

Road Beat: Kia Niro Hybrid impresses



The Kia Niro Hybrid fuel economy is outstanding. Photos/Larry Weitzman

By Larry Weitzman

After setting records like driving across the United States in a Kia Niro Hybrid averaging 78 mpg, it apparently wasn't good enough for the folks at Kia as for 2018 Kia has introduced a new Niro plug-in hybrid version with a claimed all electric range of 26 miles. In reality, that range could extend out to 35 miles or more, as I found in many of my shorter trips.

About the only external difference to the Niro's very attractive body, well proportioned body, is the plug-in battery door on the side of the left front fender which looks like a second fuel tank door, which is exactly what it is, a

place to add electrons from a special charging cable. Otherwise the dimensions are the same for a small compact almost CUV, 172 x 71 x 61 inches for length, width and height. Wheelbase is a long 106 inches and track is a wide 62 inches and will be appreciated when it comes to changing directions.

As to almost being classified as a small, compact SUV, ground clearance is good at 6.3 inches. And its Home Depot/Lowe's credentials are substantial at 55 cubic feet behind the front seats and almost 20 cubes behind the second row. And this is a vehicle that is 10 inches shorter than your average compact sedan. While the electric system, it's 8.9 kWh L-I battery (about 7.5 kWh more energy than the conventional hybrid) and the rest of the electrical stuff (hey, the charger cable probably weighs 5 pounds) add just about 250 pounds (the battery is listed at 258 pounds), total weight still remains about 3,450 pounds and with its small 11.4-gallon fuel tank, that saves about 20 pounds.



Specifications

Price \$28,840-\$34,500

Engine

1.6L DOHC, 16 valve, GDI
Atkinson cycle inline four
cylinder 104 hp @ 5.700 rpm
109 lb.-ft. pounds of torque
@ 4,000 rpm

Electric power

8.9 kWh L-I polymer battery

Battery weight 258 pounds

60 hp electric motor

Combined max power 139 hp

Transmission

Eight-speed dual clutch
automated manual

Configuration

Front engine/front wheel
drive

Dimensions

Wheelbase 106.3 inches

Length 171.6 inches

Width 71.1 inches

Height 60.8 inches

Track (f/r) 61.6/62.2 inches

Ground clearance 6.3 inches

Fuel capacity 11.4 gallons

Weight 3,450 pounds

GVWR 4,409 pounds

Steering 2.66 turns lock to
lock

Turning circle 34.8 feet

Cargo volume (rear seats
up/down 19.4/54.5 cubic feet

Wheels 16-inch alloys

Tires 205/60X16 inches

Performance

0-60 mph 7.66 seconds

50-70 mph 4.38 seconds

50-70 mph uphill 7.22
seconds

Top speed Officially listed
at 106.9 mph

Fuel economy EPA rated
48/44/46 mpg
city/highway/combined.

Expect 60 plus mpg in short

drives under 35 miles with full charge and 52 mpg on a level highway at legal speeds.

Under the hood you will find a 1.6L DOHC, i6 valve Atkinson cycle inline four that makes 104 hp at a low 5,700 rpm and 109 pounds of twist at 4,000 rpm. But it's kicker is a 60 hp electric motor which brings the combined output to 139 hp. The battery itself is capable of putting out the equivalent of 79 hp, so the Niro has good margins to perform at its peak 139 hp level at any time, even when in straight hybrid mode when the main pure electric part of the battery is exhausted. More on that later.

First let's talk performance, which the Niro PHEV has plenty of. How about a 0-60 mph time of just 7.66 seconds, but it feels quicker and with or without a charged battery, the Niro flat out performs. Passing times of 50-70 mph averaged 4.38 seconds and up a 6-7 percent grade that time only slows to 7.22 seconds. Part of this high performance can be attributed to the Niro PHEV's eight speed dual clutch automated manual tranny. It was faultless, super-slick smooth and extremely intuitive.

Niro PHEV is a high performance and satisfying car to drive. When the big battery is done after about 30-35 miles, it can still go pure EV at 70 mph and performance doesn't degrade one iota. I don't know how they do it, but this Kia is a great car.

Fuel economy while rated in the EPA cycle at 48/44/46 mpg, city/highway/combined, it does significantly better. In my first 187 miles, Niro averaged 69.7 mpg with a couple of plug-ins. Steady 70 mph highway mileage averaged 52.4 mpg, eight mpg better than the EPA number. My trip over the Sierras to South Lake Tahoe and back averaged 46.6 mpg for the 130-mile trip and it was done with no battery as I was at zero EV miles

when I started the trip and the drive was aggressive. In regular driving, averaging 60 plus mpg should be a lead-pipe cinch. Now the issue becomes what is the cost of electricity, as at 20 cents a kWh, a fill up will cost you about \$1.60, so the cost per mile will be the same as gasoline. But there are other benefits.

First, the drive is exceedingly smooth and quiet. And you give up nothing in handling as it has extremely quick, accurate steering (2.66 turns lock to lock), the aforementioned track is wide, suspension is state of the art four wheel independent and turning circle is under 35 feet. Tires and its alloy wheels are a bit underwhelming at 16 inches and 205/60 rubber, but handling is still excellent, changing directions nimbly and with aplomb. It is fun to drive.

Ride quality is quiet on smooth roads, especially when running pure electric. The build quality is vault like and the ability to absorb punishment is apparent in its supple ride control. Niro PHEV does not ride like a sub-compact or compact car, but at a much higher level, but not quite as high as cloud like.

Safety is all there with smart radar cruise, front collision warning, autonomous emergency braking and lane keep assist all standard as well as all the other acronyms. Four-wheel discs brakes are strong with excellent pedal feel (remember as a hybrid there is regen braking) and the standard HID head lights are excellent.

Inside this EX Premium is a leather interior with all surfaces covered in first rate luxu or near luxu materials. Seats are comfortable if not on the firm side which is preferable for longer hauls and this Niro even with its smaller fuel tank will still get you well over 500 miles with reserves.

Three can fit reasonably well in the second row, but the real deal is the compact CUV like cargo capacity mentioned above. This Niro PHEV can haul the mail and plenty of it and for a

long way.

While prices start for a well-equipped Niro LX PHEV at \$27,900 plus \$940 for the boat ride from Korea, my super well-equipped EX Premium stickers for \$34,500 with the boat ride included. Nothing else to buy, it comes loaded up. The question becomes is the Niro PHEV going to save you money? At \$0.30 per kWh as I pay for PGE power (you can blame that high price on stupid environmental laws), it really doesn't make economic sense. But in the rest of the country where electricity sells for about 12-15 cents a kWh it will save you a little money, but not nearly enough to make up the price difference over a nice Kia Forte5. It might make you feel virtuous, but there are better ways to raise your feelings of virtuosity or self-esteem. But as an automobile, the Niro PHEV is quite a car/CUV, lots of guilt free performance, but instead of paying at the pump, you pay at the showroom and your electrical receptacle.

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.