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Driven: 2011 Kia Forte5



It's amazing how quickly a design can fade into the background in the automotive industry. You only get your fifteen seconds of fame, and you'd better make the best of it, because the automotive consumer is a fickle crowd and you won't have their attention long. The Kia Forte is only entering its second year running but since its release, six major competitors have released refreshed or all-new versions of their respective compact cars. In this industry, being familiar isn't always a good thing and compared to these other six, familiar is exactly the position Kia finds itself in with the Forte. To make matters worse, the Forte5 hatchback was released after the Koup coupe and sedan were

already well established, taking away much of the fanfare the shapely hatch could have received. Kia is well known for providing great value and content, so is there enough in this car to keep it relevant in a rapidly changing landscape? We took a spin to find out, in a 2011 Kia Forte5 EX finished in Santorini Blue Metallic with black cloth interior.

Hit the jump to read more about the **2011 Kia Forte5 EX**.

Competition

The compact segment is a hard-fought battle in Canada, and Kia has got quite a fight in front of them. Four of the top five compact sellers are in that group of six aforementioned refreshed or all-new competitors (Civic, Corolla, Elantra, Cruze). So far this year in Canada, the best-selling Honda Civic has outsold the Kia Forte by almost four to one. In a round-up of fifteen compact cars on sale in Canada this year, the Forte finds itself in tenth position after four months of sales. This puts it ahead of the VW Golf, Subaru Impreza, Mitsubishi Lancer, Dodge Caliber, and Suzuki SX4. The Forte splits a fine line between the Golf and the ninth place Nissan Sentra, but after that it starts losing a lot of ground to the other eight which includes the Toyota Matrix, Ford Focus, VW Jetta, and Mazda 3. Sadly for Kia, its mechanically similar cousin, the Hyundai Elantra, is wildly more popular than the Forte, outselling it by over three to one.



SLIDESHOW

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Exterior Design

Our tester stood out in a crowd, coated in a bright blue finish. The design of the Forte is clean and uncomplicated; a good template to start with for the Forte5 hatchback. We've always been a fan of the hatch, regardless of the length of the car, and this case is no different. Extending the roofline makes a case for practicality, and we would argue, creates a sleeker profile than the sedan as the roof flows all the way back.

The EX trim is missing fog lights that you get with the SX, but thankfully the opening where they would be isn't too ostentatious. Normally, we find the 'middle trim' to look awkward with wheels that give up size to the loaded model, but again, the Forte5 looks just fine on its 16-inch split five-spoke rims. The chrome door handles are a bit cheesy; body coloured would have been just fine.

From the front of the car to just behind the driver's door, the car is identical to the Forte sedan. Behind the driver, the roof extends towards the back to create a profile reminiscent of the first gen Mazda3 hatchback, which arguably popularized the modern five-door hatchback as a mainstream compact option. The taillights again show the common 'kink' design taken from the Kia family grill, which is also seen in the rear window design.



Interior Design/Functionality

Moving into the car, you're greeted in somber fashion with a fairly dreary black interior, split above the dashboard with a tan roof which does little to break up the monotony. The dash is largely hard material with few soft points, and the steering wheel in the EX is a cheap rubbery/plastic material that isn't pleasant to grip. All the buttons and switchgear is laid out in an easy-to-use fashion, however, and when you look around you'll find a surprising amount of options for the middle trim. The EX comes standard with Bluetooth connectivity, AUX and USB inputs for iPod integration, and heated front seats. As per usual, your iPod won't integrate properly without a special cable available from Kia, so the easiest way to navigate around that problem is just to go with the AUX input.

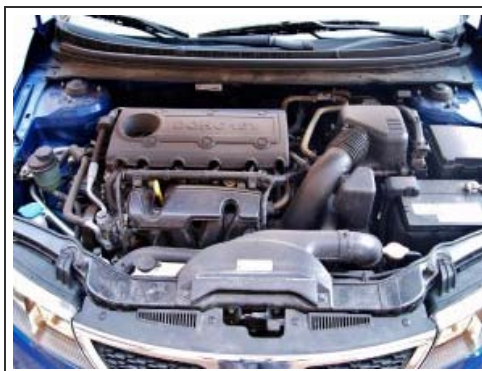
The steering wheel features audio, cruise control, and Bluetooth phone controls which is a cut above for this price range. The cloth seats were comfortable enough that we didn't complain, but nothing to write home about. The Kia Forte5 hasn't had the chance to expand like some of its rivals and feels like it's competing with the last generation of five-door hatchbacks in terms of rear seat room which is a little tight for adults.



