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HONDA'S
ALL-NEW
HYBRID
IS GREAT,
GREEN
FUN.
JUST
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A PRIUS

● words **edward loh** ● photographs **wesley allison**

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MOTOR TREND



FIRST OFF, let us all recognize the 2800 pound, leaf-eating pachyderm in the room. Though the 2010 Insight is Honda's latest hybrid, it looks suspiciously like the Toyota Prius.

It's not hard to understand why. The Prius has been a massive hit for Toyota in sales and image greenification. It's won car of the year awards in Japan, Europe, and North America, as well as our own COTY award back in 2004. It's the world's number-one-selling hybrid vehicle, but more important is who's bought them. Early adopters included such Hollywood royalty as Cameron Diaz, Leonardo di Caprio, Susan Sarandon, Sting, and Billy Crystal. It's hard to pinpoint exactly what this celebrity buzz did for sales, but you know it had to be *mahvelous*.

Naturally, Honda spinmeisters strenuously reject the notion that they're merely aping the world's first million-selling hybrid vehicle (why would they, right?) and offer the following facts as evidence:

Exhibit A: The Insight was America's first and best hybrid. It's easy to forget that the tadpole-shaped, first-generation Insight came to America in Y2K. Though Toyota's first-gen Prius was the first hybrid ever sold (Japan only, beginning 1997), it didn't make it here until 2001. The Insight's feathery weight, slippery aerodynamics, and abstemious Integrated Motor Assist system helped it return a whopping 70 mpg on the highway, a feat other hybrids have yet to equal. So why didn't it sell? Its two-seat configuration certainly didn't help, but the real issue was that, back then, gas prices hovered around \$1.15/gallon nationwide, making Insight the answer to a question no one was asking—yet.

Exhibit B: The new Insight is smaller. While the Prius qualifies as a midsize car, the 2010 Insight is a compact: shorter by 2.7 inches overall and 5.9 inches between the wheels. The Insight is also 1.2 inches narrower, with a roof height 2.5 inches lower, which is why Honda tells you its



HIT THE FLOWERY green ECON Mode button for optimum fuel savings by way of smoothed-out throttle response and CVT operation, optimized A/C and cruise control performance, earlier idle stop, and more.



