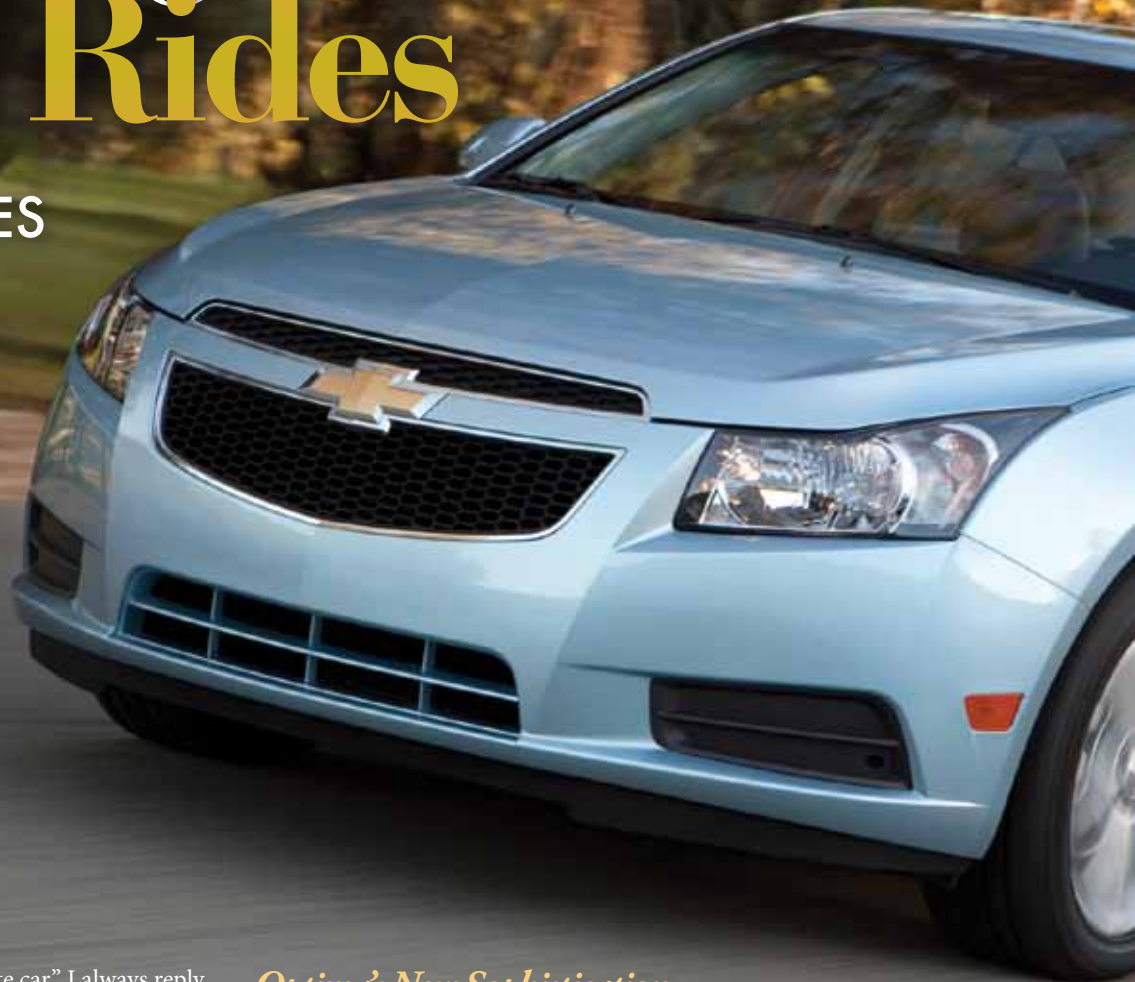


Falling for Fun New Rides

FALL FAVORITES
PERFECT FOR
YOUR FAMILY
AND YOUR
WALLET

Written by Don Armstrong



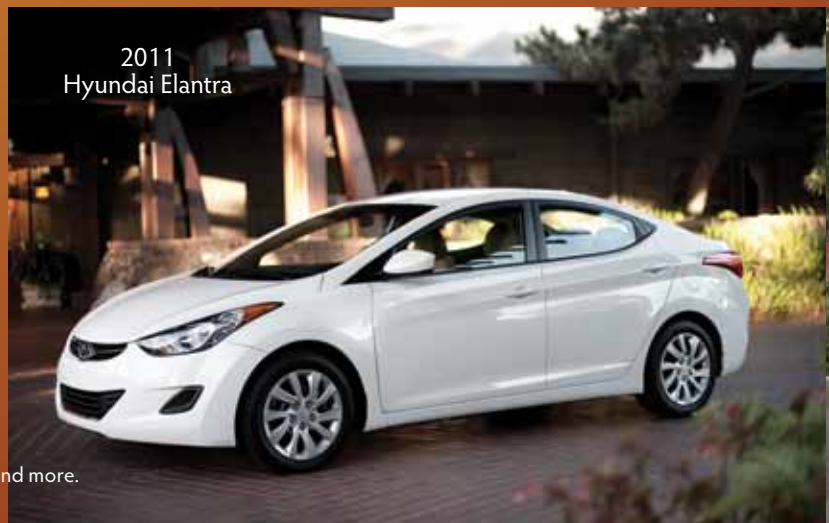
When folks ask, "What's your favorite car," I always reply, "What kind of vehicle, in what price range?" Outside of exotics, there are usually more than one or two in every category of vehicle on the market. My favorites, hands down, are those that offer Katy families the most for their money. We selected a few sedans that will pique the interest and fit the budget of any Katy car shopper looking for a crisp new autumn ride.

