Road Beat: 2017 Acura MDX, another spectacular product

The Acura MDX handles extremely well in snow and ice. Photos/Larry Weitzman

By Larry Weitzman

Honda and its luxury brand Acura are on a roll. My last three Honda/Acura Road Beats have all reported great new products out of the company that started with Soichiro Honda and his marvelous 50 cc Honda Cub that is still in production nearly 60 years after its introduction. With production exceeding 87 million units, it's making the little Honda, by far, the most produced motor vehicle in history. That's some ongoing heritage.

MDX introduced the third generation in 2014, with each successive generation growing by a couple of inches in length

and wheelbase, with this third iteration now firmly into a large midsize with a 111-inch wheelbase and a length of 196 inches. Width is a trimer 77 inches (where most large SUVs are 79-80 inches). A benefit of its width is a super wide track of 66-inches front and rear.

Acura has done a rhinoplasty to the MDX nose and in its face lift for 2017 removed the “eagle beak” grille replaced by a mesh insert in its five-sided signature theme. The result is a cleaner appearance. When combined with the new window line and shape it gives the MDX a handsome shape. Maybe my only gripe is the oversized front emblem. It’s big.

Specifications

Price S44,050 (MDX FWD) to $58,500 plus $975 for the boat

Engine

3.5L SOHC, 24 valve, direct injected V-6 290 hp@ 6,200 rpm

267 lb.-ft. of torque @ 4,700 rpm

Transmission

Nine-Speed torque converter automatic

Configuration

Transverse mounted front engine/FWD/AWD

Dimensions
Wheelbase 111.0 inches
Length 196.2 inches
Width 77.2 inches
Height 67.4 inches
Ground clearance 7.3 inches
Track 66.3 inches
Weight 4,257 pounds
Weight Distribution (f/r) 57/43 percent
Fuel capacity 19.5 gallons
Passenger volume 132.7 cubic feet
Cargo volume behind third row seat 15.0 cubic feet
Wheels 20X8 inch alloys
Tires 245/50X20
Turning circle 38.7 feet

Performance
0-60 mph 5.65 seconds
50-70 mph 2.87 seconds
50-70 mph uphill (6-7 percent) 4.11 seconds
Top Speed Probably way too fast for me.
Fuel economy EPA rated at 19/26/22 mpg city/highway/combined.
Expect 22-23 mpg in rural country, suburban driving.
26-27 mpg on the highway at legal speeds.

In the engine bay is a revised 3.5L SOHC, 24 valve direct injected engine with all the wazoo bells and whistles, including multi-cylinder displacement and a drive by wire throttle system. Trick stuff that leads to prodigious power of

290 hp at 6,200 rpm and 267 pounds of twist at 4,700 rpm which means the MDX is pumping out about 240 hp at just 4,700 rpm. That's responsive mid-range power. Acura has added some more gears to its slick cog swapper, now totaling nine.

Performance is world class with this MDX 4,257 pound AWD knocking off 0-60 mph in a very zippy 5.65 seconds. MDX backs up that world class average with a 50-70 mph simulated passing run on a level highway of just 2.87 seconds coupled with the same passing run up a steep grade of just 4.11 seconds. This MDX can fly. Throttle response is perfect and linear with a telepathic gearbox almost reading your mind as to gear selection. Beautiful.

Now here is where it gets amazing. EPA rates the MDX at 19/26/22 mpg city/highway/combined with respect to fuel economy. MDX picks up an mpg in the city and combined cycle with the Advance Package's auto stop feature which shuts off the engine while sitting at a signal. It was unobtrusive as I seem to always forget to turn it off anyway. It always defaults to auto-stop every time you start the engine. When switched off by a button on the console, a yellow light in the gauge binnacle lets you know auto-stop is disabled. EPA numbers were fairly close to my test numbers. Overall the MDX did average 22-23 mpg in a mix of rural and suburban driving with almost no time spent cruising the Interstate. In two runs to Carson City and back from Placerville, the MDX averaged 26.6 mpg in both runs, with about half of the run driving aggressively. On the highway at 70 mph in a two-way run, the MDX also averaged 26.6 mpg. With its 19.5-gallon fuel tank that equates to a good 500 miles nonstop. Most human "tanks" won't hold out.

We are only warming up here as there is a lot more to talk about. First is the ride and drive quality. MDX is deafeningly quiet as is the smooth demeanor of its ride quality. With the nine-speed tranny and tall gear ratios, the inaudible engine spins just 1,700 rpm at 70 mph. The body and structure is

built like a tank, tight and strong. MDX is a unibody crossover and has state of the art suspension of MacPherson struts up front and a multilink system in the rear with big stab bars at both ends. Its integrated Dynamic System of comfort, normal and sport will slightly change the character of its ride and handling qualities, but sport is my preferred mode, while the ride is taut, it is still supple.

Sport mode also lends itself to extra sharp handling, but rest assured, handling is pretty sharp in comfort as well. Remember that wide track mentioned before? When you couple that with 20 x 8 inch alloys and super wide 245/50 series high performance all-season rubber, you get a capital S of the SUV that this MDX is. Grip is strong and steering is quick, estimated to be under three turns lock to lock and with the wide series 50 rubber turn in is very crisp and accuracy is true.

Plenty of room to haul people, toys and cargo.

One of my drives up Highway 50 was on a snowy day with snow and ice on the road. The MDX handled it perfectly with positive control and added confidence in the systems. It was truly amazing how well the Acura handled under these difficult conditions at speed. Lesser cars simply faded away. Turning circle is a decent 38.7 feet. Weight distribution is also

reasonably balanced at 57/43 percent, excellent for a chassis that was initially an FWD system with a transverse front mounted engine.

Safety is of course second to none with every safety acronym on board, especially with the Advance Package – including a heads-up braking warning. Lane departure warning, lane keep assist, road departure mitigation, adaptive cruise and more are all standard. MDX's strong huge disc brakes are over a foot in diameter with all the braking acronyms. MDX also has a full surround camera system giving the driver a 360-degree top view of its surroundings. Even in tight parking situations you should never put a scratch on its beautiful finish. Acura's beautiful headlights are excellent.

Now to another bright spot for the MDX, its comfortable and beautiful interior done in soft perforated leather with umpteen way power adjustable seats with memory. Nice. The IP gauge binnacle has the customary large tach and speedo separated by the trip computer-information center. That's all good. The center stack has two big info screens stacked on one another and that makes for complications as they are controlled by a kind of vertically operated center knob or mouser. There is a learning curve to successfully operate the system. It's not a touch screen, but it is still hard. Sometimes (most of the time) buttons and knobs are better and easier to use while being less distracting.

Second row seating is comfortable and copious, and while it looks less than inviting, the fold-down rear seats are good for two, even adults as long as they are not NFL linemen. Passenger volume is huge at 133 cubes and it will please the Home Depot/Lowe's lover. I easily carried a bunch of 8 foot 2 x 4s and 1 x 6s one with one second row seat remaining up right with plenty of room to spare. It can swallow a load.

Pricing for this MDX SH-AWD (SH for super handling which it does) starts at $46,050. For the sake of brevity, SH is a

sophisticated torque vectoring system proprietary to Acura that was first developed about a dozen years ago. With the Advance Package, which has features that most buyers will want, (my tester had the Advance Package), it is $56,500. The base SH-AWD MDX is well equipped, leather, etc. Perhaps the Technology version at $50,460 will work for most buyers. Study the brochure as like the center stack, there is a lot to learn. Destination, i.e., the boat (luxury suite) from Japan is additional $975. Acura MDX with the face lift (I’m being a bit superficial here) is a new favorite of mine.

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.