

Road Beat: Honda Civic – a rocket that uses no fuel



The Honda Civic continues to be a delight to drive.
Photos/Larry Weitzman

By Larry Weitzman

When Honda introduced its current Civic Coupe, engineers knew it might be a winner. In two words, it is, especially when it comes to looks, performance, fuel economy and handling. It is at the top of its class. This is the 10th generation Civic since its introduction in 1972 as a 1973 model. My wife owned a first generation CVCC Civic. In those 44 years Honda has sold 20 million Civics worldwide.

Its new super sleek design looks quick standing still. It is Honda's biggest hit in a long time. It looks racy even with a significant use of bright metal on the grille and window line.

Its low, long and wide with a length of 182 inches and a height and width of just 56 and 71 inches, respectively, on a long wheelbase of 106 inches. Without going into a detailed analysis, this is one great looking ride with near perfect proportions, a long window line, strong front end/grille with almost no unnecessary design details to ruin its smooth, somewhat edgy body work defined by its subtle curvaceous character/shoulder line that runs the length of the body.



Specifications

Engine

1.5L turbocharged, direct injected, DOHC, 16 valve inline four cylinder 174 hp @ 6,000 rpm
162 lb.-ft. of torque @ 1,700-5,500 rpm

Redline 6,500 rpm

2.0L DOHC, 16 valve inline four cylinder 158 @ 6,500 rpm

138 lb.-ft. of torque @ 4,200 rpm

Redline 6,700 rpm

Fuel requirement both engines regular unleaded

Transmission

Six speed manual

CVT

Configuration

Transverse mounted front engine/front wheel drive

Dimensions

Wheelbase 106.3 inches

Length 182.3 inches

Width 70.8 inches

Height 55.7 inches

Track (f/r) 60.9/61.5 inches

Weight 2,888

Weight distribution (f/r) 62/38

Fuel capacity 12.39 gallons

Trunk capacity 11.9 cubic feet

Passenger volume 88.6 cubic feet

Wheels 17X7 inch alloys

Tires 215/50X17 H (speed rating of 130 mph)

Steering lock to lock 2.22 turns

Turning circle 35.7 feet

Performance

0-60 mph 6.48 seconds

50-70 mph 3.41 seconds

50-70 mph up a 6-7 % grade 4.63 seconds

Top speed 130 mph easy

Fuel economy EPA rated at 31/41/35 mpg

city/highway/combined. Expect 38 mpg overall and 50 plus mpg on the highway at legal speeds.

OK, so it's got the looks, but can it back it up with the promised performance. You can bet the farm on that one. Even the lowest powered version of the Civic has serious motivation. The base engine in the LX series is a 2 liter 158 hp (at 6,500 rpm) inline four with all the bells and whistles and square engine dimensions. I hope to get one soon to wring out. But my touring model is blessed with a 174 hp at 6,000

rpm, 162 pounds of twist from a low of 1,700 rpm to 5,500 rpm, 1.5L inline turbocharged four cylinder DOHC, 16 valve mill with all important direct injection. Max boost from the turbo is 16.5 psi. Without direct injection turbo mills lose their economy advantage.

Both engines can be had with a 6 speed manual or a CVT which sometimes feels like it shifts gears. But the CVT does not have paddle shifters or a manual shifter; just D, S and L for downhill braking. As I have written in the past, max acceleration is best left to the geniuses who designed this car. Leave it in D and nail it. And this compact sporty car scoots with a 0-60 mph average elapsed time of a miniscule 6.48 seconds. Honda has yet to introduce the new Civic Si. Passing times are also record setting for a compact with a 50-70 mph simulated pass on a level road requiring just 3.41 seconds and the same run up a 6-7 percent grade only slows that time to 4.68 seconds. Those are phenomenal numbers.

Throttle response at tip in is initially soft, but then it turns ferocious. A little care must be taken in traffic. Midrange is terrific and the CVT responds beautifully once underway and at times it almost feels like it is shifting especially during the passing demonstrations. Once the engine approaches its 6,700 rpm redline it seems to fall off to peak torque which is 5,500 rpm. This is no ordinary compact car or midsize for that matter.

