

2017 Kia Niro is most affordable hybrid SUV

February 15 2017, by Ann M. Job



This image provided by Kia shows the 2017 Kia Niro. Kia's newest vehicle, the 2017 Niro, is the lowest-priced, gasoline-electric hybrid SUV on the market and is rated as high as 50 miles per gallon in combined city/highway travel. (Greg Jarem/Kia via AP)

Kia's newest vehicle, the 2017 Niro, is the lowest-priced, gasoline-electric hybrid SUV on the market and is rated as high as 50 miles per gallon in combined city/highway travel.

Starting manufacturer's suggested retail price is \$23,785 for a front-

wheel drive, five-seat Niro FE with four-cylinder engine mated to an electric motor and lithium ion battery pack to generate a total of 139 horsepower.

The base price includes an automatic transmission, rearview camera, keyless entry, cruise control, seven air bags, Bluetooth hands-free phone connectivity, audio controls on the steering wheel and a 7-inch display screen in the middle of the dashboard.

Even with luxury features added, such as a Harman Kardon premium sound system, leather-trimmed seats, power sunroof, navigation system and heated steering wheel, the Niro still can be priced under \$31,000. This pricing undercuts other hybrid SUVs that combine power from an onboard electric motor with a gasoline engine for optimum fuel mileage, such as the 2017 Toyota RAV4, which starts at \$29,990.

However, Toyota's 2017 Prius c small hatchback remains the lowest-priced hybrid car in the United States with a starting MSRP plus destination charge of \$21,035.

While affordability is the Niro's most attractive trait, this small SUV also appeals with its comfortable seating positions, pleasant driving traits, decent passenger space and flexible, SUV-like cargo room.

Similar in size to the 2017 Honda HR-V and Buick Encore small SUVs, the five-door Niro slots below the Sportage as Kia's smallest SUV.

The Niro is sold only as a hybrid, so the onboard electric motor and lithium ion battery pack supplement the rather meager power—104 horsepower and 109 foot-pounds of torque—of the 1.6-liter, double overhead cam, direct injection, four-cylinder engine.

Maximum horsepower totals 139, while torque can peak quickly at 195

foot-pounds to move the Niro in plucky, but not overtly sporty, fashion.

There's no droning or stressing of a continuously variable transmission in the Niro during acceleration as there are in most other gas-electric hybrids.

Kia uses a six-speed, dual-clutch automatic transmission in the Niro for more natural-feeling gearing and responsiveness. It worked well most of the time in the test Niro Touring model. But occasionally, the transition between power sources felt less than seamless.

Regenerative braking and the engine help replenish the battery pack, but a plug-in Niro is due later in 2017.

The top fuel mileage of 52 mpg in city driving and 49 mpg on highways is for the base, Niro FE model, which weighs the least. City mileage is rated higher than highway mileage because the electric power is able to assist more often in city travel.

The test Niro Touring, which is the heaviest of all Niros at well over 3,200 pounds, was rated at 46/40 mpg by the U.S. government and averaged 38.8 mpg during the test drive with some aggressive driving. This real world mileage translated to an impressive 462 miles on a single tank of fuel.

The Niro, which is wider than the HR-V and Encore, felt stable and roomy and had an unexpectedly quiet interior.

Back-seat passengers have 37.4 inches of legroom, while there's nearly 42 inches for front-seat riders. Headroom all around is more than 39 inches.

The luxury features in the Touring model included heated and ventilated

front seats, memory driver seat, blind spot monitor, rear cross traffic alert, turn signals in the outside mirrors, front and rear park assist, leather, sunroof, 18-inch wheels, and premium audio.

Outside styling is mainstream and not particularly memorable, but everything was easy to understand and well organized inside the Niro.

Rear seatbacks fold down flat to expand cargo space. The cargo floor sits up at bumper level, so there's no lifting heavy objects up and out.

All-wheel drive is not offered on the Niro, and towing capacity is limited.

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