

# President's Day

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Read Dan Lyons' test drive of the 2017 Mazda3.

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### TEST DRIVE

## Slybrid

### 2017 Kia Niro

DAN LYONS | text and photos  
Special to the Times Union

**W**hen the first hybrid powered cars arrived, they focused on function to the exclusion of fashion. About the only time that “good styling” and “hybrids” were mentioned in the same breath was to say how little of the former was possessed by the latter.



Hybrid styling has improved, but strangeness is threatening to become the New Normal for the breed. Against this backdrop the new Kia Niro rolls out, looking every bit like a modern crossover — and unlike most hybrids.

While the design doesn't suggest it, Niro is indeed a hybrid. The powertrain pairs an Atkinson cycle, 1.6L four-cylinder gas engine, with a single electric motor/generator, making a combined

#### 2017 Kia Niro

MSRP: \$22,800 - \$29,650 · As Tested: \$32,445

139 horsepower and 195 lb.-ft. of torque. The car's lithium-ion polymer battery pack is located beneath the second row seats.

In the early days of their development, Continuously Variable Transmissions (CVTs) were prone to pushing the engine to a certain, annoying rev range — and staying there. With no lower range to shift to, the transmission sat there singing, “Shiiiiift Meeeee” as you rolled down the road, wishing you could reach for a higher gear that didn't exist.

While modern CVT's are much better, some are still annoying, and many hybrids use them. Happily, Kia has



**NIRO**, Kia's brand new hybrid crossover, pairs a 1.6L four-cylinder gas engine with a single electric motor for 139 horsepower. Its absence of an AWD option is unusual for the segment, and may dissuade buyers in snowier climes.

eschewed the CVT, outfitting the new Niro instead with a six-speed, dual clutch transmission. The distinct gear shift changes improve the car's drivability, while the lack of CVT droning improves cabin livability.

Slipping the gear shifter to the left invokes the transmission's sport mode. Unlike many adjustable driving settings, Kia's makes a noticeable difference — especially compared to the default (and relatively sedate) Eco mode. “Manumatic” shifting can be done by tapping the lever fore or aft. The transmission doesn't have the lickety-split quickness from gear to gear that some DCTs do, but it does allow you to widen the distance between shifts and keep the engine on the boil, enhancing the car's responsiveness. And, manually or in full auto mode, the powertrain is pretty quiet. Engine noise is largely absent, even at full throttle.

Though not quick, Niro has class competitive responsiveness. The driveline has sufficient resources on tap for all normal driving situations. As with any small

displacement engine, passing takes planning, but generally, the car operates effectively, cruises quietly, while sipping petrol through a very small straw.

How small? The fuel economy estimates vary according to model chosen. The base, FE model is the most mileage minded, with estimates of 52/49/50, and an effective cruising range of roughly 600 miles between fill-ups. LX an EX — the expected volume leaders — are next, at 51/46/49. Finally, the Touring Launch edition and range-topping Touring models check in with 46/40/43. The difference in mileage is largely due to weight and wheels. The added equipment adds some lb.'s, and the sporty looking 18-inch rims/tires that Touring/Touring Launch are shod with, offer more rolling resistance than the 16s fitted elsewhere in the lineup.

I drove Niro through city traffic, byways and 75 mph highways, and netted 40-something mpg's throughout, with lots of time in sport mode, and little regard for maximizing mileage. Impressive frugality.

*Continued on page 4*

The new Kia Niro looks every bit like a modern crossover — and unlike most hybrids.



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