

soul reincarnated

The original Kia Soul represented a watershed moment for the brand. Could they completely redesign it without losing its flavor and, well, soul? Well, yes.

By Joe Sage



Kia chose Minneapolis as the launch site for the 2014 Kia Soul for a number of reasons. For one thing, it's been declared the Nicest City in America by the *Wall Street Journal*. And Kia is a nice company, and the Soul is a nice car. The town is also increasingly recognized as a hot spot for art and music, and for food and wine (it's *Food & Wine Magazine's* favorite new food city). Perhaps most pertinently, Minneapolis has been declared one of the Top Five Best Cities for Generation Y, and this generation's style, philosophies and demographics—including art, music, food, wine and niceness—mesh perfectly with the Soul.

The funny thing is that despite this focus on Gen Y, popularity of the Kia Soul actually completely spans age groups, vehicle shopping niches and taste in general. The company shies away from stating the average buyer age, because it is 48. This is younger than most—it's always surprising to realize how many brands have average buyers of 55 or 60 years old—but not as young as the Soul would seem to attract. One key reason for this is that most data comes from vehicle registrations, and a great many Souls are sold to parents, for their offspring to drive. At the same time, the numbers are legitimately skewed by the vehicle's popularity with some older buyers, who like everything from its price, to its youthful look and feel, to its utility and easy access.

Buyers migrate to Soul from many segments: over 20 percent from compact cars, 17.2 percent from compact MPVs, 13.3 percent from midsize cars, just over 10 percent from compact SUVs and just under 10 percent from midsize SUVs.

Bottom line: if the Kia Soul catches your eye, yours is not to wonder why. It's broadly popular.

What's surprising about the Kia Soul's broad success is not just its breadth and depth, but its persistence and duration. Most new models do well for a couple of years, but then see sales decline by about 5 to 10 percent after the second year. Not Soul. Its second year was more than double its first, but its third was over 50 percent above that. The fourth year was up again, now hitting almost four times the first year's sales, and model year 2013, the car's fifth year of production, is on track to repeat that.

So when the time comes to create a new version of such a vehicle, the designers, stylists and engineers proceed very carefully. We've seen this over the years—with mixed results—in such other enduring vehicles as the Volkswagen Beetle or Jeep Wrangler. Some go retro and succeed,



while others are a miss. The Kia Soul isn't old enough to confront the retro issue. For this, it's simply a matter of providing the car with a refreshing shot in the arm, while not damaging any of its enviable brand equity.

Do it right, and you'll keep your customers, attract new ones and draw interest to the brand. This is what made Soul so significant five years earlier—prior to its introduction, the overall Kia brand was not very significant in the US, with combined sales of the Spectra and Optima at less than the then-nonexistent Soul is now. "Since Soul" (which is a bit of a mantra inside Kia), sales are up 250 percent and Kia has long since cracked the Top 20, now ranking as the eighth largest brand in the US by volume.

The Kia Soul is the quickest turner—has the shortest time on the lot—of any vehicle in the industry. The need for cash or other incentives is among the lowest. And the average price as outfitted continues to rise (from a plurality of sales under \$18,000 and even a few around \$14,000 in 2009, to equal volume around \$18,000 and \$20,000 plus a growing volume around \$23,000 by 2013). So yes, they have to do it right.

The project planners identified three areas to address in the Soul's redo: design, desirability and dynamics. By design, they mostly mean styling, although elements of engineering and ergonomics have been addressed throughout, as well. The styling redo has really been a master stroke—or seems to be, as of now (the passage of time is needed, to confirm this). A few specific points are mentioned in the sidebar, and comparative photos tell the tale. Some quirky features



NEW MODEL SPOTTER'S GUIDE: The red and brown Kia Souls shown above are the prior model, while the Latte Brown one on the facing page and the Solar Yellow at top are the redesigned 2014 Soul. • We always liked the cantilevered headlights in the original, but those have been streamlined in the new one, no longer continuing the hood seam. They also depart from following the curve of the wheel arch as they did before. Less distinctive, perhaps, but more fluid and active, less static. • The wheel arches themselves are softened, as is the side crease. • From the rear, there is no mistaking the two, although all the spirit of the original remains. Tying the liftgate's shape in with the taillights gives a wider appearance, and again feels more active and fluid. The taillights evolve from the originals, but with more emphasis on their shape, while the rear reflectors involve body shaping and become a more active part of the styling in the new model.

KEEP RIGHT >>



First all-electric Kia will be a Soul

During our launch event in Minneapolis, Kia announced an all-electric version of the Soul, to go on sale in the US in 2014. With the vibe the Soul commands, it is a natural platform for Kia's first venture into electrics. The Soul EV will be distinguished by enhanced aerodynamic styling cues and will be exclusively battery-powered. More details about the Soul EV's powertrain, range, MPGe and markets in which it will be available will be announced at the major auto shows coming up this winter. "Eco-consciousness already comes standard on the all-new Soul, with 85 percent of its materials able to be recycled at the end of its lifespan, and the Soul EV will further demonstrate Kia's engineering capabilities as well as our commitment to producing vehicles with reduced environmental footprints," said Orth Hedrick, executive director of product planning, Kia Motors America.

are modernized a bit, while an overall feel of fluidity replaces some static and angular aspects of the original. At first, you would be excused if you walked by the new one and didn't realize it was new. But take a look back and forth between the two three-quarter-rear shots on our opening spread—the Latte Brown 2014 Soul in the lead photo and the brown prior model at right—and it becomes clear. Not only are distinguishing details modified, such as the tailgate and lights, but the overall sheetmetal shapes have a lot more flow to them. The overall shape, the stance, the blacked-out window pillars, the high-mounted curving vertical taillights—these are all still present and accounted for. But modernized.

