



# have your cake and eat it, too

The surprise we expected, and then some. The diminutive Kia Rio delivers a lot.

by Joe Sage



It's a running joke for us, to wonder whether the next car we review might be a Bentley or maybe a Kia Rio? Not to pick on the Rio in particular. Its name just rolls off the tongue easily. We will now be modifying that statement, as the Rio is one of our favorite vehicles of the year.

We knew we'd be receiving a Kia Rio SX and first anticipated the limited edition (500 copies) Rio SX M/T track-capable manual-shift hatchback. No dice. It was to be the more routine sedan with 6-speed Active Eco automatic.

We were surprised to find it stickered at over \$21,000. (We were ready to show this to a friend who is shopping in the 15-ish range.) But, from colors and textures, to joints and gaps, inside and out, fit and finish are spectacularly accurate—and attractive. And the car is very fully featured.

**Inside.** Begin with keyless entry and start. Starting brings up a great little screen, proof that bigger is not necessarily better, with a focused and clear interface—an advantage while driving. Instrumentation is top-notch, including high-end steering wheel-mounted controls. The Rio has power windows and locks, heated seats, Bluetooth, SiriusXM, a great backup camera—pretty much everything.

Ours didn't have automatic climate, so you get to set the fan and the temp, which is actually kind of refreshing. One of our few interface complaints was that if you want to turn the radio down while backing up, you can't—it won't allow you to touch the radio until "after cancelling the camera mode." And we had to reset our iPod to shuffle each time we got in. As for the audio itself, Kia always excels, and this affordable small car is no exception. As we've said before, some brands would charge as much as this whole car costs, just for an audio option this nice, with good, clear sound—we could hear each drum head, and it delivered some of the cleanest bass we've heard.

Reaching for an overhead light at night, we were happy to find a one-touch lens right where we expected it. Power to charge the phone was right where we reached. The inside temperature knob ranges from blue to red as many do, but has an illuminated red mark at its current position, an unusual and welcome feature. We give the Kia Rio a solid A-plus for intuitive ergonomics.

**Driving.** Within our first block or so of driving, the Circle K slogan popped into our heads: "what else do you need?" The Rio is a solid, well-built, well-appointed car, and in fact it doesn't actually feel too small. The rear seat is surprisingly big;

you could put four 20-somethings in the car with few complaints. We anticipated a surprisingly big trunk. We found it to be huge, with what seemed like the capacity of a mid-'60s Pontiac, just taller instead of deeper, though plenty deep.

The six-speed automatic hardly needed any babysitting, consistently performing as we needed it to, including during some typically aggressive Valley traffic challenges. When we wanted a little more rocket power, the manumatic was more than up to the task. Through various combinations of the automatic's eco options and the manumatic, we had total control and sufficient power at all times. And, unlike many brands (that charge a lot more for technology), the Rio's manumatic is pretty much idiot-proof: if you have it in manual but get distracted, it will shift for you anyway—so simple and so significant.

Anecdotally, we passed a cluster of other small cars on the 51 freeway and noted a combination of those who were holding everyone up, or those who were not holding their track well, and found ourselves thinking, "What's wrong there, buddy? The Kia Rio's doing just fine." The more we passed other small cars, the more we appreciated that this is a really outstanding one.

Just as we were feeling highly adequate in our little Kia, we found ourselves next to a classy blonde at a red light, casually noting the beltline of her beautiful black Mercedes. Well, okay, this car still falls short in the more stratospheric pecking order. But wait—as the light turned green and we pulled away, we realized we hadn't really paid attention: that "Mercedes" was in fact a beautiful black Kia Optima, with its sibling tiger grille now staring at us in the mirror. Poetic justice.

We drove the Rio to the Copperstate 1000's Field of Dreams event, where we realized you can buy about 175 of these for the price of one Aston Martin DB3S (recently bought for \$3,685,000 at RM Auctions). Enthused by that knowledge, we gave the Rio some gas in the sweep of a freeway ramp from the 143 to the 202, and it held the line beautifully, with level, neutral cornering and torque-free steering—one very enjoyable car.

**Buying.** We were in the Valley for our week with the Kia Rio, where we shared the road with a great many other compact and subcompact cars. It becomes clear that any stigma attached to the smallest of cars is gone by now, and any perceptions of a value tradeoff are secondary. It is increasingly common to go the small route just because it can be so appealing. The Kia Rio is big enough—it impressed us with its passenger and



cargo capacity—and powerful enough (ditto), it delivers as well as anything we could be driving. The fact it's smaller and affordable is not even in the equation. Bottom line: the Kia Rio is an absolute laboratory case example of how happy you can be with what you got for what you spent.

What do you gain, driving a small car like this? Purchase economy, operating economy, ease of parking and handling. What do you give up? Nothing. Some country club status points, if that.

For the same money, a minimally-optioned higher model may compare well to a fully-optioned lower model. For a few thousand dollars more, base price, you can jump to the Kia Forte, then to the Optima. It depends upon budget, of course, but also which form factor you like. We quickly grew used to the size of the Rio and would seriously consider it even beyond a budget factor.

Sure, you know you want an affordable car, but you know you want all these features included. And that does not come for free. The good news is that it's all delivered in the economical and efficient Kia Rio. And, by the way, we would still welcome the manual transmission and performance elements of the SX M/T, although we've ended up falling for the sedan style and format. ■

## SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE	.....1.6L GDI 4-cylinder
HP/TORQUE	.....138 / 123
TRANSMISSION	.....6-spd auto w/ Eco system
DRIVETRAIN	.....FWD
DISC BRAKES (FR/R)	.....11.0" vent / 10.3" solid
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	.....171.9 in / 101.2 in
WHEELS/TIRES	.....17" alloy, 205/45R17 (for LX or EX: 15" wheels, 185/65R15)
TURNING CIRCLE	.....34.5 ft (for LX or EX with 15" wheels: 33.5 ft)
LEGROOM (FR/R)	.....43.8 / 31.1 in
CARGO VOLUME	.....13.7 cu ft
WEIGHT	.....2410 lb
MPG (EST)	.....28/36/31 (city/hwy/comb) (LX manual 29/37, EX w ECO pkg 30/36)
FUEL TANK	.....11.4 gallons
BASE PRICE	.....\$17,700
COLOR	.....Signal Red / Black
PREMIUM PACKAGE	.....Nav w Sirius Traffic, power tilt/slide sunroof, pushbutton entry/start, leather trim seats.....\$2350
REAR BUMPER APPLIQUÉ	.....\$75
CARPETED FLOOR MATS	.....\$115
EC MIRROR w/ COMPASS/HOMELINK	.....\$350
DESTINATION	.....\$750
TOTAL	.....\$21,340