



A Little Asian Soul

By Roger Witherspoon

It was clear that something different was happening when the video opened with a trio of hamsters bouncing to hip hop music as the scrawl stated “This is how we roll.” What’s up with the hip hop hamsters?

To begin with, they were bouncing in a set of wheels dubbed the Kia Soul, the latest and, perhaps, liveliest edition to the box-shaped compact SUV class pioneered by the Toyota Scion and popularized by the Honda Fit and Nissan Cube. But where those three Japanese vehicles are variations on a theme the Koreans – who have added Blacks, Hispanics, and blond-haired, California surfers to their design teams – have thrown away the base, box style book and come up with something different.

Stylistically, the Soul isn’t so much a car that was drawn outside the box – they just opened the box up. The front of the roof was raised, as if pried by a can opener, giving the impression of a cap arrogantly pushed back on the head. The front has a thin, stretched grill and flat hood flanked by wrap-around head lights. The overall impression is somewhere between a smirk and a smile as the Soul rolls by.

Under that flat hood is a 2.0-liter, four cylinders, fuel injected engine cranking out just 142 horsepower and 137 pound/feet of torque. But that is more than enough to provide a lot of power to such a lightweight vehicle. The soul, with its five-speed manual transmission, is surprisingly peppy for a compact box and, if you feel like flirting with serious traffic tickets, can easily bounce into triple digits and traffic court.

Inside, the Soul offers a lot for an \$18,000 car. The décor is two toned and brash. The test car was charcoal and red, the bright red dash broken by the gray instrument

clusters. That red theme extends to the huge sub woofers on the doors, which bounce with bright red lights timed to the beat of the music pouring out of the car's eight large speakers. There is a choice of noise-makers for the 300-watt sound system, which is strong enough to serve as the sound system for a block party. The Soul has a single, in-dash CD player, as well as iPod, MP3, and USB-port connections. There is also AM/FM and Sirius satellite radio. The entertainment network is accessible via fingertip controls on the steering wheel, along with a Bluetooth system that is easy to set up and use. All that is missing is a navigation system, though that would be unusual in this price category.

As a small SUV, the Soul has more room than one could ever get in a typical sub-compact car. And the powered sunroof adds to the Soul's feel of ambiance. When the rear seats are folded flat, the Soul can easily haul a washer or dryer, and its sport tuned suspension will get the machine to its destination in one working piece. The seats are cloth and manually operated – which is to be expected in this price range – but they are easily adjusted, wide, thickly padded and would not cast a pall over a cross country trip.

All things considered, the hip hop hamsters are likely to make an impact rolling through the small SUV market.



2010 Kia Soul

MSRP:		\$18,345
EPA Mileage:	24 MPG City	30 MPG Highway

Performance / Safety:

2.0 – Liter DOHC aluminum in-line 4-cylinder engine producing 142 horsepower and 137 pound-feet of torque; front wheel drive; rack & pinion steering; sport tuned suspension; independent front suspension with stabilizer bar; Torsion beam rear

suspension; 18-inch alloy wheels; 4-wheel disc brakes; 5-speed manual transmission; anti-lock brakes; electronic stability control; front seat mounted, side airbags; full-length side curtain airbags.

Interior / Comfort:

AM/FM/ Sirius satellite radio; 300-watt sound system with 8 speakers and center amplifier; CD, MP3, & iPod player; USB port; cloth, manually operated seats; power sunroof; tile leather wrapped steering wheel with fingertip audio, Bluetooth, and cruise controls; 60/40 folding rear seat.