

The Canadian Champion

WHEELS

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Kia ups its image by baring its Soul

By Jim Robinson
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TOP: Kia sees the square sided 2010 Soul as getting consumers to start thinking outside the box about their image of the Korean carmaker. Common automotive practice in the 1920s, the box remains the most efficient way to combine versatility and utility.

BOTTOM: The rear of the 2010 is very stylish with taillights set high and a large liftgate that reveals a cargo area of 546 litres (19.3 cu ft) with the back seats upright and 1,511 litres (53.4 cu ft) with them folded.

Kelowna: It's hip to be square. That's what Kia wants Canadians to think about the 2010 Soul five-door now in dealerships across the country.

Kia sees Soul as not just a new offering, but an image changer.

Soul is one of the new breed of vehicles that are high on content, high on style, low on price and, well, square.

It's basically a small box for the engine and drivetrain attached to a bigger box for people.

But what a box!

Inside the cabin can be found Bluetooth connectivity, seat inserts that glow in the dark and illuminated speakers that pulse with the music.

Equipped with everything available like power roof, ABS with stability control, outrageous "Burner" interior trim and spider-spoke alloy wheels, you can't pay more than \$22,195. In fact, pricing starts at \$15,495.

The box on wheels is not new. All cars of the 1920s were slab-sided. Post WWII technology that allowed large metal panels to be shaped and stamped took over except for generations of panel trucks which is what the Soul essentially is.

The first time I noticed a return to packing as many people and techno goodies into one compact,

square-sided package was at the 1999 Tokyo Motor Show with the Honda Fuya-jo concept designed for "urban night cruising" and the Neukom as a multi-purpose commuter concept that morphed into the Honda Element.

The first to capitalize on this concept of people moving was

Scion, a division of Toyota that has been selling the xB in the U.S. for years and is coming to Canada in 2009. Expected next is the Nissan Cube which describes it perfectly.

Kia does not see Soul as a niche product like Nissan and Toyota do with Scion and Cube. For years

their economy cars could be best described as cheap and cheerful, not the image any car company wants in these hyper competitive times.

Thus Soul is not just aimed at a broader customer base but is designed to show Kias can still be affordable but now have sizzle.

Kia describes the overall design as "tough not rough." It looks very urban, very "now" from any angle. For instance, the rear taillights are set high but they protrude out slightly from the body instead of being flush like a Mazda5 or a Volvo wagon.

The grille is what Kia calls its "tiger mouth" design, but I see it as more pug-nosed with attitude. The wheels have truly been pushed out to the four corners. Most Pacific Rim cars these days are narrow and tall to maximize interior volume. This is true of the Soul, but the boxy shape hides this well. It's only from dead astern that this is discernable.

Power is either a 1.6-litre DOHC inline four cylinder found on the base version only producing 122 hp and 115 lb/ft hooked up to a five-speed manual. The other three trim levels get a 2.0-litre, DOHC, inline four-cylinder making 142 hp and 137 lb/ft of torque with the five-speed manual or an optional four-speed automatic. Soul is a front-driver, all-wheel-drive not being offered.

Fuel economy on the 1.6-litre is 7.7/6.3L/100 km (37/45 mpg) city/highway. For the 2.0-litre manual it is 8.6/6.5L/100 km (33/43 mpg) city/highway and for the automatic, 8.5/6.6L/100 km (33/43 mpg) city/highway.

Suspension is MacStruts at the front and a twist beam axle at the rear.

• see KIA SOUL on page B14

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