

Kia appeals to your 'Soul' with its new 2010 hatchback

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They say to succeed in business you have to think 'outside the box'.

That may be true, but many automotive manufacturers seem to think being inside the box is the way to go these days.

Just take a look at the new breed of urban vehicles that are driving the boxy, square automotive design to entirely new levels. One of the most recent is Kia's 2010 Soul, the first Korean car to win a prestigious 'red dot' design award.

Kia calls the Soul an 'urban passenger vehicle' but it really is a new take on the five-door hatchback or what is now referred to as a crossover vehicle—a wagon or sport utility-type body design on a car rather than truck-based platform.

My colleague Jim Robinson, I think described it best in his first drive report of the Soul, calling it "basically a small box for the engine and drivetrain attached to a bigger box for people." He said the Soul is "one of the new breed of vehicles that are high on content, high on style, low on price, and, well, square."

The Soul, however, has an all-new platform with a wheelbase of 2,550 mm (100.4 in) and an overall length of 4,105 mm (161.6 in). It offers front-wheel drive and a fully independent front suspension with MacPherson struts, coil springs, gas shock absorbers and stabilizer bar. At the back is a transverse torsion beam axle with trailing arms, coil spring and gas shock absorbers.

This is all aimed at providing steering stability, responsive handling and passenger comfort. If you move up from the base level, some models feature a sport-tuned suspension with firmer springs, re-tuned shock absorbers and a large front stabilizer bar for a sportier ride.

Among the other 'boxy' designs out there are Nissan's new Cube along with the Honda Element and the Scion xB, a Toyota brand that has been sold in the U.S. for years but is finally coming to Canada for 2009.

Designed by Kia's Southern California design team, the Soul is meant to stand out from the crowd



ABOVE: Kia is thinking inside the box with its new 2010 Soul five-door hatchback, one of the new breed of boxy small cars. Prices start at \$15,495, climbing to \$22,195 for this 4u Burner model.

Right: The interior of the 2010 Kia Soul 4u Burner edition, featuring a red/black colour combination. There are four basic interior trim combinations with the Burner being the topline.



with its edgy, angular look, unlike previous Kia products that have tended to blend in with the competition.

The Soul has a low, wide stance with an angled line around the windows and a rounded nose with flared headlamps that seem to create an illusion of eyes and eyebrows at the front corners. Meanwhile Kia calls its grille a "tiger mouth" design and it adds to the distinctive look.

Priced from \$15,495 the Soul is intended to help change the staid image of Kia's products, while at the same time offering value, technology and safety features today's consumers are demanding.

My recent tester was a top-of-the-line Soul 2.0 4u Burner model, priced at \$22,195 and featuring a four-speed automatic transmission, power sunroof, 18-inch alloy wheels and a funky "Burner" interior with a sport red/black interior colour scheme on the dash, steering wheel, door mouldings and seats.

Base engine is a 1.6-litre DOHC inline four-cylinder, making 122 hp and 115 lb/ft of torque mated with a five-speed manual. The rest of the trim levels get the 2.0-litre DOHC inline four-cylinder that was in my test vehicle. It produces 142 hp and 137 lb/ft of torque with either a five-speed manual or four-speed automatic.

The Soul got a good workout in a drive north of Toronto to cottage country to visit friends. My wife and I were able to get all our gear in the back with one of the rear seats folded flat. I'm not sure how much cargo volume that gave us, but specs put it at 546 litres (19.3 cu ft) with the seats up and 1,511 litres (53.4 cu ft) with them folded.

Heated seats are standard on all trim levels, because as Kia says, "this is Canada, baby!"

The dashboard features a three-gauge instrument cluster, LCD illumination and a floating centre stack with access to the AM/FM/CD/MP3 audio system with Sirius satellite radio capability. Among the standard features are air conditioning, tilt steering wheel, power windows/door locks, and external temperature display.

The 1.6L Soul comes only with the five-speed manual and basic black interior. On the 2.0L, entry level is the 2u model, priced at \$17,995 (\$19,195 with automatic) and featuring the Soul logo in the patterned cloth seats. The 4u model adds 18-inch alloys, power tilt and sliding sunroof, premium audio system and the sport-tuned suspension for \$19,995 (\$21,195 for automatic). The Retro model gives a beige/black interior combination at \$20,695 (\$21,895 for automatic), while the 4u Burner is priced at \$20,995 (\$22,195 for automatic).

On the safety front, Kia doesn't scrimp on the Soul as six airbags are standard with front, side and side airbags on all trim levels plus front-seat anti-whiplash headrests. ABS, traction control and electronic stability control come on all models except the entry-level 1.6L. Of course, Kia's standard five year, 100,000 km comprehensive warranty that covers virtually everything on the vehicle comes with the Soul along with the peace of mind of five years of roadside assistance throughout North America.

One neat feature that will be a hit with the younger set are the LED mood speakers in the 4u model that pulse to the beat of the music or add mood lighting to the cabin. Not my style, but sure to appeal to the "hipper" crowd.

A number of dealer installed extras are offered with to allow you to express your 'Soul' with features such as a rear spoiler, front skirt package, side and rear skirts, 18-inch alloy wheels and the headlight "eyeline" that adds a style accent to the headlight design. A total of 60 accessories are available, including chrome accents, body decals and upgraded gear-shift knob.

It all adds up to an exciting new package that Kia hopes will be the start of a whole new, hipper image for the Korean automaker.

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