

Is it better to learn to drive stick first?

Car Talk weighs in. SEE INSIDE



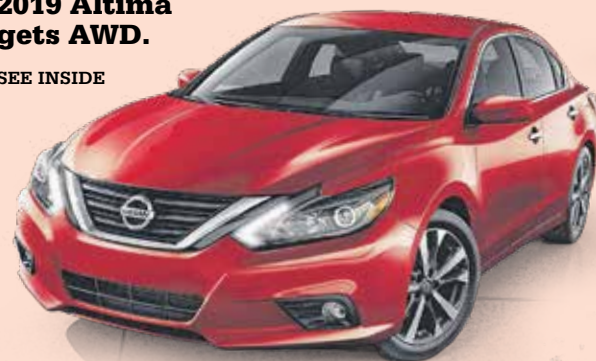
Self-delivering pizza?

It's an autonomous "fusion" between Ford and Domino's. SEE INSIDE



2019 Altima gets AWD.

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TEST DRIVE

Green On Demand EX Premium

DAN LYONS | text
Special to the Times Union

New to Kia showrooms this year is the Niro Plug-in Hybrid (PHEV). This latest addition to the Niro lineup is the company's third plug-in hybrid. Niro PHEV packages a 1.6L four-cylinder gas engine with an 8.9 kWh lithium-polymer battery pack and a 60 horsepower electric motor.

EVs and PHEVs are all about mpg's, and Niro's numbers are impressive. EPA estimates for fuel economy are 48 city, 44 highway, 46 combined, and the MPGe (miles per gallon of gas equivalent) rating is 105. With both the gasoline and electric power systems working together, the estimated driving range is up to 560 miles. Pit stops when traveling will therefore be determined more by fullness of bladder than by emptiness of gas tank.

Completing the drivetrain is a six-speed dual clutch transmission (DCT). The use of a DCT as opposed to

2018 Kia Niro PHEV EX Premium
Base MSRP: \$ 27,900 (LX); \$ 34,500 (EX Premium);
As tested: \$35,970

a CVT is significant. Small engine vehicles with CVTs are prone to drone, as they look to wring all available power out of a small displacement engine. The DCT is a drone deterrent. At full throttle or under load (as on an incline), engine noise is noticeable. But since shifting is possible, it isn't the steady state/teeth grate tone that you might endure with some CVTs. And Niro PHEV is golf cart quiet in full EV mode, which can last up to 26 miles, on a full charge.

Getting the battery fully juiced takes about two and



KIA DEBUTS THE PLUG-IN HYBRID version of its Niro crossover, running on both battery and gas-powered motor. EPA estimates for fuel economy are 48 city, 44 highway, 46 combined, and the MPGe rating is 105.

a half hours with a 240 volt (level 2) charger, and less than nine hours with a regular house current (120v/level 1). Everybody's driving days are different, but using a conventional, 9-5 shift as an example, even if you work late, and even if you rely on a wall socket charge, there's time enough to bring the battery pack back to full current by early morning the next day.

Depending on your daily agenda, a marathon's worth of miles is enough to cover a fistful of errands or the typical work commute for many people, without much dipping into the petroleum.

And if your plans change, you've always got a backup. When you exhaust the EV power, the gas engine is ready to step in. You can be as green as you feel, or as your schedule allows. The powertrain's combined output

of 139 horsepower and 195 lb.-ft. of torque is fine for normal driving. Among the driving mode choices, the default (Eco) feels the most logy; Sport the most frisky, and there's noticeably less steering boost in the latter than the former. Aside from sharpening throttle response and steering heft, Sport holds lower gears longer, so you will trade some mpg's for the added "whee."

The front-wheel-drive Niro has no AWD option, which is at odds with the company's classification of this model as a crossover. Niro is best categorized as a small wagon, a breed that I've long admired for the combination of car-like drivability with added versatility. Hybrids ride the same chassis as other Niro models. The suspension (independent MacPherson strut front, independent multi-link

PHEVs sidestep the grid issue. You can run on gas anytime and anywhere you want.

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