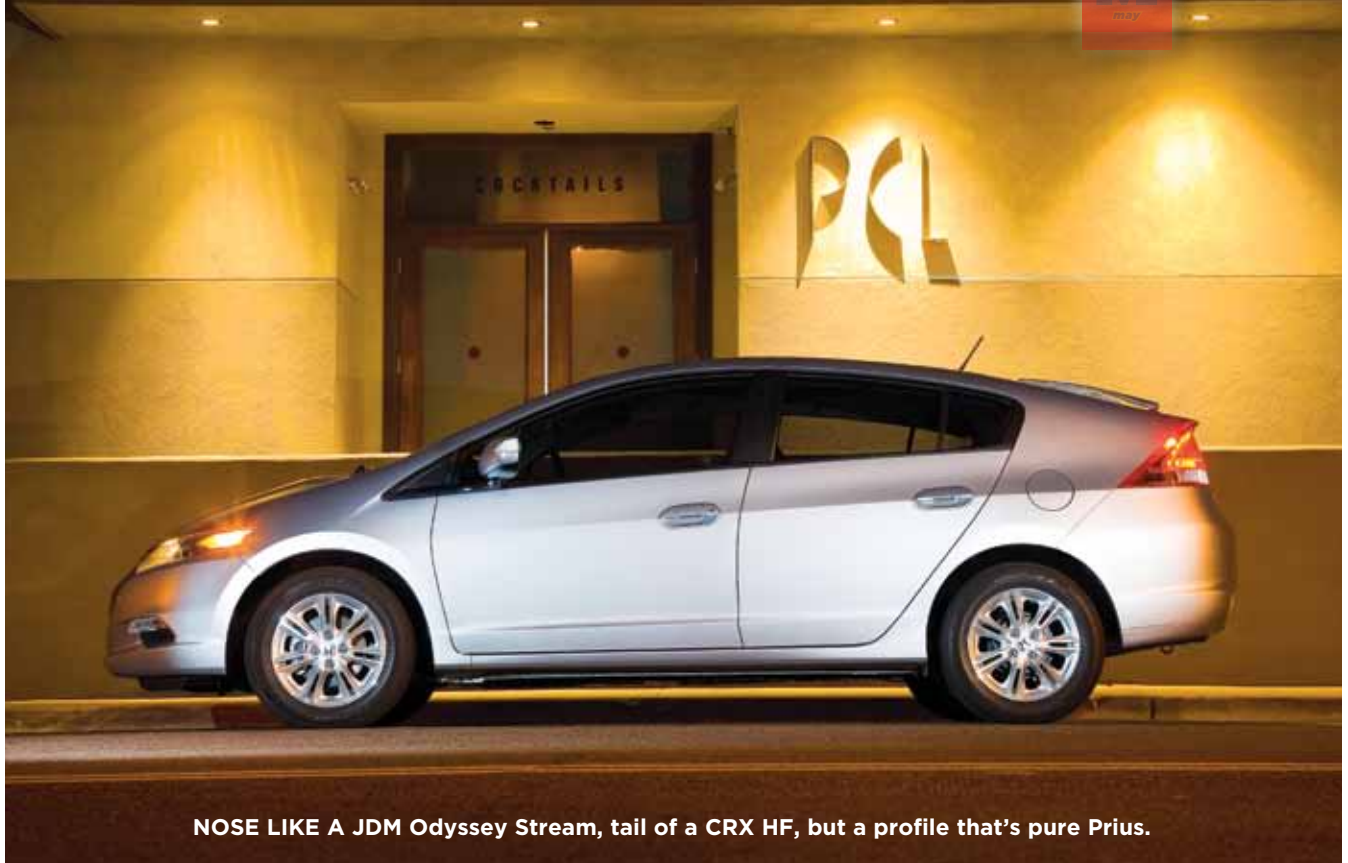
(first drive) honda insight

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NOSE LIKE A JDM Odyssey Stream, tail of a CRX HF, but a profile that's pure Prius.

Prius-fighter is the more similarly sized Civic Hybrid.

Exhibit C: The Insight will be cheaper. While pricing has not been set, the Insight will most certainly be less expensive than the \$22,720 base MSRP of a Prius.

But the real reason Honda would like to quash the inevitable comparison with the Toyota is the one it's loath to discuss. You could call it Exhibit mpg: The Prius gets better fuel economy. According to the EPA, the 2010 Insight returns a 40/43 mpg on its city/highway fuel-economy cycle. Not bad, but significantly off the Prius's 48/45 numbers. When the next-gen Prius drops next year, you can bet that difference will be greater still.

So is that it? The Insight is merely a 7/8th-size Prius that delivers 7/8ths the fuel economy? Of course not. Although the exercise is futile, Honda is right to reject Prius comparisons, but for reasons that have nothing to do with mpg, measurements, sales numbers, or celebrities. The Insight is, quite simply, more fun to drive (see sidebar).

From the first turn of the key—no push button or fancy startup here—the Insight is

familiar and inviting. Honda owners will feel instantly at home in the cockpit; the steering wheel appears lifted from the Civic, as do the split-level dash and console-mounted gear-shift. HVAC and audio controls recall the Fit.

Because it's a hybrid, the familiar Honda starter hiccup has been replaced by the silent stirring of a 10-kilowatt DC electric motor. The 1.3-liter gas engine flickers to life only the moment your foot leaves the brake for the throttle. Driven normally, the Insight responds like a normal compact car—if you're used to the peculiar feel of a continuously variable transmission (CVT). Matting the throttle unleashes the full fury of motor and engine, though only the latter is heard; the busy buzz of a small-displacement four-cylinder mixed with a monotone CVT drone.

More fun comes from going green. Pushing the emerald-green ECON button on the dash initiates Ecological Drive Assist: a wide array of fuel-saving functions, including earlier idle-stop engagement, a smoothing out of throttle inputs and CVT operation, and more-efficient air-conditioning and cruise-control modes. Where is the fun in all this? Check the monitors.

An arc of light projected behind the upper-level digital speedometer glows green when you're driving, well, green. Accelerate quickly and watch the color shift to naughty green-blue and then bad-boy blue. Since the speedo is in your line of sight, you're always, at least passively, aware of where you stand with Mother Earth.

For those more aggressively green, Honda has a multi-information display inset into the tachometer. Like the one in the Prius, it shows the relationship between battery and engine power and such things as instantaneous mpg. The screen you really want is called Eco Guide, recognizable by a set of digitized plant stalks.

