

Road Trip: The 2012 Kia Rio Conquers Nova Scotia

Part One: Halifax to Yarmouth

By Brent Morton

There may not be any better way to get a feel of what a car is all about, discover its strengths and weaknesses, and really put it through all of its paces, than a good old-fashioned road trip. And after having ample opportunity to wheel the 2012 Kia Rio around the city of Halifax, it was high time to give it a try out on the open road, loaded with passengers and luggage, and see how it performed on the long haul.

Although we were limited by time (and weather, as it turned out) to a trip of just two full days and one night, the road layout of western Nova Scotia was perfect for what we had in mind. Starting from Dartmouth, just over the bridges from Halifax proper, we planned to complete approximately a 700-kilometre loop that would see us run west along the south shore of the province on highways 3 and 103, spend a night in Yarmouth, then return to our starting point along the north shore using highways 1 and 101.

Nova Scotia's 100-series highways are high-speed express routes that, generally, are nowhere near as scenic as their single-digit counterparts that run more slowly, but much more interestingly, along the coasts. As all of us were new to Nova Scotia, our plan was to use the expressways only to make time when necessary, and stick to the pleasantly twisty two-lane roads as much as possible.

Upon setting out the first day, we immediately altered our route plan — the flexibility to do this, as all road trippers know, is one of the best parts of the road trip — and made a slight detour east of Dartmouth to Lawrencetown.

This surfing mecca offers good views and high bluffs, and although the day began grey, the Rio posed for an inaugural photo (right) at the Kannon Beach Surf Shop (902-471-0025; kannonbeach.com)



As we settled in to head west, we appreciated that the Rio offers good passenger and cargo space for a subcompact, swallowing luggage for all three of us and offering sufficient rear legroom for our rear passenger to make the entire journey without complaint (in fact, she fell asleep so often on the drive that this is likely an excellent testament to the overall comfort of the rear cabin!)

Heading towards the picturesque (and extremely popular) village of Peggy's Cove, on St. Margaret's Bay southwest of Halifax, we drove the terrific Route 333. This road offers much to delight the sporting driver, with a myriad of twists and turns and, often, fantastic ocean views.

At the time of our Easter weekend trip, traffic was extremely light, and I took the opportunity to aggressively attack the road and work the gearbox of the six-speed manual Rio. One of the most surprising things about the vehicle was how little rowing of the gearbox was required given the hills we encountered and our passenger complement, but the 1.6-litre, 138-horsepower engine never felt taxed by its load.

My main wish on this road was that the steering had more feel — the car corners surprisingly well given its economy-car status and run-of-the-mill 195/55R-16 Kumho tires, but the overly light steering and lack of any sense of what the front tires are actually doing made me feel less involved with the driving experience than I'd have liked on such a great stretch of highway. Still, the relative lack of body roll coupled with strong four-wheel disc brakes gave me confidence to toss the Rio harder than I had expected.

We pulled into Peggy's Cove to find clear skies and light crowds, and enjoyed a stroll on the rocks, a visit to three of the local craft shops, and, of course, found time to grab a snapshot of the oft-photographed lighthouse near the Sou'Wester restaurant and gift shop (peggys-cove.com; 902-823-2561):





A number of artisans have set up shop in Peggy's Cove, and their storefronts, located in colorful, weathered homes or fishing shacks, are as memorable as the area itself.

Here, The Buoy Shack greets visitors with its brightly painted door and starfish in the window.

Returning to the Rio, we set off again for Lunenburg, our next south shore destination, and another famous postcard-pretty town known for its colourful, eclectic buildings as well as for being the home port of the famous schooner *Bluenose II*. In early spring, the start of tourist season is still several weeks away, and coupled with our arrival on a holiday weekend, there was little to do in Lunenburg but explore the waterfront and enjoy a lunch of fish, clams and chips while looking out at the sailing ships shivering in a cool wind, moored at a pier under their winter protective covers.



One tip for visitors to Lunenburg: watch out for the sharks. Fortunately, they're easy to spot, since in these parts, they swim above water.

At this point in the day, we were behind schedule to reach Yarmouth, so the decision was made to hit the highway and make time. Naturally, our stop here wouldn't have been complete without a picture of the trusty Rio, here in front of the Adams & Knickle building on Bluenose Drive.



Once out on the wide, steady stretches of Highway 103, the Kia settled down nicely on cruise control at just over 100 km/h, and the passengers and I began to appreciate some more of its positive qualities.

Unlike its less-than-engaging nature on a winding road, the steering felt perfectly suited for highway cruising. Despite feeling too light in the twisties, at speed the effort is just right, and the leather-wrapped wheel offers access to cruise, phone, and audio controls with buttons and toggles right at your fingertips. I was pleasantly surprised by how stable the Rio felt on the highway, even in crosswinds. It simply doesn't drive like a small car, and doesn't feel like one from the driver's seat (admittedly, some of that feeling comes from the large expanse of dash in front of you, necessitated by the steeply raked windshield.)

For their part, my passengers quickly took advantage of the Rio's UVO entertainment system, which offers touch-screen and voice command interfaces, a USB port, and streaming Bluetooth capability to play music directly from a smartphone or MP3 player, no cables required.

The UVO ("your voice") system, powered by Microsoft, was a \$500 option on the 2012 Rio EX (now standard on the EX trim for 2013) and well worth the upgrade, in my opinion, as it also includes a rear-view camera — previously unheard of in this class of vehicle, and a handy feature, given the Rio hatch's small, high rear glass. We cruised down to Yarmouth, listening to reggae on the six-speaker stereo.

Our arrival in Nova Scotia's west coast capital coincided, fortunately, with a small break in the clouds and the opportunity to drive out to another of the province's famous lighthouses at Cape Forchu to see the late-day sun.

This "apple core" light station, at the end of Route 304 southwest of Yarmouth, offers fantastic views both of the mainland and out to sea, and we couldn't resist snapping a few pictures of ourselves in the giant chair nearby.



The brisk wind eventually forced us back into the Rio, and we returned to Yarmouth, passing through the active fishing port at Yarmouth Bar, a thin strip of land protected from the sea by huge boulders, giving us some idea of how powerful the ocean can be in this area.

Starved from a long afternoon on the road, we ended our day at Rudder's, a seafood restaurant and local brew pub. Live music and a meal of tuna chowder, lobster sandwich, and coconut cream pie were just the ticket to end our first day on the road, while our intrepid Rio enjoyed a well-deserved rest in the parking lot of our B&B.

Next: Part Two – Yarmouth to Halifax

For more information about the places we visited along our route, and for maps, visitors' guides and other information, contact Nova Scotia Tourism (novascotia.com; 1-800-565-0000)