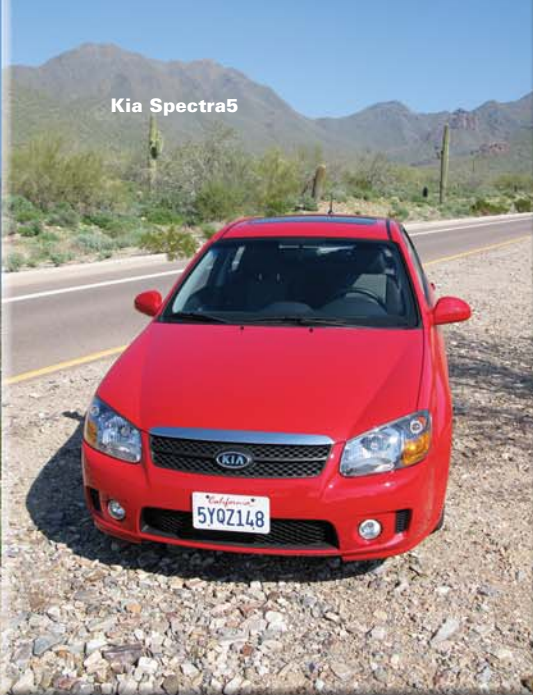


Dos Kias

Poco y pocito

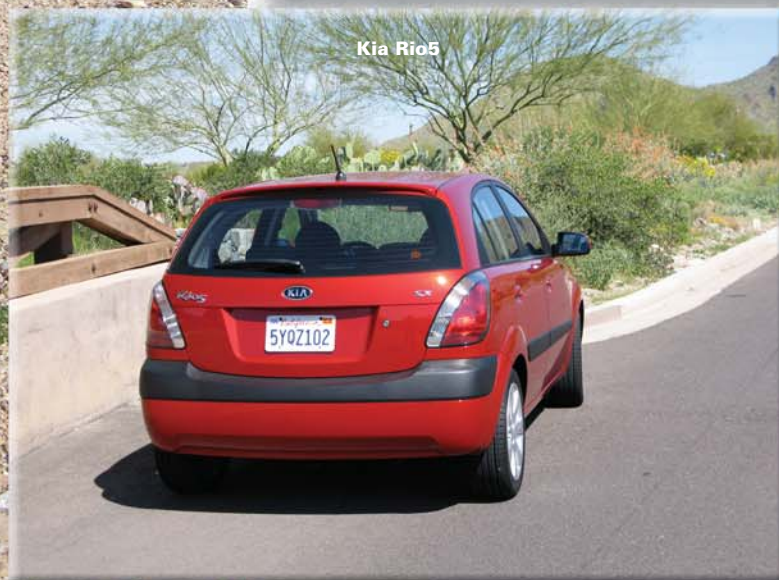
Kia Spectra5



Kia Spectra5



Kia Rio5



Kia Rio5

Economy in a vehicle comes in at least three basic forms: purchase price, fuel economy and a combination of reliability, maintenance and service costs.

With any Kia, service and reliability are well covered by their universal 10-year 100,000-mile warranty.

The Kia Rio starts at \$11,515, and our test Rio5 stickered at \$15,615. The Kia Spectra starts at \$13,520, and our test Spectra5 stickered at \$18,020, so both are on the affordable side, by a margin.

And fuel economy is in the 30-and-up range, highway (and city, too, for the Rio5). At close to \$4/gallon, gas prices have caught everyone's attention. If you can trade in your 15mpg ride for a 30mpg new car, you're effectively changing your gas price back to \$2/gallon overnight. (Conversely, if you trade your 24mpg car for a 12mpg heavy-weight, you are effectively suddenly paying \$8/gallon overnight.)

Saving at the pump has traditionally meant two things to most people: lower quality or smaller size. Many people will agree that it's almost impossible to buy a low-quality car anymore, and we refer you again to the confidence expressed by Kia's generous warranty plan. Smaller size is a preferred choice to some, a compromise to others, and a never-ever (so far) to yet others. Small size also sometimes means a 3-door or 5-door hatchback, and whereas the utility of this layout is great, hatchbacks have traditionally not sold well in the US. This is starting to change, not just due to fuel prices, but also due to the positive reception afforded to such vehicles as the MINI, Audi A3, VW GTI and others.

This is almost a Goldilocks comparison, except there is no Papa Bear in this set. We received a Kia Spectra5 5-door hatchback and a Kia Rio5 5-door hatchback just a couple of weeks apart, so it's pretty much impossible to think about one without thinking about the other. But in many ways, though one is officially midsize, they strike us as two options toward the same solution—smallish and economical to buy, to own and to operate.

You get plenty of bang for your buck with either. The Rio SX has standard alloy wheels, body-color rear spoiler and available front fog lights outside, and a decent audio system and power everything inside. Rio comes standard with class-leading safety features, including six airbags, impact-absorbing steering column, front and rear crumple zones and side-impact door beams.

And the Spectra's standard features include class-leading interior space, an AM/FM/CD audio system with six speakers and an auxiliary MP3 inputs. Its 2.0-liter engine puts out 138 hp—more than competitors like Toyota Corolla. Spectra has earned a five-star crash safety rating in NHTSA frontal driver and passenger crash tests.

So how do you pick one? Well, you could go to www.kiamatch.com, enter some of your personal and fun preferences, and the site will tell you which model they think you belong in (though it could be something else from their lineup). Complete specs and pricing are available at the site, too. Or you can just go try them both on for size. Our impression, receiving the Spectra5 first, was that it's a fairly small car, anyway, so we waited with anticipation to see how the even smaller Rio5 would compare. We wish we'd had them both at the same time, as all in all we found they both filled the bill fairly equally. You may find more important differences, depending on your family size, your personal legroom and headroom needs (we're over six feet tall and had no problem with either) or your general response to the individual feature sets.

Beyond that, we came back to one thought. No, it's not a Goldilocks comparison. It's more like buying a laptop computer. If you want it to be more like your office desktop, you'll go as big as you can. If you think portability is most important, you'll but a notebook. The positioning of these two equally likeable small cars relative to each other and relative to your prior experiences and new expectations struck as as being a very similar drill. ■

