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## 2010 Kia Soul **Boxy new compact is cute, spirited, practical.**

### **Overview**

The Kia Soul is a new vehicle invented by its young designer, catering to the wants and needs of his fellow Gen Y types. It might be said that the Soul is an extension of the boxy little 2006 Scion xB, because the redesigned '07 xB drove off that track, and the Soul aims to steal that market as well as find its own.

Kia is heavily pitching personalization, offering many accessories and ways to attach your identity to your Soul. Everything from sideview mirrors in accenting colors, to seats that glow in the dark. Their goal with the Soul is to stand out in a sea of sameness.

The base model uses a 1.6-liter engine with a five-speed manual transmission for \$13,300, but far more buyers will opt for the 2.0-liter with an optional four-speed automatic for \$15,900, getting 27 combined miles per gallon.

We found the Soul felt nimble and light, fun to drive. The lines are smooth and stylish, for a box, and the interior is notably clean and functional. Standard equipment includes six airbags, ABS, and electronic stability control to keep you safe. There's a sport (lower case S) model, but it's mostly just trim, with slightly firmer suspension. You'll have to look to the aftermarket for a hot Soul.

The window sticker of our test model showed a new category: Environmental Performance. The Soul earned an 8 out of 10 for its Global Warming score, and 5 for its Smog score.

### **Model Lineup**

There are four Kia Souls: the base, the +, the !, and the sport. No, those aren't typos.

The Soul (\$13,300) uses a 1.6-liter engine making 122 horsepower, five-speed manual transmission, and comes with rugged cloth seats, power windows and door locks, 60/40 rear seat, solar glass, rear wiper/washer, and an AM/FM/CD/MP3/SAT sound system with USB port and auxiliary input jack. It has steel 15-inch wheels with wheel covers, front disc brakes, rear drum brakes.

The Soul+ (\$14,950) upgrades to the 2.0-liter engine making 142 horsepower, 16-inch alloy wheels, rear disc brakes, cruise control, remote entry, Bluetooth, steering wheel controls, and tinted rear windows. A four-speed automatic transmission is optional (\$950). Options are a power moonroof and foglights (\$800) and an audio package with five tweeter speakers, subwoofer and external amplifier (\$400).

The Soul! (\$16,950) comes with 18-inch alloy wheels, the premium audio package, power moonroof, and premium houndstooth accented cloth upholstery, with a leather steering wheel and shift knob, and metal-finish interior trim.

The Soul sport (\$16,950) replaces the power moonroof with black front and rear fascias and side sills, a spoiler, black-and-red cloth seats and trim, metal pedals, and a sport-tuned suspension. The Sport uses the five-speed manual or optional four-speed automatic (\$950).

Safety equipment includes six airbags, active front headrests, LATCH seating system, ABS, electronic stability control, and a tire pressure monitor.

## **Walkaround**

Make no mistake, Kia is serious about capturing the imaginations of their target 23-year-olds (although it's a car for 40- and 50-somethings, too). Check out these unique exotic exterior paint colors, including metallic tones of Shadow, Titanium and Bright Silver; coffee-inspired Java; red-hot Molten; and Alien green. Additional colors available later in the model year will include flame-emulating Ignition, Denim blue and bright white Ghost.

The Soul was well on its way to being built when the latest Scion xB was introduced, and there might have been some OMGs around the Kia design studios, because the two cars look a lot alike. But look closer, and the Soul will stand out. Driving around Miami, the Soul got lots of positive looks.

Kia calls the shape a reverse wedge greenhouse, adding that the Soul looks like it's wearing a pair of wraparound sunglasses. Because the rear windows are narrower than the fronts, there appears to be a downward rearward slope to the roof, but it's a clever illusion achieved by the rising beltline below the windows. There's a final and small third side window, an upside-down wedge to complete the shape.

Bold chiseled wheel arches give the Soul strength. The corners are nicely rounded, erasing some of the inherent boxiness. The grille is small and tidy, the Soul's mouth no bigger than needed so suck in air for the engine (unlike so many, from Audi to Dodge truck). The headlights are stylish, wrapping over the intersection of front fascia, fender and hood. There's an artificial black vent on each front fender behind the wheel, a nice touch. A black horizontal ding strip on the doors doesn't do much for cleanliness, but it has a function. The 16- and 18-inch alloy wheels are nothing special, but one of the test cars had carbon-fiber stick-on accessory appliques that made them look like stylish 10-spokes, until you got close enough to touch.

