

Road Beat: Kia Niro FE, less is more

By Larry Weitzman

About two months ago, I tested the Kia Niro Touring, the top of the line model of the Kia Niro family. I noticed in the specs, the lower trim line model returned better fuel economy, so I scheduled a bottom of the line model FE to see if that was true as there were no apparent spec differences between the two models except for a small weight difference of 168 pounds which shouldn't create the 6-9 mpg mileage differential the EPA test procedures says there is between the two models.

Other than weight, the only other apparent difference is wheel and tire size.



Specifications

Price \$23,785

Engine 1.6L direct injected inline four cylinder 104 hp @ 5,700 rpm

109 lb.-ft. of torque @ 4,000 rpm

Electric Power system

Electric motor 43 hp

125 lb.-ft. of torque

Battery

Capacity 1.56 kWh
Maximum output 42 kW
Combined output 139 hp
195 lb.-ft. of torque

Transmission

Six-speed dual clutch
automatic manual

Configuration

Transverse front
engine/front wheel drive

Dimensions

Wheelbase 106.3 inches
Length 171.5 inches
Width 71.1 inches
Height 60.8 inches
Track (f/r) 61.6/62.2 inches
Ground clearance 6.3 inches
Fuel capacity 11.9 gallons
Luggage capacity, rear seats
up/down 19.4,54.5 cubic feet
Cabin volume 97.1 cubic feet
Steering lock to lock 2.85
turns

Turning circle 34.8 feet

Weight 3,106

GVWR 4,079

Payload 973 pounds

Tires 205/60X16

Performance

0-60 mph 7.93 seconds

50-70 mph 4.32 seconds

50-70mph uphill 7.47 seconds

Top speed Well into triple
digits

Fuel economy EPA rated
52/49/50 mpg city/highway
combined. Expect 48-50 mpg

in rural, suburban driving and 56 mpg on the highway at legal speeds.

But the drive train and other specs are essentially identical. So, what does the real world tell us about these minimal differences between these otherwise identical cars. In two words, a lot.

Kia Niro FE has identical looks and dimensions when compared to the Touring. It is a great looking ride as well and is sized like a small compact with a length of 172 inches on a long 106-inch wheelbase. It is wide at 71 inches and stands somewhat short 61 inches. Cabin volume is a large 97 cubic feet with nearly 20 cubes in the cargo bay.

Under the hood is the same 1.6L transverse mounted DOHC, 15 valve, direct injected four banger cranking out 104 hp at 5,700 rpm and 109 pounds of twist at 4,000 rpm combined with a 43 hp electric motor that also produces 125 pounds of twist. Because of maximum battery output and rpm differences the total output is 139 hp and 195 pounds of twist. The electric motor is sandwiched between the gas engine and the six-speed dual clutch tranny.

In the FE tested here there is a big improvement in performance over the Touring model with 0-60 mph arriving in just 7.93 seconds. Passing times were also much improved with 50-70 mph times on the level and up a steep grade in 4.32 and 7.47 seconds, respectively. Those times reflect more than a 1 second improvement in all performance parameters except for the level pass which recorded an improvement of over eight-tenths of a second. Those are significant differences. And this performance improvement could easily be felt on your backside as this FE was quite lively and fun with good pulling power and midrange even when pure electric. When making passes at altitude on Highway 50, this little Kia was surprisingly quick. Touring performance numbers were

9.22/5.14/9.65 seconds, respectively.

Along with this performance improvement comes a fuel economy improvement in about the numbers reflected in the EPA testing which shows numbers of 52/49/50 mpg city/highway/combined as opposed to the touring numbers of 46/40/43 mpg. In actual testing the FE at a constant 70 mph returned 56.2 mpg in a two-way run. In a 219-mile trip to Carson City via Highway 50 the FE averaged 51.1 mpg with the return trip to Placerville averaged 61.3 mpg. Overall fuel economy was about 49 mpg. These numbers are a 6 mpg over the Touring model. I have no explanation.

Fully independent suspension remains the bill of fare with wheel and tire size being the only difference as the FE get 16-inch alloys shod with taller 205/60 series rubber instead of higher performance 225/45 tires on the Touring model. All other mechanicals stay the same, including the quick 2.85 turns lock to lock steering. But here's the thing, the FE still handles great and with the less sporty tires it is a bit more playful, easily rotating in the turns and powering it out of tight corners. When pushing the FE to its limits, it telegraphs what it's going to do well in advance so counter measures can be taken. It's kind of fun, no it is fun and playful, too and I am talking about a 50-mpg hybrid.

When pure electric the Niro is eerily silent and it runs pure electric to well over 60 mph. And even with the gas engine running it is quiet and long trips would be quite acceptable. It absorbs bumps well. There is not much not to like. Tire, wind and road noise levels are excellent.

Safety of course is second to none. Sure, this is an entry level model without lane keep assist and blind spot warning, but it has all the acronyms such as ABS, VSM, ESC and a backup camera. Remember safety starts and ends with the driver, good judgment and driving ahead to anticipate problems along with a good scan rate.

Inside are durable cloth seats that are extremely comfortable. While there is no power, they are easily adjustable and they are good for an easy six hours without much fatigue. Good support in all the right places. Rear seating has copious room and provides reasonable comfort. The cargo area can hold 55 cubes behind the front seat making it dangerous when going to Home Depot.

Instrumentation is complete sans a tach. It doesn't do what the Ioniq does when going into sport mode and display a tach. But the trip computer is easy to use and has all the info, especially giving you your most recent trip info, mpg, etc. The center stack is also well done. And while it does have a touch screen, it also has buttons and knobs for all functions. There are plenty of storage cubbies.

If I were to buy a hybrid, the Niro FE would be my ride. Performance is top of the class, fuel economy is near the best, the drive is excellent and the price seals the deal at \$22,890 plus \$895 for the boat ride from Hwaseong, South Korea, making the Monroney total \$23,785. It is the best hybrid deal out there.

Larry Weitzman has been into cars since he was 5 years old. At 8 he could recite from memory the hp of every car made in the U.S. He has put in thousands of laps on racetracks all over the Western United States.