

Tucson takes to new heights

In the highly competitive small-utility class, automakers are practically obligated to frequently make over these models. That certainly applies to **Hyundai**, which, according to well-placed sources, will introduce a significantly updated **Tucson** in 2019 as a 2020 model.



If Hyundai's redesign follows through, this 2018 Tucson will get "squarer."

Physically, the compact wagon will receive similar sheetmetal to the all-new 2019 Santa Fe that launches later this year. The Tucson's cabin will also see significant change, including a tablet-style touch-screen perched above (and not within) the dashboard. You can also expect suspension changes aimed at smoothing out the vehicle's somewhat choppy ride. Although there's no specific word on powertrains, the Tucson's non-turbo and turbocharged four-cylinder engines are likely to carry over.

The 2019 Nissan Altima will be available in all-wheel-drive.



Altima shakes it up with AWD

A lot of people were caught off guard with the news that the **2019 Nissan Altima** sedan will offer **all-wheel-drive**. None of the Altima's immediate competitors are equipped with this increasingly must-have feature. It's no secret that sedan sales have fallen off in recent years. Industry gospel had it that buyers were migrating to smaller SUVs and crossovers because of any number of reasons, such as wanting to "sit higher up off the road" and, most presciently in this case, the desire to "get around in the winter." Nissan's latest move addresses that last concern, and just might be what was lacking from the sedan market. While there are four-doors with an AWD option (Subarus, Ford Fusion, Buick LaCrosse and various luxury models), Altima is among the more affordable offerings. Kudos to Nissan for one-upping the competition and being able to keep it a complete secret for so long in the industry. And expect to see others scrambling to play catch up.



This self-driving Ford Focus will actually have a driver when delivering pizzas.

Ford's self-driving pizza delivery cars

Ford announced that it will be partnering with **Domino's** pizza chain to begin testing a self-driving pizza delivery vehicle in the Miami area.

Before misanthropes rejoice about another opportunity to avoid human interaction, we repeat, this is only a test.

Unlike recent fully driverless vehicles being tested out on public roads recently, the Ford Focus will have fully autonomous driving ability — and the sedans made to look like there's no driver — but there will be a human manning the vehicle.



The two-month pilot period is meant as an opportunity for both companies to study human interaction with the (seemingly) driverless vehicle. Ford and Domino's recently completed another collaboration on pizza delivery in Michigan, where both companies are headquartered.

Moreover, Ford is keen to remain ahead of the curve on self-driving cars and their various applications. And while Uber has temporarily suspended its autonomous testing after one of its self-driving Volvo SUVs struck and killed a pedestrian in Tempe, Arizona, the deployment of autonomous transportation on American roadways is expected to continue.



The updated RAV4 looks a little tougher and is also a little bigger than before.

If you like the Tacoma or 4Runner, you might actually love the 2019 RAV4

Toyota's recently unveiled 2019 compact utility vehicle is more aggressive looking and is also longer and wider. The distance between the front and rear wheels has also been extended. The changes will likely appeal to most RAV-ers who will no doubt revel in the vehicle's tougher appearance. The off-road-style blacked out lower body trim also adds to the effect. Beneath the hood sits a 2.5-liter four-cylinder that connects to an eight-speed automatic transmission, although hybrid models get a continuously variable unit. A new all-wheel-drive system can shift torque to the outside rear in a turn to help the vehicle yaw.

TEST DRIVE

2018 Kia Niro PHEV

Continued from page 1

rear) is tuned to an agreeably comfortable ride. While it's not designed to be a corner carver (and testing that theory reveals the grip limits of the mileage-minded tires), Niro PHEV feels fairly nimble, and its compact footprint makes it easy to maneuver and park.

Clever placement of the battery pack (under the rear seat and cargo floor) and a slightly smaller gas tank (1/2 gallon less) allow the hybrid Niro to maintain the same cargo capacity as the gas-only version. The range is 19.4 - 54.5 cubic-feet.

Niro's rear seatbacks fold flat forward, and the lift over height in back is manageably low. Looking at some other plug-in hybrids, that compares to 19.8 aft of the back seats in Toyota Prius Prime,

10.6 in Chevy Volt, 15.5 max in Honda Clarity and 23 cu. ft. in Niro's corporate cousin, the Hyundai Ioniq.

That space difference between Niro and Ioniq is reversed in the back seat, where the Kia offers 37.4 inches of rear leg room, compared to 35.7 inches in Ioniq, 34.7 inches in Volt, 33.4 inches in Prius Prime and 36.2 inches in Clarity. A little goes a long way when it comes to leg room, and Niro's layout allows you to carry six footers in both rows — more than can be said for some segment competitors.

Small item storage space in the cabin is modest. Driver visibility is generally good. Rear 3/4 blind spots argue for blind spot monitoring and rear cross traffic alert, both of which are standard on EX and EX Premium, but not available on



With a 7-inch display screen, Kia's UVO3 infotainment system includes voice recognition and is compatible with Android Auto and Apple CarPlay.

LX. Other onboard safety tech standard on top-level EX Premium models include Smart Cruise Control, Lane Keep Assist, Forward Collision Warning and Autonomous Emergency Braking. Soft touch points inside aren't especially soft and the abundance of hard plastic interior trim looks — especially in lighter colors — and feels out of place on top trim models, which can crest \$35,000. Most functions are managed by either a mid-dash deck of buttons and knobs or the 7-inch touchscreen (EX) just above.

Kia's UVO3 infotainment system includes voice recognition and is compatible with Android Auto and Apple CarPlay. The 7-inch display is an easy read, though the capacitive touchscreen isn't responsive to input from a winter gloved hand. Top trim models add a harmon-kardon surround sound system which is a nice upgrade over the base unit.

At some point in the future, it's likely that the network of recharging stations across the nation will flesh out to the point that EVs will be a practical choice of transportation, most anywhere in the country.

Until then, map gaps in charger coverage will — along with range anxiety — temper the growth of the breed. PHEVs sidestep the grid issue. You can run on gas anytime and anywhere you want. And when there's a place to plug-in, you can charge up and take a time-out from fossil fuels. The option of running on gas or electric power makes plug-in hybrids the most versatile (and desirable) of all alternate fuel vehicles.

A regular contributor to the Times Union for more than 25 years, Dan Lyons is the award-winning author of six books, and photographer of 180 calendars.