And that lack of ordinary also extends to the Civic fuel economy numbers, when it becomes extraordinary. Although rated by the EPA at 31/41/35 mpg city/highway/combined, you can expect much higher numbers. With the cruise control set at 70 mph in a 40 mile two way run on a level highway, the Civic returned an average of 50.7 mpg. Overall in about 500 miles of varied driving including some heavy traffic, mountain byways and perhaps 15 percent on the freeway the Civic averaged 38.0 mpg. In a 20-mile round trip to Carson City and back over the Sierra and some heavy traffic incurred in Carson City, the

Civic averaged 42 mpg. Seven plus liter, 400 plus hp muscle cars from the late 1950s and '60s didn't perform as well and returned 8-10 mpg. One small negative is that the fuel tank has shrunk from 13.2 gallons to a too small 12.4 gallons. Bigger would be nicer and more convenient.

Handling is go-kart like. Honda's has all the ingredients, its attitude is flat, its steering lightning quick and its wide 215/50 tires on 17 x 7 inch wheels provide tenacious grip. Suspension state of the art four wheel independent with stab bars at both ends and that lightning quick steering is just 2.22 turns lock to lock, albeit a bit heavy. That's about the quickest ever encounter in a street car. Turn in is very crisp and understeer while built in is still mild. Also helping is Civics' curb weight which is 2,888 meaning there is less mass to resist changes in direction. Weight bias is 62/38 percent front to rear. It's no wonder this is such a popular car in SCCA racing. It handles like a good sports car. It is a blast to drive and to power out of corners. This Civic gets it done.

However, it rides like a true sports car with a firm, solid ride. It handles bumps well and there is definitely no float. What you will feel are muted bumps, but you will feel them. There is no harshness, but it is not an Acura RLX. And with Hondas there is some road or tire noise. You get that with a sports suspension type of set up along with the handling benefits. The engine spins just 1,900 rpm at 70 mph and is quiet.

Besides strong four-wheel disc brakes (fronts are ventilated) with ABS and all the other braking acronyms, this touring model also comes with about every other safety acronym including lane keep assist, lane departure warning, a collision mitigation braking system, road departure mitigation and a whole lot more. One more important safety advance involves turning right or a lane change to the right. When the right turn signal is activated the display shows a picture of what is on the right side of the vehicle, virtually

eliminating the blind spot. What a great feature. Six airbags are still standard. Brakes are strong and easy to modulate. LED headlights are excellent.

More good news. With the top of the line Touring, everything mentioned is standard including leather seating (and it is nice leather) and other leather trim pieces and floor mats. Hooray for Honda. There are no options to buy. The seats fit my backside perfectly with superb back support. These are all day accommodations.

Instead of a two-tiered dash of the prior generation, front and center is a huge tach with a digital read out speedo in the center. Ancillary gauges are flanking left and right. Trip computer information is also centered inside the large tach giving separate readings for trip A and B with the average fuel econ in digital form and the instant fuel econ in a bar graph. That is a big plus too.

The center stack has a 7-inch screen which is for HVAC, NAV and the sound system. There are no buttons and everything is controlled by touch screen or on the steering wheel. The HVAC has knobs, but the sound system doesn't. Knobs and buttons are easier being more exact and precise.

Rear seating is there and would probably be OK for two, just not me, but it would sure beat walking. But it looks habitable.

Pricing for this top of the line Civic Touring Coupe starts and ends at \$26,125, plus \$835 for the train and truck from Honda's Alliston, Ontario, Canada assembly plant where U.S./Canadian parts are 70 percent of the build. Its paint was an interesting color, Energy Green, which is a very shiny enamel color bright green with some yellow in it. More like a pastel color. You can see it from a mile away or more. It grew on me like a bad mold, but by the end of the week, it became cool. It sure got a lot of attention. Even a colleague in his

story on a Civic of the same color discussed it as an extremely popular attention getter. If you want a slickly styled extremely competent sports coupe that gets phenomenal fuel economy and kicks some serious butt, this is your ride. You might even be finding yourself with an additional set of wheels and tires at Thunderhill, Sonoma Raceway, Buttonwillow or Laguna Seca having some real fun and exploring the Civic uncivilly during track days.

Larry Weitzman has been into cars since he was 5 years old. At 8 he could recite from memory the hp of every car made in the U.S. He has put in thousands of laps on racetracks all over the Western United States.