

Roaming emperor



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Tim Barnes-Clay

Finally, the electric cars are starting to flow into the market. Here's the latest contender – the new Kia e-Niro. And the Korean automaker hopes this is the car that will put to rest the reservations of electric vehicle naysayers.

EV sceptics tend to think that vehicles without combustion engines don't have the range or the performance of regular cars, and they always criticise the price. "Less is more," they say – less range for more money.

Well, after having a first drive of the 2019 Kia e-Niro in South Korea, we're pleased to report that the car is highly likely to turn these disbelievers into believers. Why? Well, the e-Niro is more credible than any electric car to date, in terms of performance, range and price. That includes Hyundai's mechanically related Kona Electric. While the two vehicles have similar powertrains and platforms, the Kia houses its ingenious technology in a more traditionally-designed and more down-to-earth bundle.

Both the new e-Niro and the existing hybrid-

powered Niro take on a curious external form, akin to an SUV in profile but with the ride height and wheels of a regular hatchback. But look closely and the e-Niro has some slight differences. You'll spot the sleeker front bumper, a faired-in grille and 17in alloys. The rear of the Kia wears modified trim to complement the nose, too, helping to provide a more slippery shape.

Inside, occupants will find the e-Niro even more adaptable than the hybrid version. The upshot is a vehicle that offers plenty of room, with a cabin that doesn't have any of the obstacles that can afflict SUVs.

It might not give the seven-seat practicality of some bigger SUVs, but the pure electric e-Niro is a big-hearted five-seater. The driver and front seat passenger have plentiful room for head, shoulders and feet, and getting a comfy driving position is undemanding. You're not as elevated as in some SUVs, but the view forward is still lofty compared with that offered by standard hatchbacks.

Rear seat passengers will be just as contented with their journeying conditions, with not even the middle occupant getting the short straw on any but

the most protracted trips, where shoulder-room can sometimes feel a little tight with three abreast. There are convenient compartments for bits and pieces, including a stowage box in the centre console.

The e-Niro's 451-litre boot is larger than the Nissan Qashqai's, but it's smaller than the 510 litres in the Seat Ateca. Mind you, it's still a good size, and you can store the charging cables under the load floor.

The e-Niro is 19mm shorter than a Qashqai at 4,375mm against 4,394mm, but longer than the Ateca's 4,363mm. But it's less tall than its conventionally-engined SUV-crossover competitors.

Inside, the car is largely unchanged from the non-EV Kia Niro. The dashboard is bland yet functional, and there's an ultra-modern infotainment system. The only obvious difference is within the centre console. The usual gear selector has been replaced with a rotary dial. This little change in details contributes some additional storage room too.

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At the time of writing, there's just one trim level to select, called the First Edition. It's not very original, but who cares when you get a car as well kitted-out as this? The e-Niro in this guise comes with a reversing camera, heated leather seats, lane-keeping assist and forward collision warning. No LED headlights, though, and that's a shame.

The Kia gets a 204PS electric motor that propels the front wheels. This, as well as the 64kWh battery pack, is used in Hyundai's Kona Electric. However, unlike the Kona, a 136PS, 39kWh variant won't be sold in the UK.

The motor's power output boosts the Kia e-Niro's athleticism well above the current plug-in and hybrid Niro models. What's more, once the substantial surge of torque is taken into consideration, the car feels livelier than many 'warm' family-hatchbacks. There's even enough grunt to get a squeal from the front tyres, as we found out when putting our foot down to escape Seoul's traffic.

There are paddles behind the e-Niro's steering wheel to regulate the force of brake regeneration. And, while you can't drive the Kia with one pedal as you can in Nissan's Leaf, the trio of levels allows you to make the most of the e-Niro's charge.

Kia is a marque whose name has been steadily rising over the years. Once bracketed with budget motoring, the standing of its products has improved to a point where they're on a level playing

© Pro Driver Media Ltd field with most mainstream European brands – see last year's Stinger grand tourer for ample evidence.

This means safety is up there with the best, with kit such as autonomous emergency braking and lane keeping assist being fitted as standard on the e-Niro. Therefore, the all-electric car should get the same top five-star Euro NCAP crash safety score as other Niro models equipped with this safety bundle.

The e-Niro cuts the amount of work for its driver when lane keeping assist works in union with adaptive cruise control to follow the vehicle in front, identifying the road markings and making steering alterations to keep you in lane on busy motorways. We found this very handy when driving in the hectic traffic around Seoul.

What about the all-important range then? Well, Kia claims that the e-Niro can manage 282 miles on one charge. More impressively, the official figure is higher when driving around town. That means a private hire driver using an e-Niro would only need to charge up every couple of days – useful for drivers who don't have access to overnight charging facilities.

Granted, the topping up process isn't as straightforward as a quick fill up at the pumps, but connect the Kia to a 100kW quick charger and less than an hour later (54 minutes) you'll have charged the battery pack from next to nothing to 80%. That's enough energy for the e-Niro to cover between 226 and nearly 300 miles, depending on how you drive it. Zero to 60mph is achieved in a quick 7.5 seconds, and the top speed is 104 mph.

verdict

So, how much does this new all-electric car cost? Well, at £32,995 (after the £3,500 Government grant), the Kia e-Niro is on the money against key EV rivals such as Nissan Leaf Tekna and Hyundai Ioniq EV. But significantly, e-Niro battery range outshines both the Leaf and the Ioniq, which we tested extensively in our November 2018 issue, and which each offer around 120-140 miles of range when fully charged. On paper, e-Niro offers twice that, putting it into Jaguar I-Pace territory, though at around half the price.

So for the moment, the e-Niro has few direct rivals. Until other automakers start manufacturing electric vehicles with better range, there's no other sub-£35,000 EV with a range of more than 250 miles.

Indeed, there are very few drawbacks with this e-Niro. Okay, it can understeer a bit due to the weighty battery-pack, but then this pack gives the Kia a low centre of gravity. So, no, there really aren't any significant gripes from us.

At the end of the day, the all-new e-Niro is a no-nonsense five-door crossover that makes electric car ownership more appealing than ever. The model goes on sale in the UK in April 2019, and London-based private hire operators looking for a TfL ULEZ-compliant EV for post-2020 fleet expansion should put the e-Niro on the shopping list.

data

PRICE as tested	£32,995 (after grant)
WARRANTY	2 years / unlimited miles
INSURANCE	--
VED BAND	A

performance

ENGINE	Single electric motor
TRANSMISSION	Single-speed auto, FWD
POWER	204PS at 3,800rpm
TORQUE	395Nm at 3,600rpm
0-62MPH	7.5sec
TOP SPEED	104mph
RANGE	282miles
CO ₂ EMISSIONS	0g/km

dimension

LENGTH	4,375mm
WIDTH	1,805mm
HEIGHT	1,570mm
WHEELBASE	2,700mm
LOADSPACE	451 litres
BATTERY CAPACITY	180Ah