

Blade runner

BY JOE SAGE

Launched in 2017, the original Kia Niro broke new ground by, in a sense, not breaking new ground—it was a dedicated hybrid that could be taken for any general model, unheard of to that point in a segment known for quirky styling that was embraced by some, actively unappealing to others. It was prime time for such a move, and the entire industry has largely followed suit, as hybrids move from “segment” to widely implemented powertrain detail.

Kia has added plug-in hybrid and full EV versions of Niro in the intervening years. And for 2023, they turn the page again, with the gen-two Niro.

Highlights include larger dimensions inside and out; an enhanced and more efficient powertrain lineup including a 32-kW electric motor on the hybrid model (contri-

buting to a best-in-class 53 mpg combined); a digital key that can be transferred phone-to-phone; better cold-weather cabin heating; dual 10.25-inch panoramic displays; 14 standard driver assist and safety technologies; extensive use of recycled plastics and vegan leather inside; and for the EVs, 50 kWh of charging included at Electrify America.

We drove the Kia Niro hybrid at its launch in the Texas Hill Country in 2017, again at home later that year, then the full EV version for a week in 2019, but hadn’t driven it again since (unless perhaps briefly at comparo drives). Till now. The new generation offers five hybrid trim levels from \$26,590 to our top SX Touring at \$34,890, or nine counting the PHEVs and EVs. They all live among a broad lineup of some 15 Kia SUVs, crossovers, MPVs, hybrids, PHEVs and EVs (arguably also adding a nod to the Rio 5-Door).

The EPA, which admittedly has some odd categorizations, calls the Kia Niro a small station wag-

on, a term generally avoided in America currently, but they may be on to something. Its lower roofline and ground clearance push the limits of what the crossover term means (as do so many things). And that’s just fine. It’s a great little size, not too small at all, with over 40 inches of front legroom, almost 40 in the rear, headroom to match, and generous cargo volume. And all this comes with that 50ish fuel mileage and starts in the mid-\$20s.

You might conclude it picks up where Kia Soul leaves off. The Soul is a famously great little unit, but its standout styling is a little quirky for some. For those, Kia Niro is a solid antidote.

The black body element in the rear three-quarter area—what we call the blade, but they simply call black C-pillar trim—may still qualify as quirkiness. To some, it may seem styling overkill, but it’s an option, at just \$195. If it were pricey, we might do without, but this makes it tempting, as perhaps a key defining feature. Time and take rate will tell.

We had our usual range of notes and comments on user interface details, but ultimately the answers to any puzzles were found, often in their

own clever ways. All in all, you will orient easily and appreciate it all increasingly.

Our first note about the drive experience was a realization that we had no first note. This we took as refreshing—it’s rare to find a vehicle we can just get in and drive, without a prompt critique.

Stated horsepower numbers (from Niro’s combination of gasoline engine and electric motor) do not do the vehicle justice—it is a plenty lively driver. Considerably higher torque, more than doubled by the electric drive component, is surely a factor. Perhaps most noteworthy is its six-speed dual-clutch automatic transmission, in a segment otherwise populated by quite a few CVTs. With or without its exceptional fuel mileage in mind, you will find drivetrain power quite satisfying.

We do and don’t value drive modes, appreciating their range, but carrying a philosophy that the product should be maximized by default. In the Kia Niro, we forgot all about that, driving in eco most all the time (thus ensuring that maximum fuel mileage), remarking that we didn’t even notice.

The new Kia Niro has both daily driver and road trip written all over it. Seeming to fall outside established segments, it might just deserve a category all its own, called “don’t miss this one.” ■



The new narrow grille seems to move on from Kia’s long-running “tiger nose” treatment, but look again—that remains echoed along the top edge of the windshield and below the lower grille opening. It’s subtle, but the stylized KIA name badges have done well at taking over primary identity duties now.

SPECIFICATIONS

ASSEMBLY	.....Hwasung, South Korea
ENGINE/TRANSMISSION	.....Korea/Korea
CONTENT	.....Korea 90% / US/Canada 1%
ENGINE	.....1.6L 4-cyl DOHC 16v GDI dual CVT alum/alum
HP/TORQUE	.....103.5 hp / 106.3 lb-ft
COMPRESSION RATIO	.....14.0:1
HYBRID TYPE	.....transmission-mtd elec device
HSG	.....perm magnet synchr motor
HP/TORQUE	.....10.7 hp / 26.1 lb-ft
MOTOR	.....perm magnet synchr motor
HP/TORQUE	.....42.9 hp / 125.4 lb-ft
BATTERY	.....15AH Li-ion polymer 240 V
COMBINED HP/TORQUE	.....139 hp / 195 lb-ft
TRANSMISSION	.....6-spd dual clutch auto
DRIVETRAIN	.....FVVD
0-TO-62 / TOP SPEED	.....10.8 sec / 100.7 mph
SUSPENSION	.....twin-tube shocks: F: MacPherson strut; R: multi-link
STEERING	.....rack & pinion, elec motor
BRAKES	.....integrated elec booster (IEB); F: 15.0 vented; R: 14.0 solid
WHEELS / TIRES	.....7.5Jx18 alloy / P225/45R18
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	.....174.0 / 107.1 in
GROUND CLEARANCE	.....6.3 in
APPR / DEP / BRKOVER	.....15.2 / 27.4 / 14.7°
TURNING CIRCLE	.....34.8 ft
HEADROOM (F/R)	.....40.5 / 39.5 in
LEGROOM (F/R)	.....41.5 / 39.8 in
CARGO CAPACITY	.....22.8 / 63.7 cu.ft
GVWR	.....4210 lb
TOW CAPACITY / ROOF LOAD	.....na / 220 lb
FUEL / CAPACITY	.....na / 11.1 gal
MPG	.....53/45/49 (city/hwy/comb)
BASE PRICE	.....\$34,790
BLACK C-PILLAR TRIM	.....195
CARPETED FLOOR MATS	.....155
DESTINATION CHARGE	.....1295
TOTAL	.....\$36,435

Prices have increased; see chart.

2023 KIA NIRO LINEUP / HYBRIDS

LX	.....\$26,590
EX	.....29,190
EX Touring	.....31,490
SX	.....32,590
SX Touring	.....▼ 34,890