Inside, the stylists applied a circular theme—easy to pick up from the famous pulsing color lights surrounding the door speakers in the prior model (and continued in this model)—but brought into more shapes throughout. The official schtick is that this represents "the sonic range when music is playing." Whether you see that or not, it's easy to see that the audio system, as well as the climate control system, have style points that benefit greatly from this overall direction. Combination speaker and vent stacks at the outboard corners of the instrument panel are so well done (see left sidebar), you will likely marvel at them for as many years as you own the vehicle.

More objectively, the interior is upgraded with de rigueur soft touch surfaces throughout, door handles are engineered to feel better and latches to close with a more solid sound, and the center stack includes soft gloss black surfaces.

The new Soul follows suit to a common evolution, becoming longer, lower and wider. Besides the subtle effect this has on style, it also enhances ingress and egress, and it allows for an inch of additional front seat travel. Rear headroom is increased a bit, and side-to-side separation of front seat occupants is increased a bit, enhancing the feeling of roominess inside.

Driving dynamics are improved several ways. More ultra-high-strength steel and structural adhesives have increased body rigidity by a whopping 28.7 percent. A one-piece front subframe (with four bushings, formerly none) pushes suspension forward and the stabilizer bar back, for more precise tracking with less movement. The steering box is moved forward, for better balance and on-center feel. A new one-piece steering gear housing (replacing a two-piece) is stronger and provides more direct steering feel. A new Flex Steer system has three settings: Comfort, Normal and Sport—which feel more distinct than many such systems. Twin-tube rear shocks have been turned vertically (they were angled

previously) and lengthened for more suspension travel, improving ride comfort.

Increased quietness is also delivered through that new front subframe and improvements to materials and construction of the instrument panel, underbody and chassis. Of note is a new expansion foam, sprayed into the body and frame before the final bake oven, which expands to fill and block out all sound transmission paths.

There are two engines in the 2014 Soul: for the Base model, a 1.6-liter, and for the Plus (+) and Exclaim (!) models, a 2.0-liter. Both are inline four-cylinder GDI (gasoline direct-injection) engines. The Base 1.6L has 130 hp, 118 lb-ft of torque and is available with either a 6-speed manual or 6-speed automatic transmission, either of which delivers 24/30 MPG city/highway. The 2.0L engine in Plus and Exclaim models (which we drove in Minnesota and Wisconsin on our launch drive) has 164 hp, 151 lb-ft of torque and achieves 23/31 MPG city/highway. Manual shifting is available on the Plus but not the Exclaim.

The Soul Plus model is available with an ISG option (Idle Stop and Go), which is rated at 24/31 MPG. We have learned to be apprehensive of some start/stop implementations—including some top-dollar ones—though we know they will soon be universal. But the Kia Soul's is one of the smoothest we've driven.

You can be out the door with a new Soul at a base price of just \$14,400 with a manual (\$16,200 automatic) and still have all the fundamentals of style and utility that come with any Soul.

But for just \$500 more (\$16,700 starting), you are into the Plus (+) model, at least if you make the apples-and-oranges move back to a manual (we would). And whereas the jump to an automatic in a Base model is \$1800 more, the jump in a Plus is only \$1000 more. Unless you are absolutely counting every dollar (plus those dollars are likely to be spread out for several years to come), the boost in power with the Plus (or Exclaim) is well worth that cost differential. (If you're scraping too tight, there will be some great used Souls on the market, too, although another bonus of the car's immense popularity is high residual value.)

The Exclaim (!) model starts at \$19,900—so well equipped, they've clearly worked hard to keep it under \$20k.

We've always found the Kia Soul a great vehicle to drive—around town, on the freeways or even on the long haul. It has punch beyond its numbers, utility beyond its size, and features and comfort beyond its price.

Factor in all the improvements in the "totally transformed" new model, and it is all the moreso. We drove for a very full day along and across the



Mississippi River, in Minnesota and Wisconsin, and well into the Wisconsin dells. Our route included beautiful two-lane roads you would be happy to test any car on—and we enjoyed this one fully. To round out the challenge, we had rain for much of the day. The Soul's combination of carefully considered suspension and well-implemented electric steering delivered a solid, neutral feel well beyond most front-wheel-drivers.

The interior amenities are well laid out, including its new side-by-side map-and-nav feature, which proved useful on some of our more challenging stretches of map. As always, the Infinity audio system is not only superb, but—as we've said before—delivers sound that could cost this much just to add on to some more expensive brand vehicles. It has a rock and roll soul.

The folks at Kia have put their hearts and minds into this new Soul, and it shows. ■

SAMPLE TEST SPECS

ENGINE	2.0L GDI 4-cylinder
TRANSMISSION	6-spd auto w/ Active Eco
POWERTRAIN	FWD
POWER/TORQUE	164 hp, 151 lb-ft torque
FUEL MPG	23/31 city/hwy, 26 comb
EXCLAIM (!) BASE PRICE	\$20,300
• Sun and Sound Package: automatic climate control, panoramic sunroof w/ power sunshade, 8" nav-satellite-traffic, Infinity audio, speaker lights	
• The Whole Shebang Package: HID low beams, pushbutton start w/ smart key, leather trim seats, heated/vented front seats, heated rear outboard seats, heated steering shell, Supervision meter cluster w/ 4.3" color LCD, engine immobilizer	
DESTINATION	
TOTAL AS TESTED	

