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TEST DRIVE

Soul Survivor

2017 Kia Soul Exclaim

DAN LYONS | text
Special to the Times Union

When it arrived in the U.S. in 2010, the Kia Soul became the newest member of the “Appliance Moderne” school of auto styling. Soul joined the Honda Element, Nissan Cube and Scion xB in this class, all of which featured sharp cornered styling with a function-first feel. Fast forward to 2017. Element, Cube and xB have all departed (the latter taking its brand with it), leaving the angular Kia as the Soul Survivor. That the Kia survives and thrives (it's Kia's best-selling model) while the others went away is proof that it can be hip to be square, provided that the square is a little edgy.

This is a refresh year for Soul, and while most of the changes take the form of facelift freshening and content enhancements, the news is found under the hood of



2017 Kia Soul Exclaim

MSRP: \$16,100 (base) - As Tested: \$27,620

the top trim level. The Exclaim (or ! — it also goes by the punctuation mark symbol) gets a bigger engine for 2017. Base models are equipped with a 130 h.p., 1.6L four-cylinder. Plus packs a 2.0-liter four with 161 horsepower. The Exclaim is fitted with a turbocharged, 1.6L four-cylinder engine. The turbo mill is rated at 201 horsepower @ 6,000 rpm and 195 lb.-ft. of torque @ 1,500-4,500 rpm. A six-speed manual transmission is offered only on Base models. Optional on Base and standard on Plus is a six-speed automatic. Exclaim's turbo four is paired with a seven speed dual-clutch automatic transmission.

With 40 more horses and 45 more lb.-ft. of torque than the 2.0, the 1.6L Exclaim is, unsurprisingly, considerably quicker than the other Souls. It's mid-6-second 0-60 time is about two seconds faster than 2.0L equipped models. While max horsepower is achieved at 6,000 rpm, peak torque occurs from 1,500-4,500 rpm, so it's snappy off the line as well as responsive at cruising speed. Punch up the “Sport” setting on the Drive Mode Selector, and transmission shift points are



THE KIA SOUL enjoys a refresh for 2017, including a facelift freshening. The Soul's squared-off shape lends itself to more cargo space: in this case, a capacity of 188 cu. ft., expandable to 61.3.

remapped, throttle response quickens, and steering feel gets some added heft. The dual clutch transmission is noticeably quicker shifting than the six-speed automatic, and you can use it in manumatic mode, by tapping the floor shifter. However, you can't grab a gear paddle on the Exclaim-exclusive, flat-bottom steering wheel, as it has no flippers. The addition of the D-shaped wheel but lack of shifter paddles suggests that Kia sees the turbo model as simply a sportier Soul, not an all-out sport compact.

Similarly, the suspension is unchanged from the setup found in other Soul trims, though the footprint is slightly larger with Exclaim's 18-inch wheels/tires, and front disc brakes are beefier for 2017. If you get in an auto-cross dust-up with a veteran sports compact like the VW Golf GTI or the Ford Focus ST, for example, you'll be looking at their taillights. But, the turbo Soul has good reflexes, and the lively new engine gives an added dimension to the car's funky personality.

All Soul models are front-wheel-drive. While drivers have and do get by with FWD in winter around here (and, if you'll forgive a flickering, black and white reference, some of us even managed fine with rear wheel drive), the lack of an AWD version takes a bite out of potential Soul sales in Snowbelt states like ours. The car's overall dimensions are compact and easy to fit in parking spots or merging lane openings. Blind spot detection and rear cross traffic alert (available on Plus and Exclaim trims) are recommended to improve

the driver's rear $\frac{3}{4}$ awareness. In an option oddity, lane departure warning and forward collision warning are optional on mid-level Plus but unavailable on top rung Exclaim. Ride quality gets progressively stiffer as you go from 16-inch wheels (Base) to 17-inch (Plus) to 18-inch (Exclaim), though it never rises to the level of objectionable, even on !, the model with the shortest sidewalls. The car's boxy form isn't very aero-friendly, so it's two hands on the wheel on windy days.

Boxy shapes are, however, very friendly for holding things (if you doubt me on this, go try and pack something in a round box, or maybe a triangular one. I'll wait). Cargo capacity measures 18.8 cu. ft., expandable to 61.3 cu. ft. Split, rear seats fold nearly flat, liftover height is manageable low, and there's hidden storage space below deck. People, too, benefit from vehicles with upright lines when it comes to fitting in them. Soul will hold adults in both rows, and there's sufficient headroom even with the optional (\$1,000), panoramic sunroof.

Other options of note include the harmon-kardon 315 watt, 8-speaker sound system. The tunes maker is part of a pricey-but-lengthy list collected in the \$3,000 Technology package. Other items included here: navigation system with 8-inch touchscreen, speaker lights, projector beam headlights, LED fog lights, taillights and positioning lights, power mirrors and front seats, heated front and rear seats and steering wheel, blind spot detection and USB chargers.

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Kia's Soul proves it's hip to be square, provided that the square is a little edgy.

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