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Test Drive



Honda

Undercover hybrid's a winner

Civic may look average, but it doesn't act it

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USA TODAY

Honda's Civic hybrid is a good alternative for those who don't need Toyota Prius' distinctive styling to advertise their fuel-saving heroics.

Civic hybrid's a four-door, gas-electric sedan that looks about the same as gasoline-only Civics. Prius, a hatchback, is hybrid-only and unlike anything else Toyota sells.

Apparently most hybrid buyers need to make sure the neighbors know, because Prius outsold Civic hybrid 5-to-1 last year.

The 2009 Civic hybrid shares minor cosmetic and interior trim changes that Honda made to the entire Civic lineup for '09.

From the outside, you could mistake it for a gas Civic if you miss the "hybrid" emblem on the rear and the different wheels.

The battery pack and some other elements of the electric-drive system got upgrades to make charging more efficient, but that made no difference in fuel economy or drivability.

Most important, stability control is standard. Also, because Honda wants to position this as a premium Civic, it is available with fancier options, such as heated leather seats.

Honda and Toyota use different gas-electric hybrid systems. Honda relies mainly on a small, efficient gasoline engine. A small electric motor, cleverly packaged between the engine and transmission, kicks in when more power's needed. Toyota and the similar Ford system default to electric power as often as possible.

Honda's hybrid gets better highway mileage, like gasoline-only cars; Toyota-type systems excel in town where they rely more on electric power.

The Honda system eliminates the annoy-

ing shimmies present in other systems when their gasoline engines restart and come online while the car's underway. Axing those shudders is a big relief.

Like gasoline Civics, the hybrid test car had a sturdy, tight feel, as if it were modeled after a sport sedan. It didn't have the slip-slidey feel you can get when trying to push a Prius briskly through corners. Thus, the Civic was more fun to drive in the normal-to-brisk end of the scale.

Leather seats were comfortable. The sweeping and swooping instrument panel seemed as eye-friendly and easy to use at it did when this generation of Civic made its debut late in 2005. Most controls were simple, intuitive.

Electric power steering, a fuel-saving feature, felt overly boosted at lower speed, about right going faster.

Brakes got extra grab from regenerative braking, which turns the electric motor into a battery-charging generator. A little brake delivered a lot of slow. Too abrupt for people not used to it. Too artificial-feeling even after you got acclimated.



What stands out

Sporty: A Civic Signature.

Comfy: Nice seats, handy controls.

Expensive: Three grand more than gasoline-power model.

Noisy: Engine, tires sing coarse songs.

2009 Honda Civic Hybrid

► **What?** Midcycle freshening of front-drive, four-door, gasoline-electric hybrid sedan.

► **When?** Sold since Aug. 19.

► **Where?** Made in Japan.

► **How much?** Base Civic hybrid is \$24,320 including \$670 shipping. Top-end, with leather, navigation, XM satellite radio, is \$27,530 (\$3,195 more than top-end gasoline model).

► **How potent?** Not very. The 1.3-liter, four-cylinder gasoline engine is rated 110 horsepower at 6,000 rpm, 123 pounds-feet of torque at 1,000 rpm. Electric motor is rated 20 hp, 76 lbs.-ft. Gas and electric deliver their power at different speeds, so their ratings can't simply be added, and Honda won't specify what the combined peak ratings are.

Gas and electric power plants are linked to a continuously variable automatic transmission.

► **How big?** Compact, similar to Toyota Corolla or Prius. Civic hybrid is 177.3 inches long, 56.3 in. tall, 69 in. wide on a 106.3-in. wheelbase. Weight's listed as 2,877 lbs. Passenger space: 90.9 cubic ft.; trunk, 10.4 cubic ft. Turning circle is a tight 34.8 ft.

► **How thirsty?** Rated 40 miles per gallon in town, 45 highway, 42 combined. Test car's trip computer showed 34.3 in suburban driving (and was continuing to climb as miles accumulated, suggesting that real-world mpg could be higher). Regular (87-octane) gasoline is specified. Tank holds 12.3 gallons.

► **Overall:** Pleasant, if pricey, way to save fuel.

Monitoring the hybrid system was simple: Bars moved up or down in a vertical gauge, telling whether you were charging the battery (braking or coasting), or draining it by using the electric motor to augment the gas engine (merging, passing or just hustling about).

The video-game persona of most hybrids' gauges is a distracting safety hazard.

Even though the Civic hybrid came off generally quite pleasant, it had its annoyances:

► **Marginal power.** Sufficient in town, but struggles challenged. Also true of Prius.

► **Coarse powertrain.** Engine had an unfortunate, bust-a-gut sound when legged hard.

► **Choppy ride.** Firm suspension and

short wheelbase will provoke some complaints. If you're used to stiffly sprung vehicles, you won't mind.

► **Road noise.** Lots on rough asphalt, not much on smooth surfaces.

► **Sub-par details.** Optional navigation system seemed as dated as telegraph compared with what Honda uses in the Pilot SUV and other new models.

Goose-neck hinges on the trunk lid swing down and in, swiping cargo room and possibly pinching your luggage. Plenty of rivals use hinges that fit in the gutter around the trunk opening, avoiding the luggage compartment.

Because of how the electric motor's battery pack is situated, the car's back seat doesn't fold down for expanding the trunk,

nor is there a rear fold-down center arm rest.

► **Mileage.** It's 25% to 60% better than similar gasoline Civics, but less than Prius in city and combined city-highway driving, according to government ratings.

Civic hybrid's rated 40 mpg in town, 45 on the highway, 42 in mixed driving. Prius is 48/45/46.

Toyota will launch a redone Prius this year, and Honda will introduce Insight, a lower-priced small hybrid hatchback this spring. If you're interested in a modest-size hybrid, wait to see if you like those better.

But if that seems too studied, and you prefer a small, fuel-efficient car that looks and drives like a conventional car, discovering Civic hybrid could be like finding a gem.