

TRANSFORMATIVE

BY
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SAGE

This car looks comfortably familiar, yet under its skin it's quite new and exciting. You know the Kia Soul by heart—it's a runaway success, selling by the boatload since it arrived in 2009, while transforming American perceptions of the whole Kia brand. But much as a familiar body shell can conceal thunderous magic on a specialized race car, Kia has taken the body and cabin of the Soul and built something completely new within—their first electric vehicle. It's a neat move on Kia's part, using an outer layer of the familiar to make it a whole lot easier to dip a toe into unfamiliar waters. Though almost imperceptibly transformed, the result is transformative.

The Soul EV is not yet sold in Arizona. The car was first put on sale in California, at particular certified dealers with special training and specific service equipment. But no sooner had we driven this sample in Arizona, than they announced Soul EV sales expanding to Oregon, Washington, Texas, Georgia and Hawaii—states already demonstrating strong EV interest. Bearing in mind

Arizona and California were the only two states receiving GM's EV1 20 years ago, we hope to see our state added to the sales map any time now.

The vehicle needs no special care and feeding, which made it no problem for us to have one early. A simple one-touch panel up front slides open to reveal two standard charging ports. One is a common J1772 port; with this, a supplied cable connects to regular 120v or 240v household current (Level 1 and Level 2 charging, respectively), charging the car completely in 4-5 hours with 240v or 24 hours with 120v. The other is a 480v CHAdeMo DC fast-charging port, which works with a special 50 kW fast charger to do the job in just 33 minutes.

We plugged in overnight twice during our week, never because we had to—once with range still at about a third, once at about half. But it's an utterly simple plug-unplug process akin to the routine way you might top off your phone while at your desk.

We calculated costs, using kilowatt-hours, different voltage options, amps, Phoenix electricity rates and Kia's stated recharging times. At resi-

dential rates, a full 93-mile charge costs about \$4. Commercial rates are lower, so a full charge at work is about \$3.50 or less. If you work at a site with industrial rates, we calculate \$2.55 with 240v. A 28 MPG car at \$3/gallon costs \$10 for the same 93 miles. If you can grab some free juice at work or other stops, you save even more.

Markets, malls and movies are all starting to sprout free charging stations. Or you can hit a 110v commercial spot at 4¢/minute. That adds up to \$5 for 20 miles' worth, on a par with \$5/gallon gas in a 20 MPG vehicle, but higher than today's \$3 gas prices and 30-40 MPG cars. Nonetheless, these are a great convenience in a pinch.

We didn't have any pinches. Another impressive thing about the Kia Soul EV: its estimated range meter hit precisely on the nose for us. Its advanced lithium ion polymer battery holds its charge for a long time, and very consistently. Whether draining or refilling, the readout was dead accurate. Forget range anxiety. The math is simple, and the systems may help you more than any gas gauge ever did.

We've had good drive experiences with EVs in general. Between silence and power—electric vehicles have 100 percent of their torque from the

moment you touch the pedal—it takes no time to start thinking you must have the coolest thing on the road. The chassis is well balanced, and suspension felt strong and smooth, even on speed bumps.

A "B" mode involves regenerative brake power to a greater degree, to extend range a bit, but we were enjoying the car's power, smooth acceleration and cornering too much to want to try that.

But we finally did. We could feel a drag, which is to be expected and is why it's an optional mode. In the right mindset, though, we could feel like a surfer harnessing the power of a wave and just riding along with increased efficiency.

The Kia Soul EV blends with the crowd, though with its special badging, body panel grille area, and two-tone paint schemes unique to the model—Caribbean Blue with a white roof, like ours here, or black with a red roof—the cognoscenti will spot you. Soul EV is also available in grey or white.

Every detail is optimized for EV efficiency. Aerodynamics are applied in places large and small. Aero wheels cap off tires that are developed exclusively for Kia and found on no other vehicle, with low rolling resistance and other range-extending attributes over variable conditions.

The car has an appropriate mix of manual and power features, all of which makes sense—some conserving power, some utilizing all the electricity

at hand. The rear liftgate is manual—hugely welcome after battling any number of power and pneumatic versions. Seat and steering wheel adjustments are manual—things you access seldom, so why waste the juice? Yet those same seats are heated—in our Plus trim also ventilated and the rear seats also heated. AC works just fine. (We haven't run it on a 120-degree day yet; but it's an electronic system tested in the hottest conditions.)

The interior is a gem. Kia has not gone overboard with controls, interfaces and readouts, as many alternative drivetrain vehicles do. We appreciated its simple interface and controls—a simple meter and some easy gauge information to see your range, no more distracting than a gas gauge.

Our sample was the higher of two trims, the Plus ("+")—two grand well spent (see sidebar). Options are few. The purchase process is painless.

Everybody loves the Kia Soul—a great package with economical purchase and operating costs, nice command of the road, clean and effective controls, plenty of room for people and gear, styling that is cutting edge yet comfortable. Kia nailed all this from the get-go. Add to this all the economies and general future-preparedness of an EV, and you have a vehicle that anybody who is remotely thinking of shopping for should try on for size as soon as it's available to us here, if not sooner. ■

SPECIFICATIONS

MOTOR.....109hp (81.4kW) AC synchr. elec
TRANSMISSION.....1-speed gear reduction
BATTERY.....27kWh lithium ion polymer
TORQUE.....210 lb-ft
DRIVETRAIN.....FWD
WHEELS/TIRES.....16" alloy, 6.5Jx16
TURNING CIRCLE.....34.8 ft
WEIGHT.....3289 lb
MAXIMUM SPEED.....90 mph
RANGE (EPA EST).....93 miles
MPGe.....120 hwy / 92 city / 105 comb

INCLUDED: Electronically powered AC and heat-pump HVAC, 3.5" OLED cluster, nav w/ 8" display, UVO EV services, SiriusXM, USB/aux/Bluetooth, EV charging station locator, energy usage monitor, 2-level heated front seats, 60/40 split rear seat, keyless start, tilt/tele wheel, rear camera, ABS, brake assist, stability control, stability management, park assist

PLUS ("+") MODEL ADDS: Aero wipers, projection foglights, power fold mirrors, electrochromatic rear mirror, luggage net, cargo screen, 12V cargo outlet, leather seat trim, leatherette cluster and door trim, 3-level heated front seats, vented front seats, heated outboard rear seats, passenger side tray. (Price diff \$2,000.)

WARRANTY:
 Powertrain.....10 yrs / 100,000 miles
 Battery.....10 yrs / 100,000 miles
 Basic warranty.....5 yrs / 60,000 miles
 Roadside assistance...5 yrs / 60,000 miles

BASE PRICE ("+" model).....\$35,700
CARPETED FLOORMATS.....125
DESTINATION CHARGE.....800
TOTAL.....\$36,625

Features that distinguish the Soul EV from its gasoline sibling are simple, refined, complete, unobtrusive, attractive and well executed. As for gas pumps, no need to ever go there again—maybe for soda and chips.

