

Road Beat: Kia Rio – maximum efficiency personified



The 2018 Kia Rio five-door is a definite hybrid beater. Photos/Larry Weitzman

By Larry Weitzman

My car review this week is one of the least expensive economy cars for sale in the United States, the Kia Rio 5 door LX edition. It stickers for \$15,290 with a six-speed auto cog swapper. If you like to shift, the sticker drops to just \$14,200.

Both require the obligatory delivery charge of \$895 for the boat, train and truck from Pesqueria, Mexico. Even the engine and transmissions originate in Mexico. If you are worried about build quality, don't, it's built like every other world car in an automated factory. My tester was bank vault tight.

Rio may be the ultimate commuter/economy car as will be explained. First while the standard Rio subcompact is 170-inches long riding on a long 102-inch wheelbase, the five-door hatchback version is a handy 160-inches long which is approaching the length of a Mini-Cooper. Both are a svelte 68-inches wide. Rio five-door is small on the outside. But inside interior volumes are 2 cubic feet shy of being classified by the EPA as a mid-size car. And it's all wrapped in a pretty good looking, very well-proportioned body. It's cute.

Powering up the Rio is a sophisticated 1.6L DOHC, 16 valve, direct injected inline four-cylinder engine that cranks out 130 hp at 6,300 rpm and a commensurate 119 pounds of twist peaking at 4,850 rpm. My version had a torque converter six-speed automatic cog-swapper in place of the standard and less expensive six speed manual driving the front wheels.



Specifications

Price \$15,095 to about \$20,000

Engine

1.6L DOHC, 16 valve, Direct injected inline four cylinder 130 hp @ 6,300 rpm
119 lb.-ft. of torque @ 4,850 rpm

Transmissions

Six-speed manual

Six-speed torque converter

automatic

Configuration

Transverse mounted front engine/front wheel drive

Dimensions

Wheelbase 1,011.6 inches

Length 160.0 inches

Width 67.9 inches

Height 57.1 inches

Track (f/r) 60.0/60.2 inches

Ground clearance 5.5 inches

Fuel capacity 11.9 gallons

Cargo capacity (rear seats up/down) 17.4/32.8 cubic feet

Passenger volume 90.5 cubic feet

Steering lock to lock 2.77 turns

Turning circle 33.46 feet

Wheels Steel/5.5X15 inches

Tires 185/65X15

Weight 2,714 pounds

Performance

0-60 mph 8.26 seconds

50-70 mph 4.43 seconds

50-70 mph uphill 7.58 seconds

Top speed Does anyone really care?

Fuel economy 28/35/32 mpg city/highway/combined.

Expect 34-35 mpg in rural/suburban driving, 47 mpg on a level highway at (California) legal speeds.

When Kia arrived in the United States some 25 years ago, its only model was the 1.5L, 79 hp Sephia which couldn't get to 60 mph in 12 seconds even pointed downhill. Now, this foot shorter Rio will literally rocket to that benchmark of 60 mph from a stop in a quick 8.26 seconds. Who said extreme economy/commuter cars can't be fun and quick? Passing performance is also good with a 50-70 mph simulated pass requiring just 4.43 seconds and the same run up a steep grade (6-7 percent) will slow that time down about three seconds to 7.58 seconds. Interestingly, these numbers are virtually the same as the Toyota Corolla tested last week (8.31, 4.58, 7.66 seconds).

But while it slightly outperforms the Corolla, it returns significantly better fuel economy. EPA says expect 28/35/32 mpg city/highway/combined. However, my tests revealed much better fuel economy with a two-way level highway run returning an average of 47.3 mpg and my round trip from Placerville to Carson City via Highway 50 yielding an average of 42.5 mpg. Overall, I averaged about 34 mpg. The point being that these numbers, the highway mileage and round-trip numbers are within 5 mpg of a hybrid. It also has a hybrid size small 11.9-gallon fuel tank.

So how does the Rio handle? A one-word answer would be good. It comes with steel wheels (15 x 5.5 inches) and hubcaps, 185/65 rubber and a torsion beam rear suspension, but its electric power steering rack is a very quick 2.77 turns lock to lock. It has a turning circle of just 33 feet and it weighs just 2,715 pounds meaning the mass that needs to change directions is on the minimal side, so Rio handles quite sporty in a benign fashion with no vices. It feels good in the twisties and its attitude remains flat. Rio can be rowdy.

Ride quality is quite quiet and smooth. Noise sources are subdued as the engine spins just 2,300 rpm at 70 mph while there is little if any tire noise and no wind noise. You will forget that this is an extreme economy car. More on that

later.

Safety isn't compromised as well as all important acronyms are present, even though only the front brakes are discs. Rears are drums, but remember the fronts do 80 percent of the stopping (unless you predominantly drive in reverse), so the brakes are strong and powerful. About the only thing missing from its safety complement is the rear-view backup camera, but a slight upgrade will net you that anyway which I will discuss later. Headlights are good on high and low beam.

Inside is a comfortable interior, seats are good and the instrument panel is complete with a trip computer being flanking by a tack and speedo. Most of the interior is hard surfaced (what do you expect for \$15K?), but it has a decent sound and HVAC system. Best of all its easy to use. It has plug-ins for charging your stuff.

Rear seating is not bad and behind the rear seats, this mini-CUV holds over 17 cubes and with them folding it grows to about 33 cubes. Unbelievable for a 160-inch ride.

Unfortunately, my LX is a bare bones tester with no power windows, mirrors, Bluetooth, cruise, keyless entry and rear backup camera. However, if you opt for the "S" model one trim grade up for just a paltry \$1,110 (or a \$16,400 sticker), you get everything I mentioned. Or in other words a well-equipped vehicle with all the modern conveniences. Everything you need and nothing you don't, making the "S" version of the Rio 5 door perhaps the best value in a commuter/economy car in the USA and it's made in North America.

Rio is about \$5,000-\$6,000 less than the cheapest hybrid. Rio certainly outperforms the cheap hybrid and returns within about 5-7 mpg. So, if you drive 15,000 miles a year, the hybrid will save you about 80 gallons of gas, certainly no more than 100 gallons, or in other words, even in high priced California that amounts to about \$300 a year, which doesn't

even pay for the extra capitalization costs of the hybrid. Rio makes a whole lot of dollars and sense.

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.