The basic concept is same as the Ford Fusion Hybrid's leafy display (as profiled on page 39): Drive green to add leaves, drive blue and the leaves fall off. Though the Fusion Hybrid's display is seductively colorful, Eco Guide is arguably more fun and interactive—more Wii, than PS3, if you will. Finish one set of leaves, and you're rewarded with another set to complete—three levels in all. The Insight tracks your green progress too, recording previous trips and overall

(first drive) honda insight

INSIGHT VS. PRIUS



TASTES GREAT, (NEEDS) LESS FILLING

THOUGH THEY differ in size, the look of these two hybrids ensure comparisons are as inevitable as Coke versus Pepsi. The Honda people knew it, which is why they made a Prius available at their Arizona launch event.

The Insight uses Honda's fifth-generation Integrated Motor Assist system which mates a 1.3-liter engine to an ultra-thin electric motor. Instead of the 11-module nickel-metal-hydride battery system of the 2006 Civic Hybrid, Insight uses a seven-module setup that's smaller, lighter, and more powerful. This means the battery, brains, and cooling system can now be positioned beneath the rear load floor (instead of behind the rear seats as in the Civic Hybrid), which allows such features as a split 60/40 rear seat and 1.5 cubic feet more cargo area than in a Prius, for 15.9 cubes total.

Output for the gas engine is 88 horsepower and 88 pound-feet of torque, while the 10-kilowatt motor generates 13 horses and 58 pound-feet. Fuzzy-engineering math means the Insight's combined output is 98 horsepower and 123 pound-feet.

The Prius uses Toyota's far more complicated Hybrid Synergy Drive, composed of two electric motor generators and a 1.5-liter gas engine. Net output is only 110 horsepower, but due to the 50-kilowatt electric motor, there is a whopping 295 pound-feet of torque available.

If that seems to you a large disparity, you are correct. And it's one of the reasons that, despite outweighing the Insight by roughly 200 pounds, Prius will probably smoke it at the dragstrip.

But Honda has worked hard to make the Insight the drivers' choice. There's a hollow stiffness to the chassis, but the overall sensation is road feel, not harshness. Steering is light and precise, and the Insight changes direction happily, without keeling over as the Prius is wont to do. Throttle and brake response are smoother too: Powertrain engineers focused on keeping the pedal feel and position consistent with the performance of the CVT and brake-regeneration system. Not so in the Prius; its throttle seems to have a mind of its own, depending on speed and pedal position, while the brakes have a noticeable stepped feel.

Feeling sporty? Slot the gearshift back into S mode and watch the tach jump a few hundred rpm. For more fun, send the needle up and down via the steering-wheel-mounted paddle shifters. In truth, downshifts of the Insight CVT's seven virtual ratios appear to generate more noise than actual speed, but the Prius doesn't even offer such sporting pretense.

When it comes to having fun while driving green, the cold efficiency of the Prius's display is simply no match for the warm fuzzies generated by the Insight's Eco Guide and color-shifting speedometer. And isn't that what conspicuous hybrid motoring is all about?

leafiness. Much more fun than logging miles and gallons, I tell you.

Honda has set Insight sales target at 100,000 for America and Canada, in a 90:10 split. When it goes on sale on April 22 (Earth Day, naturally), the Insight will be available in two trim levels: LX and EX, with navigation optional on EX. With features including stability control, 15-inch alloy wheels system, and turn-signal mirrors, EX trim is expected to be the volume seller, accounting for 65 percent of Insights sold.

Numbers like these are modest in comparison to Prius, which moved over 180,000 in the U.S. in 2007 and approximately 160,000 in 2008, but they are well above any previous goals Honda has set for a hybrid. Will consumers flock to a smaller hybrid, simply because it offers great green fun for fewer greenbacks? We think so—though YMMV. ■



2010 HONDA INSIGHT

BASE PRICE	\$15,715 (est)
VEHICLE LAYOUT	Front engine, FWD, 5-pass, 4-door sedan
ENGINE	1.3L/88-hp/88-lb-ft, SOHC 8-valve I-4 plus 13-hp/58-lb-ft front electric motor
TRANSMISSION	Continuously variable auto
CURB WEIGHT	2800 lb (mfr)
WHEELBASE	100.4 in
LENGTH x WIDTH x HEIGHT	172.3 x 66.7 x 56.2 in
0-60 MPH	11.5 sec (MT est)
EPA CITY/HWY ECON	40/43 mpg
CO ₂ EMISSIONS	0.47 lb/mile
ON SALE IN U.S.	March 2009