

Massively successful By Joe Sage

Four years of huge popularity on the highways of America have made the Kia Soul an acknowledged catalyst for the brand's rapid growth and success overall. In fact, its very first year did that. It took little time for Kia to start to refer to everything from product to business itself in terms of "after Soul" versus before.

We've all been exposed to the challenge and reactions that come with efforts to update a so-called icon—whether Jeep, Beetle, Mustang, Corvette—and the Kia Soul has tackled that in this, its second generation.

We attended the new model's launch event a few months back, in Minnesota and Wisconsin, at the time asking (and answering) the question: "Could they completely redesign it without losing its flavor and, well, soul? Well, yes."

Our initial positive response was reinforced as we spent another week with the handy little machine recently here in Arizona. It starts with the restyling. There is no mistaking this as a Kia Soul—but, at the same time, it has been extensively redone. Vehicle dimensions are different overall—longer, lower and wider. Front and rear fascias are considerably reworked, one quick way to spot the new model. Quickest of all is to check out the liftgate in back, which is now integrated into

the shape of the high taillights, for a more active and even elegant stance, in retrospect making the prior hatch look like an appliance door. Up front, the headlights no longer have their lower signal portion recessed below a cantilevered main lens. Four or five months into the new model, we confirm that Kia has successfully taken 100 percent of the winning spirit and style of the original and evolved it to be 100 percent cooler.

There is a catalog of changes beneath the skin—including new body structure, sound insulation, suspension, steering, instruments, the works.

Our Plus model ("+" in official parlance) started at just \$18,200 and barely scratched the mid-20s, fully equipped. The base Soul—with a 130-hp 1.6-liter engine—starts at \$14,900, with Bluetooth, SiriusXM and four-wheel disc brakes. The Plus adds 17-inch wheels, keyless entry, cruise control, and gets one less MPG around town, but actually gets one *more* on the highway, from its 164-hp 2-liter engine. Top model is the Exclaim ("!") at \$20,300, adding power folding mirrors, LED taillights and front marker lights, plus UVO eServices. Our Kia Soul Plus seems to be at a good balance point, although once fully outfitted, the total for an Exclaim—which already has some Plus options—can be kept pretty close to that of the Plus. ■

Originally aimed at younger buyers, the Kia Soul quickly exploded to be popular with older empty-nesters and everybody in between—and it has remained so.

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE2.0L GDI 4-cylinder
 POWER164 hp, 151 lb-ft torque
 TRANSMISSION6-spd auto, active Eco
 DRIVETRAINfront-wheel drive
 MPG23/31/26 (city/hwy/comb)
INCLUDED: 17" alloy wheels, AC, power windows/locks, bluetooth, 60/40 rear seats, remote keyless entry, cruise, tilt/telescope, wheel-mounted audio controls, trip computer, cargo cover, heated mirrors w/ signals, 10 year/10,000 mile powertrain warranty, 5/60,000 basic warranty.

BASE PRICE\$18,200
AUDIO PACKAGE: incl automatic climate control, nav w/ 8" screen, Infinity audio and distinctive speaker lights1400
PRIMO PACKAGE: pano sunroof w/ power sunshade, fog lights, pushbutton start, leather seat trim, power driver's seat, heated/vented front seats, heated main rear seats and more3000
UVO W/ eSERVICES: incl rear camera and auto on/off headlights500
CARPETED FLOORMATS:115
DESTINATION CHARGE:795
TOTAL\$24,010



LOGBOOK NOTES

The rear camera is vividly clear, sharp and colorful, covering an effective wide angle.

The test car came with no owner's manual, but within a day or so we realized how many things we had set up, modified or fine-tuned to our taste without it. The whole thing is intuitive. Nobody gets 100 percent, but you can still get a solid "A," and they do.