

Offbeat yet straightforward

By Joe Sage



We hopped into the Kia Soul straight out of a vehicle that cost over \$123,000 (\$100,000 more than the Soul). We probably could have guessed before we even got in, but we found the Soul refreshing.

You might expect the Soul to be outfitted more sparsely than that premium car. It did have keyless entry, but lacked power seats, though the mechanical adjustment was quick, and it did have power mirrors. We put the Soul in reverse, slid out of our driveway and hit the road. The audio interface was friendlier and more useful than the expensive car, and once again the Infinity audio quality was much better. Zipping down the boulevard, our Soul made that overfeatured pricey vehicle feel like somebody's science project. The Soul is much more straightforward, and we appreciated that.

Our Soul was, in fact, top of the line. In keeping with Kia's simple lineup approach, there are three models: Base, "+" (Plus) and "!" (Exclaim). Our Exclaim included the only remaining available package at that level, Premium, plus a few individual options (see sidebar). A few others available include cargo liner, rear spoiler and wheel locks.

Among the three levels of Kia Soul, many specifications are the same. The primary variables are engines, wheels and transmissions. The Base has a 130-hp 1.6-liter four, while the Plus and Exclaim share a 164-hp 2.0-liter. We found the 2.0L just fine for both neighborhood and highway driving—in fact we noted being able to blow right by many a tight spot on the freeway—but slightly underpowered for a power turn in tight surface traffic. The Exclaim comes with six-speed automatic only; the other two offer that or a six-speed manual. To get the bigger engine, we would hope to move up at least from Base to Plus (a bump of \$2300 with manual or \$1500 with automatic transmission). For a stick-shifting fan, the middle model Plus is the obvious choice—fun to shift, costs less to buy and gets better fuel mileage, too. Wheels bump up an inch with each model—16/17/18. The best news is that the turning circle remains the same.

Kia has fun with their paint names, such as Molten, Shadow or Alien—the distinctive green of our test car. Most interiors are cloth—not country-club fare, perhaps, but kids-and-picnic or youth-and-party ready. For the nightclub set, the Premium package includes leather trim.

At our first stoplight, we pulled up next to a full-length GMC Yukon XL Denali. But as the light turned green, and the Denali sped off, we saw a Nissan Cube to our rear, a Scion xB next to us, a MINI up next, a classic little Nissan B210, a BMW Z4 and then another Scion xB. Small, small, small. We fit right in, after all. Despite its funky flavor and offbeat styling, we quickly found the Soul to be a fairly mainstream item, ubiquitous in traffic.



The Soul provides many pleasure points: cantilevered headlights that carry the hood's gap across from the tiger nose grille; an echo of that tiger nose deep inside the headlight itself; or the perforated "Soul" logos in the seats. The Soul's mood ring lighting on the door panels has settings that create various effects based on the music and your emotional choice of the moment.

The Soul handles tight spaces or a boulevard U-turn just fine, with a 34.8-foot turning circle that beats even a MINI (at 35.1).

Over-the-shoulder lane-changing visibility was noted as good. Between rising beltlines and huge C-pillars in many vehicles, this is often not the case. Specifically in the Soul, there is only a very small light opening back there, so either our experience was purely perceptual or that small detail actually makes a difference.

We dabbled a bit with the Eco mode, noting that the imperceptible change going into Eco mode is about the same as the almost imperceptible change coming out of Eco mode.

We did experience slight torque steer, and the suspension is nothing fancy: we could definitely feel speed bumps, and changing lanes over Botts dots could even have an impact. Somehow, it all fits in with the fun-filled character that brings you to the Soul in the first place.

There were times the Soul could make us feel as though we should be 17 years old, but are not. So it's a great fit for a younger customer, as originally intended. Yet the sheer volume of Souls we saw on the roads make it clear that the market is broad and deep for this fun, useful and well-outfitted car. It could be on the list of any shopper. ■

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE.....	2.0L DOHC CVT 4-cylinder
TRANSMISSION.....	6-speed automatic
HP/TORQUE.....	164 hp / 151 lb-ft
MPG (EST).....	24/29/26 (M/T) 23/28/25 (A/T)
WHEELS/TIRES.....	18x7.5 / 235/45R18
DRIVETRAIN.....	FWD
BRAKES (DISC FR/R).....	11.0 vented / 10.3 solid
SEATING.....	5-passenger
HEADROOM (FR/R).....	39.6 / 39.5 in
LEGROOM (FR/R).....	42.9 / 39.1 in
CARGO.....	24.2 cu.ft. (19.6 w/ under tray)
TURNING CIRCLE.....	34.8 ft
WEIGHT.....	2714-2879 lb
FUEL TANK.....	14.2 gal
BASE PRICE.....	\$19,900

INCLUDES: Electric power steering, alloy wheels, airbags (front/side/curtain), ABS, traction control, ESC and VSM, hill-start assist, power windows/locks, AM/FM/CD/MP3 Infinity audio, UVO w/rear camera, Sirius, USB/aux inputs, A/C, 60/40 split rear seats, keyless entry, leather-wrap wheel and shift, steering wheel audio controls, floor mats, power tilt/slide sunroof, auto headlamps, fog lights, LED lights, heated mirrors with signal indicators, privacy glass.

WARRANTY: 10 yr / 100,000 miles powertrain, 5 yr / 60,000 mile basic + roadside assist

PREMIUM PACKAGE: Nav w/Sirius Traffic, push-button start, leather seat trim, heated front seats, auto climate.....\$2500

- Rear bumper applique.....\$75
- Cargo net.....\$50
- EC mirror w/compass.....\$275
- DESTINATION.....\$775

TOTAL.....\$23,575