power (bhp): 126 at 4000 rpm
• Max. torque (lb/ft): 192 at 1900-2750 rpm • CO2: 116 g/km • **Price: £21,095 on the road**