

2,013 Miles. No Electricity. Many Hassles

Our reporter drove from New Orleans to Chicago and back to test the feasibility of take a road trip with a fossil-fueled vehicle. She spent more money keeping it on the road and it cost her sleep.

By Rebecca Fox
The New Orleans Daily Half-Bit

I thought it would be fun.

That's what I told my friend Cheese, who I asked to drive with me from New Orleans to Chicago and back in a fossil-fueled car.

I'd made long road trips before, surviving broken charging stations and little else in my 2021 Kia EV6. The Kia is a RWD with Wind Trim, 77.4 kWh battery and 310 miles rated range (I usually get that driving around NOLA, about 280 on the road). It's my second EV after getting a 2017 Leaf. I figured driving a brand new Honda Civic I'd rented would be a piece of cake.

Sales of gas-powered cars totaled 96% of the market. They must be doing something right, despite the fact that less than half of car buyers say they want their next car to be gas-powered.

Oh – and we aimed to make the 2,000 mile trip in just under 4 days, so Cheese could make it back to her Thursday afternoon shift.

Much more money, slightly less time.

Given our Honda Civic advertised mileage of 36 mpg and a 12.4 gallon tank, the driving range should be over 440 miles. I plotted a meticulous route, splitting our days into 4 chunks of roughly 7-1/2 hours each. We'd need to refill twice each day. There would be no problems at gas stations along the route, although at 36 mpg, the 2,013 mile trip would take 56 gallons of gas. At \$4.50 a gallon, based on the New Orleans price, it should take about \$250.

The government subsidizes the fossil fuel industry around \$20b a year, most of which goes to gasoline and natural gas production. In return, Americans consume about 135 billion gallons of gasoline per year. Each gallon produces 20 pounds of CO2 which goes into the atmosphere, which results in over a billion metric tons of CO2 emitted, or about 38% of all CO2 emitted by the US each year. CO2 is a major contributor to global warming, but at least we have plentiful access to gas stations.

But that's not the whole story.

Renting nuances



We arrived at Herdgis Rent-a-Car promptly at 8:30 AM to pick up our Civic. When we got to the desk, we were informed that there were no Civics available, and in fact, most of the cars that were normally in the lot had been taken already. Our choices were a 2018 Chevy Spark, with 80,000 miles on it or a new Jeep Wrangler 4WD. We signed the paperwork and took the Wrangler. At least the rate for the Wrangler was the same as the Civic. Plus we had a full tank of gas.

We stopped in Slidell for a quick breakfast and rummaging through Google, we learned that this car required Premium. Oh well, a few more cents per gallon.

I also began thinking about how quiet the Kia was and how noisy the Wrangler is. We cranked up the radio to compensate, but the engine continued to whine. Cheese googled up Jeep Wrangler to make sure we weren't in 4WD. The Internet says a lot of things, so we might be and we might not.

When “convenient” isn’t convenient

We got to Meridian and parked downtown. Feeling bad about the gas situation, we decided to pass on Weidmann’s and settled for Binke’s instead. Our troubles began as we got back on the road toward Birmingham. Mysteriously, the gas gauge was pushing toward empty.

We pulled into a Truck stop at Eutaw, AL and filled up, figuring it would get us to Nashville. At \$5.14 a gallon for Premium, I started to blanch when the amount passed \$100, settling at \$105.80. As I put my credit card in, I texted Chief to let him know our situation.

I parked the car to go into the bathroom, but decided I could wait until Birmingham. Back on the road again.

We have reservations

Travelling north toward Nashville, we still were driving a very noisy Wrangler. Our suspicions were that it was in 4WD but couldn't be sure. So we stopped in Columbia, south of Nashville, at the local Jeep dealership. The salesman checked out our car, and explained to us that in fact, we were in 2WD. He then proceeded to explain how to get into and out of 4WD, but it was nearly hopeless. Too complicated and too many steps. On the good side, we weren't abusing the Wrangler. On the bad side, we had no way to decrease the amount of engine and transmission noise. We just had to live with it. It made me wistful for the Kia, which has a synchronous 167 hp motor that has only one gear. 0-60 mph – it's all the same. EV motors are not engines, they are motors, which are simpler.