Engine/Transmission

The base LX and our EX tester both come standard with a 2.0 liter inline-four that produces 156 horsepower and 144 lb-ft of torque. This little mill is down seventeen horsepower from the next level SX trim, but the power is enough to get the job done, especially in town. From a standstill and at in-town speeds, the EX feels zippy and eager to go. Once you get onto the highway and urge it to pick up speed through the on-ramp the power is less obvious, making you push your foot further to the floor to accelerate at a reasonable pace.

New for 2011, the Forte5 replaces the previous 4 and 5-speed automatics with a new 6-speed automatic transmission, optional in the EX. Our tester was fitted with this transmission which also has a Steptronic manual mode.



Handling

This one came out of left field; the Kia Forte5 has a few tricks up its sleeve when it comes to maneuverability. We certainly weren't expecting the Kia hatch to be a corner-carver, but it had an air of agility that was surprising; the Forte5 felt light on its feet and always alert to your steering inputs. Over bigger bumps the suspension got a bit unsettled and bounced around, so we'd definitely recommend checking out the Forte5 SX if this bothers you.

Fuel Economy

The Kia Forte5 manages to squeeze in under that magic 3,000 lb mark for compact cars, and with the 2.0L I4 motivating it up to speed, Kia says it will do it all while using only 8.0/5.5 liters per 100 kilometers. However, back in reality, we've come back with a week's worth of driving and discovered that our best efforts resulted in 8.4 L/100 km. This was accomplished with a fairly even split of city and highway driving. The ECO light on the dash is supposed to motivate you to drive more efficiently in order to keep the light on more often, but this exercise mainly serves to annoy drivers behind you.

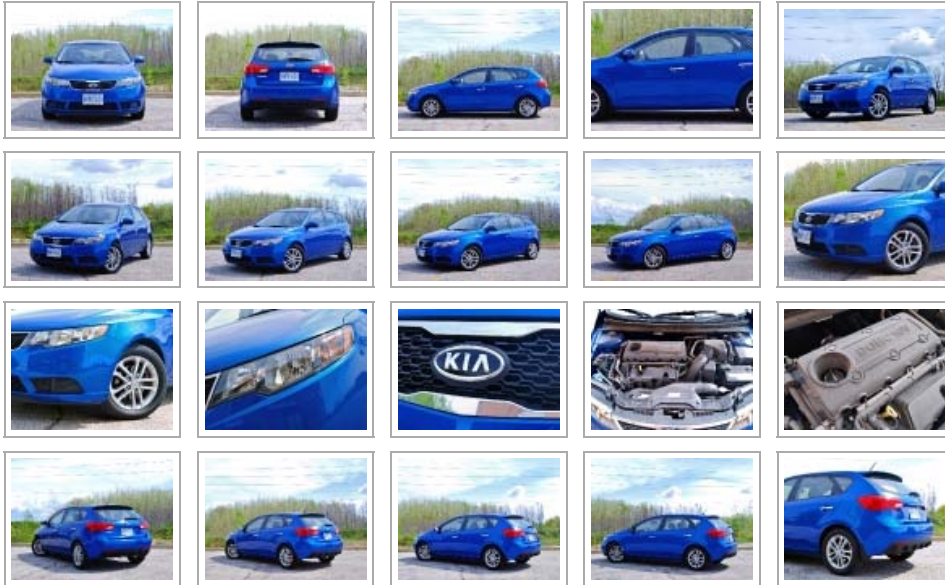


Value

When manufacturers are turning around new and refreshed models and faster rates every year, it's hard to stay current, and even a year seems long enough to take away the newness of a capable vehicle. Once we got some seat time, the Forte5 pleasantly surprised us with its quick handling, roomy and well-optioned interior, and affordable price. If you're in the market for a 5-door hatchback, the Forte5 certainly merits a look before you purchase.

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We Like..

- Great, agile steering feel
- Premium switchgear
- Competitively priced

We don't like..

- Styling already feels dated
- Plastic/rubber steering wheel

Base MSRP – \$21,295

Options – \$150

Destination Charge - \$1,455

Other Taxes & Levies – \$100

Total MSRP – \$23,000

Options on Tester

Colour Charge – \$150

*Chuck Reimer for **Auto Addiction**©*