

All Forms of Economy

Eco-Friendly Kia Niro Aims For Efficiency, Value

By Derek Price

CARGAZING.COM

Driving the Kia Niro is proof that one doesn't have to spend a lot of money or burn a lot of gas to enjoy a crossover vehicle.

After a complete redesign for 2023 that made it roomier and more stylish, the Niro retains its unique spot in the car market for people who want SUV-like styling, a practical cabin layout and outstanding fuel economy, all without breaking the bank.

The Niro is available in three eco-friendly versions.

The cheapest and likely sales champion is the Niro Hybrid, starting at \$26,840, which combines a 1.6-liter engine with an electric motor and battery pack to deliver 53 mpg in the city and 54 on the highway.

For even better gas mileage, plus the possibility of driving up to 33 miles on electric power, Kia also offers a plug-in hybrid version starting at \$34,290. It's rated for the equivalent of 108 mpg, although real-world gas mileage will depend heavily on how it's driven.

Finally, there's the Niro EV, which dumps the gasoline engine in favor of a 64.8-kWh battery and higher price tag of \$39,600. It can drive 253 miles on electric power, the federal government claims.



Kia redesigned its small Niro crossover for 2023 with a more SUV-like shape, including what Kia calls the “Aero Blade” on the rear sides to route airflow and catch the eye.

My tester was the plug-in hybrid version, the one that makes the most logical sense because it combines the benefits of EVs — being able to drive short distances on electric power without burning any gasoline at all — without the range limitations of a full EV.

The plug-in hybrid's gasoline engine means it's still usable for road trips with no charging stops required, negating the biggest drawback of EVs in America today.

Granted, the Niro still has drawbacks of its own. It's noisier than many competi-

tors at highway speeds, and that great gas mileage comes at the expense of pokey acceleration. It also feels unsettled over bumps and isn't much fun to drive on curvy roads, which is one of the biggest reasons some of us like small cars in the first place.

On the flip side, most buyers don't care about those things, especially if they're trying to get the most vehicle for the money. That's where the Niro excels.

Every single version, including the base model priced under \$27,000, comes with blind spot warning,

lane keep assist and rear cross-traffic sensors.

It also feels spacious from the inside, despite being a small vehicle overall. It has more rear legroom than the bigger Honda CR-V, for example, and has a high roofline that makes the cabin seem deceptively airy.

Appearance-wise, the redesign for 2023 is a big improvement over the Niro's previous cutesy look. Its lines carry the swagger of an SUV to contradict its hatchback-like length, and a unique structure on the back of the vehicle that can be painted in contrasting colors

— something Kia calls the Aero Blade — helps it turn heads.

Its SUV presentation is all about style, though, not substance. You can't get a Niro with all-wheel drive, for example, and it still rides close to the ground like a compact car.

As I see it, though, that's just honesty. The Niro unpretentiously embraces its role as a city car designed for what many of today's buyers are trying to find: SUV looks, lots of tech and environmental consciousness, all without carrying a bloated price.

AT A GLANCE

What was tested?

2023 Kia Niro PHEV SX Touring (\$39,490). Options: Black C-pillar trim (\$195), SX Touring cold weather package (\$500), carpeted floor mats (\$155). Price as tested (including \$1,295 destination charge): \$41,635

By The Numbers

Wheelbase: 107.1 in.
Length: 174 in.
Width: 71.8 in.
Height: 60.8 in.
Powertrain: 1.6-liter four-cylinder engine plus electric motor (combined 180 hp, 195 ft. lbs.)
Transmission: Continuously variable
Fuel economy: 108 MPGe combined

RATINGS

Style: 6
Performance: 4
Price: 8
Handling: 4
Ride: 6
Comfort: 6
Quality: 7
Overall: 7

Why buy it? After a redesign for this year, the Niro offers SUV-like styling and practicality with Prius-like fuel efficiency. Its fresh look is a big improvement.

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After its redesign, the Niro is both realistically and perceptively larger than before. A high roofline makes it feel spacious, and it offers more rear legroom than most vehicles in its class.

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A CLOSER LOOK



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FACTS, FIGURES AND RATINGS

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