By Steve Schaefer

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The Kia Soul is a tasty flavor of cube-shaped vehicle that you can buy today. You may already be familiar with the Scion xB, which started this whole box-shaped car segment about a decade ago. Then, there was Honda's Element, a little larger, but still the same idea. The Nissan Cube came along too, in a rounded, fanciful, asymmetrical interpretation.

The idea is that some folks don't care if the car is sexy and swoopy — they seek a practical ride

that hauls people and stuff, that's straightforward and no-nonsense. The original Scion xB (called the bB in Japan) was a youthful fashion statement, and over in the U.S. it became a favorite for tuners and custom shops to play with.

The Soul seems to do the best job, it appears at this writing, of getting the recipe right. The xB has become bloated and uncute in its second generation, and the Cube is, well, kind of wacky. I love the Cube, with its strange carpet on the dash, single side wrap-around rear window, and water-in-the-lake ceiling shape. But the Kia is more balanced.

The body is overtly boxy, but also has a wedge quality, looking alert, active and even a little macho. It comes in unique colors, such as Molten (like my tester), Dune and Alien Green. The face wears the Kia tiger-nose (pinched in the middle) grille, and the front light pods are fascinatingly complex. The oversize taillamps in back are chunky and look unlike anything else on the road.

The Soul is roomy inside, with a clear view out and more of the tough attitude of the exterior. As Kia has matured (and acquired Audi's former chief designer, Peter Schreyer), the look and feel of its cars have been upgraded significantly.

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