Big vertical Volvo-like taillamps, shaped a bit like arrowheads, climb the rear corners and project a feeling of safety. The liftgate and rear window are clean and smooth (and darkly cool when tinted), with an indented handle under a Kia oval logo and a stylish chrome Soul badge off to the side.

## **Interior Features**

Maybe the nicest thing about the interior is that Kia hasn't tried to do anything too trendy except maybe for the black-and-beige houndstooth-like upholstery on the upper seatbacks of the Soul! Everything is simple, clean and functional, a handsome and ergonomic layout. The cloth is solid. Even the two-tone black-and-red cloth on the sport doesn't feel like it's shouting to get your attention.

There is one trick option that's way cool, and should be a hit with the 23-year-olds (and spirited 60-year-olds): the throbbing-to-the-beat rim of red light around the speakers in the door. We found a reggae station in Miami and watched it bop, as we cursed the Florida sun and wished it were after dark, to better enjoy the spectacle at our knees. It seems a little out of place when listening to talk radio, however. This light can be turned on and off and you can play with the way it reacts to sound. It's fun.

The front bucket seats are comfortable, good for long trips, and the interior vinyl trim is fine. There are bottle holders in the front door pockets plus cupholders in the console with its own deep compartment, a huge two-level glovebox, map nets on the front seatbacks, a trap-door compartment on the dash (that's indented so things don't slide around), and grab handles over every door. There are auxiliary audio, ipod, and usb port connections, and two 12-volt outlets.

It has a nice steering wheel, with the usual standard and extra optional controls. The three-ring instrument panel looks nice and clean with an eave so the gauges are readable in the sun. The vertical oval center stack looks great with business-like knobs and buttons. We found the four-speed fan quiet at 2 and making icy air conditioning at 4.

Rear-seat legroom is lacking. When we climbed into the back seat, our average-height knees hit on the front passenger seatback, which wasn't pushed all the way back.

The liftgate is light and pops up easily. The 60/40 rear seats drop flat in a heartbeat. There's an excellent compartment under the cargo space floor, and below that a space-saver spare tire. Interior passenger space is good, but it eats up some cargo volume, compared to the larger Scion xB and smaller Honda Fit.

## **Driving Impressions**

The Soul is nimble and fun to drive. We drove Soul+ and Soul sport, each with the 2.0-liter engine, the Soul+ with a four-speed automatic and the sport with a five-speed manual and tuned suspension. We didn't get any seat time in the base model with the 1.6-liter engine having 122 horsepower and 115 pound-feet of torque, but Kia says there won't be many of those models sold.

The 2.0-liter engine features CVVT, or continuously variable valve timing. It makes 142 horsepower with a good 137 pound feet of torque peaking at a fairly high 4600 rpm; but we found that it pulled fine, if gently, at 2000 rpm, even with the manual transmission in third gear. With the manual, it will accelerate from 0-60 mph in 8.8 seconds, which isn't bad. (We figure 8.0 seconds is the dividing line between quick and sluggish.)

The manual gearbox comes with a clutch that's smooth, both from a standing start and upshifting. However, there's a gap in ratios between second and third gears that the engine torque can't always hide.

The automatic is only a four-speed, but it would be our choice. For around-town driving, it fills the bill; and out on the highway, it's smooth on the upshifts and doesn't kick down too much.

The power steering is hydraulic rather than electric, and does not feel as heavy in the hands as the Scion xB. It makes the whole car feel lighter, which it is by about 250 pounds. Don't expect it to feel like a sports car, but then it's not intended to.

The suspension is good, compliant, okay over speed bumps, and not once did we hit any jagged spots. We climbed into the sport model with its firmer shocks and springs, and couldn't feel much if any difference in comfort. However, we were in Miami, so there were no corners to challenge the Soul. Kia says the sport suspension mostly reduces body roll. The brakes were firm and tight.

However, one thing we did notice in the sport was the louder exhaust. It's the same system, but something about the manual transmission makes the Soul louder and more visceral feeling, with more vibration too. We've noticed this in other cars. The redline is 6000 rpm, and it gets there nicely.

## **Summary**

The Kia Soul is a new model that should find a niche that the Scion xB seems to have left behind. It will appeal to the young and young at heart. The reverse wedge styling does much to bring distinction to a basic box. The interior gets an A. The engine, automatic transmission, steering and ride all leave no room for complaint.

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