

FIRST
DRIVE

Honda Civic

Featured model: 5-door



THE OUTGOING FIVE-DOOR CIVIC, built in Swindon, was the last joint venture with Rover – the 400/45 was always closely related in design, if not image.

It's just about time for a replacement and remembering lessons learned from its ex partner, Honda has produced an impressively roomy family holdall, with rear passenger space to rival most hatchbacks one size up.

It's done by moving the cabin and footwells well forward, giving a short-nosed, semi-MPV appearance. The roofline is about 5cm taller than average and it's about 15cm longer at the kerb than the Focus, Astra or Golf (though slightly shorter than its predecessor).

But it doesn't end there; the interior has a flat floor front and rear, with a gear lever sprouting from the lower fascia area. Apart from the intrusion of the handbrake (although it's tucked close to the driver's seat), one has unimpeded access from front to rear, as well as from side-to-side – safer as well as more convenient, when getting in and out.

Yet despite these MPV connotations, this Civic remains a hatchback, especially in terms of back seat adaptability and load space behind. In fact, though rear leg-stretching space is remarkable, the luggage space behind is modest, with a floor that is actually 7cm higher than it needs to be – just to find room for a full-size spare wheel.

No complaints really about the driving position or major controls, except that the steering wheel and column (with rake but

not reach adjustment) are angled more steeply than most; you get used to this, though. That funny-looking gearchange works really well, the dials are clear (though there's no rheostat) and the (normal-height) seat supports well.

Both engines feel peppy when revved and cruise very quietly until 60mph – the 1.4 is the quieter between 60 and 70, despite its shorter gearing. The steering is very light – too light on a wet roundabout, say, when you have absolutely no feel about grip. Neither is the suspension super absorbent, so Focus, Astra et al need not fear this particular challenger, in terms of ride comfort. Incongruously, the front passenger has no angled toe board to brace against on corners, so there will be relief that the Civic discourages rapid bend-swinging.

VERDICT

If the present Civic is anything to go by, its successor will prove reliable and reassuring. Its special new merit is interior occupant space to match its larger-than-average external dimensions. It feels distinctly dignified rather than nimble in its road manners, however. The cheapest S version is well equipped, but its interior trim is rather plain. However, the price is reasonable and so is the mark-up for the much better trimmed top model. A sound buy as a family holdall.

AT A GLANCE

considering size, price and rivals

Controls/displays	★★★★○
Handling/steering	★★★○○
Comfort	★★★★○
Space/practicality	★★★★○

THE CIVIC RANGE

type and size lower-medium (mid-priced) hatchback - other versions soon

trim levels S, SE, SE Executive

engines petrol: 4 cylinder/1.4 litre/90bhp; 4/1.6/110. diesel: none yet

drive front-wheel drive, 5-speed manual. (4speed stepped automatic with torque converter optional)

notable features "walk-through" interior with flat floor, electric power steering, "cab-forward" short-nose styling, facia-mounted gearshift, ABS, air-conditioning, side and frontal airbags on all

LIKES AND GRIPES

deft (if oddly placed) gearchange
twin roof lamps - front and rear
damped-action roof grab handles
big fuel tank gives superb range

thick screen pillars obstruct view
no screen/face vent delivery together
ugly rubber gear lever gaiter
delayed-reaction heater temp control
single speed intermittent front wipe

VITAL STATISTICS (cm)

length x width (folded mirrors)	429x172
front - legroom	89-107
- headroom (with sunroof)	94-98
rear - typical legroom	102
- typical kneeroom	77
- headroom	95
- hiproom	127-128
load space (all seats in use)	
(litres/cu ft)	390/13.7
load length (seats up/folded)	70/145
load width	104-130
load sill height (inside/outside)	11/68
boot/load aperture height	47/77