The 2020 Kia Soul—the boar with a backpack busts a move

Enlarge / How appropriate that we found an yeti on a day it snowed in Southern California.
Jonathan Gitlin

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Although we make every effort to cover our own travel costs, in this case Kia flew me to San Diego (where it was very cold and sometimes snowy) to drive the Soul, and provided two nights in a hotel.

When the first Kia Soul arrived in 2005, the boxy hatchback look was definitely a thing. A decade and a half later, neither the Nissan Cube nor Scion xB are around, but the Soul soldiers on as the last toaster on wheels. Except, a toaster wasn't actually the inspiration for the styling. No, it's considerably weirder than that—the car is meant to represent a boar wearing a backpack. (It's OK, I'll just let that one sit with you for a bit.)

I don't ever remember spending time in the first generation Kia Soul, but I have had a more recent one as a rental car on occasion. Whether you want to call it a hatchback or a crossover, it was actually pretty good at being an affordable, utilitarian transport. It could even be pretty fun to drive, provided you concentrated on keeping up your momentum up. So I was looking forward to trying out the new, third-generation Soul, particularly since the route we'd be using involved some rather good roads in eastern San Diego County.

It’s an all-new Kia Soul design for model year 2020. The shape is unmistakable, but there are a few clues to tell it apart. Up front, Kia’s “tiger nose” has moved down to the big lower grille, which helps emphasize the new, squinting LED headlights. The taillight clusters are a three-dimensional boomerang-shape that wraps around the body, each aimed at a rear wheel. Where the old car had curves, the new one has panel-spanning creases and some other styling tricks that help break up some of the new Soul’s visual mass. Whether that works depends on the trim level and the eye of the beholder. By the tape measure, at 165.2 inches (4,196mm) it is 2.2 inches (56mm) longer now, with 1.2 inches (30mm) of that in the wheelbase. (Width and height remain the same at 70.9 inches/1,800mm and 63.0 inches/1,600mm.) On the other hand, it does weigh a bit less—curb weights range from 2,802lbs-3,036lbs (1,271kg-1,377kg) between 82lbs-196lbs (37kg-89kg) lighter, again depending on trim.

- The taillights are 3D boomerang shapes that wrap around the sides.
  Jonathan Gitlin
- The creases and the narrow headlights give the car a more purposeful stance.
  Jonathan Gitlin
- The 1.6L turbo GT-Line is more of a hot hatch than a crossover.
  Jonathan Gitlin
- Where the old Soul was all curves, the new one is sharp creases.
  Jonathan Gitlin
- the 1.6 Turbo features LED taillights. All Souls have a “floating” C pillar. It’s probably my least-favorite design trend of the last decade, but it’s getting ever more common as cars get bigger and bigger.
  Jonathan Gitlin
- Those new squinty LED headlights.

Jonathan Gitlin

- The GT-Line gets this 3D pattern in its grille.
  Jonathan Gitlin
- The X-Line interior is sturdy but functional.
- The back seats get 38.8-inches (986mm) of leg room.
- These light panels can change color, but I couldn’t find the setting to make that happen. :(
  Jonathan Gitlin
- Kia’s photographers could, so here’s what it looks like when it’s red.
- Most Souls come with a 7-inch touchscreen infotainment system. It’s not bad.
- The GT-Line gets a sportier interior, with a 10.25-inch touchscreen, satellite radio, and wireless charging.
- The 10.25-inch touchscreen in action.
  Jonathan Gitlin
- GT-Line trim means a leather shift lever gaiter.
- The turbo gets a centerline exhaust.
- The biggest improvement on the old car is in cargo volume.

The main benefit of that growth spurt is a lot more cargo capacity—28 percent more at 24.2 cubic feet (685L). Otherwise, the inside remains about the same size, although you sit a little higher up than before. It’s a pretty funky cabin regardless of which trim leave you pick; Kia was referring to the music when it called the car Soul, and so the Soul boasts interior mood lighting that will pulse or change color in time to your tunes. I have to confess neither I nor my drive partner could work out how to engage this feature, which includes modes called “Hey! Yo!” And “Midnight City” among others, something I still regret. Kia’s infotainment system is one of the better ones out there, particularly at this end of the market. It comes with Apple CarPlay and Android Auto as standard.

Sadly, although a bright green Soul EV was parked in the hotel

lobby, that was as close as we'd get to the electric version: Kia says it's not quite ready to talk about or let us have a go in that one until later this summer. In the meantime, there's a choice of two four-cylinder engines. Most will get the naturally aspirated 2.0L. It makes 147hp (111kW) and 132lb-ft (179Nm) and can even come with a six-speed manual—though you're far more likely to encounter the "Intelligent Variable Transmission." It's a CVT, but just like always it's been programmed to feel like there are discrete gear ratios. Apparently people just won't buy cars that sit at a constant rpm while the cones or rubber bands inside do their thing, but it irks me the way that some people get irked by the fact that the original Chevy Volt could occasionally work as a parallel hybrid.

We tried one of these powertrains in an $21,490 X-Line-spec. This gets an "off-road inspired" look, as well as optional two-tone paint that fills in some of the shapes created by the aforementioned creases that really do help make the Soul look a little smaller. It rides well, soaking up road imperfections even on 18-inch wheels, and as before it can be a fun car to drive, although the pleasure comes from conserving your momentum rather than wringing the engine out. Hills, on the other hand, will wring the engine out whether you like it or not. With a bit less mass and the new CVT, the 2020 Soul's fuel economy gets a little bump, now rating at 27/33/30mpg city/highway/combined. That's better than some comparable crossovers (talking to you, Toyota C-HR), but worse than others (take a bow, Nissan Kicks), though if being as efficient as possible is your goal, you ought to be looking at the hybrid Kia Niro instead.

Enlarge / We’ll have to wait until later this summer to try out the Soul EV.
Jonathan Gitlin

(The manual is only available in LX trim, which means it’s the cheapest Soul at $17,490—a $1,000 increase MY2019. It’s also a bit less efficient than the CVT, at 25/31/27mpg city/highway/combined, and comes with no driver aids at all)

The other choice of engine is a turbocharged, direct-injection 1.6L, which only comes with a seven-speed dual-clutch transmission, and only in the GT-Line trim. It gives off a very different vibe, far more hot hatchback than crossover. The suspension has been retuned and the brakes are an inch bigger all round, to go with the the car’s 201hp (150kW) and 195lb-ft (264Nm). This Soul definitely wants to dance; the more powerful engine revs willingly and steering wheel paddle

shifts let you pick actual gears with the flick of a finger. Fair warning though: drive it hard and you won’t match the EPA-rated mileage (27/32/29mpg).

At $27,490, the 1.6L turbo is a lot more expensive than the rest of the range; in fact, it’s much closer in price and power output to something like a VW Golf GTI. But it comes loaded with equipment including a 10.25-inch touchscreen infotainment system, wireless phone charging, and a full ADAS suite (adaptive cruise, lane keeping, automatic emergency braking with pedestrian detection, blind spot monitors, and a heads-up display).

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