Honda Civic Sedan Is Back As A Smart Buy

Ann M. Job, For The Associated Press

The Honda Civic is back as a smart-to-buy compact sedan, with a premium look inside and out, a more solid-feeling ride and a standard rearview camera on every model.

The Civic's steering is revised for 2013, too, and new standard equipment includes Bluetooth hands-free connectivity, iPod interface, Pandora Internet radio compatibility, speech-to-text capability, steering wheel audio controls and a sliding center armrest between the front seats.

Most of these features are costly extras on mainstream compact sedans. In the case of rearview cameras, they may not be offered at all.

The changes to the 2013 Civic came quickly after the 2012 Civic — a new, ninth-generation version — debuted to criticism from reviewers and consumers about cheap-looking materials and plain styling.

Nothing has changed in the engine compartment for 2013, and the Civic sedan continues with notable government fuel mileage ratings of at least 31 miles per gallon in combined city/highway travel for all but the performance-oriented Civic Si models.

In addition, Consumer Reports puts predicted reliability for the Civic at above average.

Starting manufacturer's suggested retail price, including destination charge, is up some $2,000 from the base 2012 Civic sedan. Partly, that's because the bare-bones, entry-level Civic DX sedan is not offered in 2013, and partly it's because of the additional standard equipment and upgrades made to the car's structure for safety.

So, the base 2013 Civic sedan is an LX, which has a starting retail price, including destination charge, of $18,995 with a 140-horsepower four cylinder and five-speed manual transmission. The LX, like all 2013 Civic sedans, now includes a 5-inch liquid crystal display screen up on the dashboard where the rearview camera images are shown.

The lowest MSRP, including destination charge, for a 2013 Civic LX sedan with five-speed automatic is $19,755.

These starting prices are higher than the $16,995 and $18,090 starting retail prices for the 2013 Ford Focus S compact sedan with five-speed manual and six-speed automatic transmissions, respectively. The base Focus engine is a 160-horsepower four cylinder. But standard equipment on the base Focus S doesn't include Bluetooth connectivity, Pandora Internet radio compatibility, sliding center armrest

or a rearview camera.

Another compact sedan competitor, the 2013 Toyota Corolla, starts at $17,025 with five-speed manual and $17,855 with four-speed automatic. All Corollas have a 132-horsepower four cylinder. But the base Corolla L doesn't include Bluetooth, rearview camera or sliding center armrest.

The Civic is critical to Honda's success in the United States, and sales rebounded in calendar 2012 to 317,909 from calendar 2011's 221,235.

As a result, the Civic ranked as the fifth best-selling vehicle in the United States last year and the third best-selling car, after the larger-sized Toyota Camry and Honda Accord.

The changes for 2013 promise to answer the critics and position the 2013 Civic into the thick of the competition, where connectivity and technology are important to young buyers.

Longtime Honda fans are likely to appreciate the improved ride and handling of the 2013 Civic sedan vis-à-vis the 2012 Civic.

Honda engineers retuned various suspension components, including bushings and springs, to give drivers a more tangible feel of the road than the softer suspension of the 2012 Civic provided.

So, while the suspension continues with MacPherson struts up front and a multi-link rear, road feel is much improved, and passengers, while they notice some vibrations and rough patches, aren't subjected to an overly harsh ride.

The steering ratio is quickened for a more linear feel, and the test Civic EX conveyed competent, yet comfortable ride and handling.

Styling is definitely spruced up.

The black honeycomb design of the grille is nicely accented by chrome-look accents. The new hood has creases that fit well with the sweeping lines on the Civic sedan's sides and increase visual interest.

In the rear, new, substantial-looking tail lights, a taller trunk lid and a long strip of silver-colored trim give the 2013 Civic a richer flavor.

All in all, the restyling helps link the new Civic to the current Accord, and that's a good thing.

Still, during the test drive, no one was seen turning around to get a good look at the new Civic.

No matter. The lasting impression came from being inside the Civic and experiencing its spacious and quieter room.

As in Civics from the past, the dashboard, particularly on the front-passenger side, sits low, so there's ample window and an airy feel, even in a Civic without a moonroof. The dashboard, overall, feels like it's a good bit away from passengers, which adds to the roomy feel.

Yet, controls and gauges are well organized. And the large, easy-to-read, digital speedometer numbers that are positioned high up, near the windshield base, provide a quick reference to the speed the car is traveling.

Heck, the speedometer numbers are so big, people in passing cars can see the speed of the Civic, too.

Honda's colorful semi-circle of a tachometer that sits lower, down closer to the steering column, is eye-catching, and the standard "Econ" button on the dashboard helps maximize use of gasoline automatically.

The test car with automatic transmission averaged 31 mpg in travel that was 65 percent in the city and 35 percent on the highway. This was just a bit below the federal government's average.

For the record, the test EX sedan was rated at 28 mpg in the city and 39 mpg on the highway.

Shifts were mostly smooth from the automatic transmission, and sounds from the 1.8-liter, single overhead cam four cylinder were not obtrusive, save for times of hard acceleration.

The engine isn't direct-injected, and the Civic EX torque peaks at 128 foot-pounds at 4,300 rpm.

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