

A Warm Glow



Ian Lamming gets a warm glow from a plug-in SUV from Kia

PEOPLE are harsh; I blame social media. Before the likes of Face twit and Booker, I'm sure everyone was a bit politer.

I'm old fashioned and believe in traditional values, like humility, courtesy and respect. I'm also a self-confessed car nerd; I love cars, always have.

But now I'm getting slagged off for not being critical enough about the cars I test. Like I said, people are harsh.

Truth is, most, if not all, modern cars are pretty good. Some can be dull and boring others fabulous, but they will all still do the job.

Some might be ugly, others gorgeous, but then beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so who am I to judge?

So, to this week's test car. Well, with this criticism in mind, I must start with a negative – my wire is too short. But then that's not really the fault of the new Kia Niro PHEV (plug-in). My car park space is an inordinate distance from the nearest socket, must be 75 yards.

Anyway, I'm not really sure of the point of PHEVs. I've had three now and never bothered getting the wire out of the bag with any, even when a socket was in reaching distance. I suppose if I had I might have approached the claimed 217.3 miles per gallon promised in the brochure and the 29g/km CO2 figure – that's fresh air isn't it? But I didn't, so I suppose I might as well have driven the normal Niro hybrid.

Right, that's as much criticism as I can manage in one road test without having a lie down in a dark room.

Plugs, wires and sockets apart, I continue to like the Niro, which drives just like its wireless hybrid stablemate.

This smart and very aerodynamic SUV has a very efficient 1.6 direct injection petrol motor and an electric motor that works in harmony, with a combined output of 139hp, which it passes to the front wheels only via a dual clutch automatic transmission. Thank goodness, no continuously variable transmission here. I hate the way CVTs stick the rev needle in the power band until the transmission catches up, meanwhile they sound all thrashy like they are about to blow up. By contrast, DCT is as smooth but much kinder on the ears.

And another reason Niro warms the cockles of my heart is this. The outside temperature gauge reads -9 degrees. That's a tad chilly even for us hardy northerners. But press a couple of buttons and the following occurs – the seats heat to barbecue temperatures in seconds and so does the steering wheel. It's a petrol motor rather than a diesel so the engine temp, and hence the climate control, rises speedily too. Ah, nice and just the ticket on a Baltic morning.

If the air temp is -9 degrees then the road is going to be even colder. Salt and grit only work to a low of -10 so that's why the roads are

sheet ice. I don't understand the physics, I suspect it is the seamless way the electric motor feeds the power in, but the Niro grips remarkably even in these conditions. It really is confidence-inspiring the way it shrugs off ice and snow with just two-wheel drive.

I could go on because the Niro has so many strengths (I love the stupendous build quality and supreme ride, the way it drives and handles, the clear graphics and connectivity) but I won't because I don't want to upset my detractors any more than my positive nature already does. That would be impolite.

Fact File

- Kia Niro
- Engine: 1.6 petrol with electric motor
- Power: 139BHP
- 0-62mph: 10.4secs
- Top speed: 107mph
- Combined MPG: 217.3
- Transmission: six-speed dual clutch automatic
- CO2 g/km: 29
- Price: 30,495.00