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Test Drive



Photos by Honda

Pilot comes in for a smooth landing

Redesign of Honda SUV could be just the ticket

By James R Healey
USA TODAY

PALM SPRINGS, Calif. — Honda's reconfigured the midsize, 2009 Pilot to look more beefy and chunky, like a truck, and less like a warmed-over van, and has enlarged it a bit to answer complaints about where to put two baby strollers, all those groceries and extra sports paraphernalia.

All that, just as buyers panic over fuel prices and race for smaller, lighter, more carlike SUVs. Based on a few hundred miles behind the wheel of early-production Pilots here and back home in Northern Virginia, and short jaunts around here in rivals, the Honda comes off very well.

The best newcomers in the class, that, like Pilot, have three rows of seats: Mazda CX-9, General Motors' GMC Acadia/Saturn Outlook, Hyundai Veracruz, Toyota's redesigned Highlander.

How the new Pilot stacks up:

► **Styling.** Not swoopy and sexy like the CX-9, nor graceful like GM's GMC/Saturn models but easier on the eyes than the Toyota and Veracruz.

Pilot's big, ugly grille — a visual sore point — is less garish if you pick a slate or sliver vehicle. The high hood line that accommodates the big grille makes it hard to see where the path goes when cresting an off-pavement hill.

In back, dual exhaust pipes are a very nice touch. But a modesty panel between them would obscure the rear suspension and clean up the look.

► **Drivetrain.** Honda says that potential buyers didn't care about 270-and-up horsepower ratings of rivals, but drew the line at 250 hp. So the new Pilot's engine is rated — surprise — 250 hp, up a modest 6 hp from the '08. Engine sounds sweet when spurred and has a jump-and-run persona. More important, because you use

it in everyday driving, torque is up 13 pounds-feet to 253 lbs.-ft.

Pilot's put on about 140 pounds, negating some of the new punch but had plenty of pep for a family of four and miscellany.

The 3.5-liter V-6 has Honda's high-tech array, including the ability to shut off two or three cylinders when the going's easy.

Even so, the several test vehicles managed only about 15 to 19 miles per gallon in various uses — typical, not exceptional. Honda demonstrated 27 mpg in one of the test vehicles on a 240-mile highway run that included several stops. Test Drive hit 24 mpg on a 50-mile highway leg — but it was downhill.

Rather than letting the array of mileage numbers confuse you, consider them evidence that — because it shuts off some cylinders in easy cruising — Pilot can do well on the highway.

Five-speed automatic transmission shifted crisply, up or down. The only hiccup



2009 Honda Pilot

What? Major makeover of midsize, four-door, eight-passenger, crossover SUV. Available with front-wheel drive (FWD) or all-wheel drive (AWD).

When? On sale May 22.

Where? Made at Lincoln, Ala.

Why? About time. Rivals are getting ahead.

How? Uses bigger, updated "global truck platform."

Who? Honda's buyer forecast: median age, early 40s. Women: 55%. Married: 86%. Kids: Yup.

How much? \$28,000 to \$41,000. Exact prices are to be announced before sales launch.

How many? 140,000 annually, Honda forecasts.

How potent? Slightly more so than before, but less than key rivals. Pilot 3.5-liter V-6 is rated 250 horsepower at 5,700 rpm, 253 pounds-feet of torque. Mated to five-speed automatic transmission.

How big? Two inches longer, 3 inches wider than Toyota Highlander. Tows up to 4,500 lbs., carries up to 1,322 lbs.

How thirsty? FWD rated 17 mpg in town, 23 highway, 19 combined. AWD: 16/22/18.

Computers in test vehicles showed 14.7 to 18.8 mpg, depending on conditions. Tank: 21 gallons. Regular (87 octane) is specified.

Overall: Spot-on for many shoppers.

► **For full rundown of features, specs, go to cars.usatoday.com**

was a jolt when it shifted simultaneously with cylinders shutting off or kicking in.

The gear lever pokes out through the dashboard. More precise than a column-mounted lever and takes up no space on the console. You won't give it a second thought.

► **Dynamics.** Steering stayed on-center nicely and was properly responsive on command. Brakes felt about right for most people, neither sudden (alas) nor sloppy.

Ride was an odd mix of accommodating smoothness on most surfaces but jerky harshness on slow bumps.

Cornering was precise and controlled enough for most users. But pushed hard, the new Pilot had an old fault: excessive under-steer. Partway through a tight, quick corner, you'd find yourself restearing to maintain the intended path. Handling that's important to most people most of the time — maneuvering in tight spots and parking in crowded lots — was excellent because of a compact turning circle and good visibility.

► **Interior.** Now we're talking. Wider than most rivals, it feels generously spacious and makes three-across child seats plausible. Honda puts lower child-seat hooks at all three second-row spots and one in the third row. Upper tether hooks are at all six rear seating slots.

If you tote many toddlers, or just like to

choose where to strap the child seat, Pilot's your friend.

The second row slides fore-aft and has good leg and knee space. The backrest angle is adjustable for comfort. A single latch releases the second row to tilt and slide forward for an aisle to the third row. A bit stiff to operate in the test cars.

The third row is adult size — if people in the second row slide their seats ahead just a little and if you're not planning on riding back there from Omaha to Denver.

There's more room behind the third row, so you can fill all seats and still have room for luggage. A well under the cargo floor opens more storage room. A cargo net can be deployed above the well — like a hammock — and is especially useful for preventing flattened bread and scrambled eggs.

The center stack up front bristles with buttons and controls. Intimidating at first, but quickly learned, and far better than trying to minimize the number of controls via a joystick system or multiple-choice menu, both of those setups typically being illogical and annoying.

Models without navigation but with a backup camera show what's behind on a small screen on the inside rearview mirror. Not as intuitive as the navigational system's big-screen image. Plenty of cubbies and bins are scattered about. The door panels have dual-level shelves. The dashboard

offers a ledge above the glove box. The console has partitions and a roll-top cover.

All in, quibbles and nits pale to near-insignificance, and the Pilot comes across as pretty close to wonderful.