Optima's New Sophistication

Although Kia may have been known for... well, uh... a great warranty, styling was pretty much from the town of Dullsville. Welcome the 2011 Optima, Kia's point of light in an almost completely redesigned lineup that has sparked new interest in the brand. One of the most compelling reasons for increased showroom traffic is Optima's bodywork. From the new corporate-look grille,



2011
Kia Optima



2011
Hyundai Elantra



2011
Chevrolet Cruze



2011
Toyota Corolla

sleek, composite headlights, and blacked-out lower valance with large, incorporated fog lamps, the car has an overall pricier, more sophisticated look. The interior didn't escape the designer's attention, either. Layout is driver-friendly, and even though there is an abundance of plastic utilized on the dash, it tends to disappear with the extensive use of color and incorporation with the center stack.

There are four trim levels, ranging from the base LX model, priced at \$18,995 before options, to the full-tilt SX, which starts at \$24,995. Whether you choose the standard four-cylinder, 200-horsepower engine that gets a 24/35 mileage rating or the hopped-up, 274-horsepower turbo, you'll have to decide if the price difference is worth it.

Elantra's Fluidic Sculpture Design

Yes, Hyundai owns Kia and although the two companies occasionally share parts – and profits – the marriage ends there. The fifth generation 2011 Elantra is a new-from-the-ground-up sedan that exemplifies what Hyundai calls a fluidic sculpture design. And we have to agree that this is one slick car that lives up to the nomenclature.

The interior ranks among the best in the business, with a striking, aluminum-look center stack that is beautifully integrated into the sculpted dash and door panels. The Elantra comes in two trim levels: the GLS and Limited. Each has a partial zero emissions engine option. It is equipped with a 1.8-liter, I-4 that gets 29 miles per gallon city and 40 miles per gallon highway, with either a six-speed automatic or manual transmission. Options are limited depending on trim level, but yes, GPS and a loud sound system are among a few of the choices. The EPA classifies the Elantra as a mid-size, but its compact nature and price point with other compacts may have you wondering about the government's criteria. Pricing starts at \$15,195.

Cruze's New Sleek Look

Whether you're headed out for a weekend festival in the Hill Country or an everyday commute downtown, fuel price volatility still ranks among the top concerns when buying a new car. The Chevy Cruze is not only one of our top picks, but comes in as one of our favorites in the competitive world of affordable compact sedans. The high-mileage Eco version adds another notch in the old pump nozzle.

Many of the Cruze's exterior styling cues are borrowed from Chevy's popular Malibu. Smooth, wind-cheating bodywork is modern, yet conservative enough to attract a wide range of buyers. We think the Cruze interior really shines, with soft-touch materials and a brilliantly executed, dual-cockpit design layout. Yes, GM can still turn heads and impress when it wants to, and this is a perfect example. Power is derived from a 1.8-liter, I-4 engine that delivers 136-horsepower to the front wheels and gets 22 miles per gallon city and 35 miles per gallon highway. The optional Eco model returns 28 miles per gallon city and 42 miles per gallon highway. Beginning at \$16,525, the Chevrolet Cruze should be at the top of your shopping list. **KM**

DON ARMSTRONG'S knowledge and lifelong love affair with motorsports has earned him the reputation of being one of the area's most respected automotive journalists. He's a member of the Texas Auto Writer's Association.

More Affordable Autumn Autos

Ford Focus

The 2012 Focus is all things the outgoing model wasn't. Here is a world-class compact that hits home with young and old alike. The hatchback model is outselling the sedan. Here's a must-drive that starts at \$16,500.



Toyota Corolla

Despite a natural disaster in Japan and ever-mounting competition in a crowded segment, the Corolla still sells, although not as much as it used to. Dependability is its strong suit. Pricing begins at \$15,900.

VW Jetta

German engineering and quality don't have to cost a fortune, and the Jetta proves it. With no fewer than seven variants to choose from, there may be a VW in your future. Starting at \$15,365, it's certainly worth a test drive.



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