We also asked him what the mpg and gas tank capacity was, and he gave us the bad news – 14 combined mpg and a 21.5 gallon tank. Barely a 300 mile range, even less than my Kia. Just to be on the safe side, we stopped at a gas station to refill. This time we topped it up with 17 gallons. Only \$90. Yeah!? I texted the Chief for an advance. One day out and we've already near our fuel estimate for the entire trip.

We got into Nashville in one piece, but decided to cancel our reservations to save money and go to a local pub bar instead. After our first beers, the Chief called. His tone could be described as a cross between cross and apoplectic. I tried to explain to him that we had no real choices at the car rental and that I was writing on a deadline. I promised him a great article and reminded him that I had done every piece for him in the last year on time and on word count. He asked how much more it was going to cost. I demurred and said we were going to need 144 gallons of gas instead of 56. With some napkin math, Chief shouted back that we were in for \$650 instead of the budgeted \$250. I had to correct him and let him know we needed Premium, so the tab was going to be more like \$750. There was a long silence. Chief finally relented, but asked us to keep other expenses down. We assured him that we were. It had been a long day and as my head hit the pillow, I expected a long-awaited rest. Instead, I spent much of the night worrying about getting back into Chief's good graces.

A Giant Conflagration



To get back on schedule, we are up and out early, amid pouring rain, writing the previous day off as a warm-up, a Jeep 4WD hazing.

We fill again, north of Nashville and then again at Clarksville, IN. This time, topping the Jeep up only took \$75, but Premium was now \$5.85 a gallon.

We decide to have a quick lunch. We overheard the women in the next booth describe a harrowing recent trip in her 2007 BMW. Jane Smith had to be towed when her car caught fire between her Louisville, KY apartment and Boulder CO where her daughter was getting married.

“My daughter was like, “You’ve lost it, Mom; just fly” the retired hairdresser says. She says she felt safer in a car during the pandemic – but now traumatized because she is afraid her car could catch fire at any time.

While she loves embracing her Beemer, she says, her family has been giving her so much pushback that she is considering getting an EV with her insurance settlement. For every 100,000 cars, 1,500 gas powered cars catch fire every year. Only 25 EV’s catch fire.

Frowning at gas prices

At another station, in Indianapolis, we meet George Stravinsky as he waits for his Ford Mustang to fill. A medical equipment operations manager, 45, he drives all over the Midwest from his home in Ohio, for work.

In the nine months, he says, he's put 30,000 miles on the car, and figures he spent nearly \$5,000 on gas alone. "I frown as the gas-sign prices tick up," he says. "I had the chance to get a Ford Mustang Mach-E, but didn't want to spend the additional \$10,000. The way things are now, I could have saved that much in gas in 2 years." That day, his charge comes to about \$75, similar to what we are paying to fill up.

"Filling, Sloppily!"



Leaving Chicago, we can't even make it 300 miles on a full tank en route to Memphis. Factors such as average highway speed, altitude changes, and total cargo weight can all impact range, whether derived from a tank of gasoline or a fully charged battery.

To save gas, we turn off the car's cooling system and lower the windshield wipers to the lowest possible setting while still being able to see. Three miles from Mt. Vernon, the gas gauge has been on empty for what seems like an eternity. How much slack does Jeep give you on the gas gauge? This game of chicken needed to end.

We fly screeching into a gas-station. We've made it, but barely. As I pull the nozzle out of the pump, a big splurt of gas soaks by lower pants leg and shoe. I finally get the nozzle into the tank and fill again for \$120, a new personal record. After paying, I went to the rest room to

change, and promptly left the rest room without changing. I took the shoes off and put them in a bag in the back, but the scent of gasoline remained in the cabin for the rest of the day. Two pairs of socks on my driving foot helped, a bit.

Home, sweet 20 cent a kWh home

We pull into New Orleans 30 minutes before Cheese' shift starts – exhausted, grumpy, with the faint perfume of gasoline enclosing the cabin. We return the rental car and explain the smell.

The following week, I charge up my Kia overnight at the parking garage where I keep my car. It runs \$.20 per kWh, or less than \$15 to charge it up. My thoughts return to the Jeep Wrangler. Why would anyone manufacture, let alone buy a car that gets only 14 mpg?

I inhale deeply. There is no smell, which is as it should be.