

Honda Civic 3/4 door

- Featuring 1.5i LS and 1.6 ES CVT



HESE CIVICS DIFFER FROM THE Swindon-built five-door by being made in Japan and having different engines, too. There's also a stylish coupé and a CRX, but here we look at the 1.5 manual and the 1.6 automatic – both with 115bhp on offer. Where they differ is that the Auto uses Honda's new Continuously Variable Transmission (CVT) even though a conventional torque converter "stepped" auto, box is also available.

The three-door puts looks before space and convenience, whereas the longer four-door saloon has almost as much adaptability as the five-door, beneath its conventional, middle-class styling, thanks to a folding and split rear seat backrest. Indeed, when it comes to conveying a roll of carpet or serious luggage behind an occupied rear seat, it has more room. The

rear seat itself offers better support, more head and legroom and is far easier to get to (or leave). The three-door's front seat folding facility is both awkward and "forgets" its previous setting – even getting in and out at the front is a struggle for some.

Once you're inside, both offer similar, reasonable front seat support (in a rather low, leaned-back posture). The wheel and driver's seat cushion both have height adjustment and the pedals are well placed and very smooth-acting, as is the improved manual gearshift. Equipment is more generous than on its

three-door predecessor and it's a relief to see the demise of that version's two-piece rear tailgate.

Out on the road, the 1.5 five-speed manual proves quieter and less vibrant than the 90bhp VTEC-E version of the five-door we sampled last year. Except for the cheapest 1.4, all the three- and four-door versions feature the same variable valve timing and part-time lean-burn characteristics which are rapidly becoming a Honda trademark. Sure enough, we again achieved outstanding fuel economy figures, but this time, the extra 25bhp produced class-leading acceleration times, as well.

Two idiosyncracies have to be learned about these special power units – the real power surge comes at heady, upper engine revs and in steady, part-throttle cruising, mild but discernible surging can be detected at times; maintaining a steady 70mph for our consumption test on the track was unusually difficult, for example. In all other respects, you would be hard put to tell that, at times, inlet valve opening was being curtailed or prevented entirely, under computer control.

Let it rev all the way to 60mph in second and both you and this Civic will have the time of your lives – certainly the car yowls its delight all the way to the 6750rpm rev limiter. Whether steady family saloon types will get the hang of changing up from second to fifth, to enjoy the top slot's long-legged cruising gait,

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2 PERFORMANCE FOR 1.5i LS MANUAL PERFORMANCE FOR 1.6i CVT AUTO Acceleration time in seconds Acceleration time in seconds - in Drive/Sport 30 40 50 60 40 mph 70 mph 50 60 70 THROUGH THROUGH 10.5 10.8/9.9 THE 4.5 6.9 THE 4.4/3.9 7.2/6.6 2.3 2.1/1.8 **GEARS GEARS** IN 5TH 38.5 26.8 **GEAR** 17.2 8.3 20 mph 30 4 0 50 70 IN 4TH 22.4 15.9 **GEAR SPEED** 10.4 4.0/3.5 5.1/4.8 5.3 RANGES USING 4.4/3.9 6.4/6.0 **KICKDOWN** 20 mph 30 40 50 70 17.1/10.8 18.5/10.6 5TH/4TH **Drive** 107 SPEED Maximum speeds RANGES 17.2/10.4 21.3/12.0 using accelerator fully depressed Low Sport **Drive REVS** Maximum speeds 107)mph **PER** Sport 6200 6200 5500 **MINUTE** 881/2 100 1st **REVS** 4th 5th PER 2nd 6400 6500 4125 (5025rpm in all selector positions MINUTE 3rd at car's maximum road speed) mph 62 for best acceleration **FUEL CONSUMPTION FOR 1.5i LS MANUAL FUEL CONSUMPTION FOR 1.6i CVT AUTO** Fuel grade for tests: unleaded Premium, 95 octane Fuel grade for tests: unleaded Premium, 95 octane Normal range Normal range mpg mpg Hard driving, heavy traffic 32¹/2 Hard driving, heavy traffic 28¹/₂ Short journeys in the suburbs 33¹/2 36 Short journeys in the suburbs Motorway - 70mph cruising 43 Motorway - 70mph cruising 37 Brisk driving, mixed roads 44 Brisk driving, mixed roads 39¹/₂ Gentle driving, rural roads 51¹/2 Gentle driving, rural roads 44 Typical mpg overall Typical mpg overall 38 litres/360 miles Realistic tank range* Realistic tank range* 38 litres/320 miles *based on fuel gauge/warning lamp and filling station experience *based on fuel gauge/warning lamp and filling station experience SAFETY/SECURITY FEATURES (BOTH MODELS) **BRAKES (BOTH MODELS)** Assessed on their effectiveness and convenience Pedal feel ●●●●○ Behaviour in an emergency ●●●●○ Handbrake ●●●●○ (the more black blobs the better) Dry road stopping distance from 50mph (standard ABS) (A good-to-average best stop is about 28m at 20-30kg pedal load) Seatbelts Door locking 00000 front ••• rear •••OO central locking? remote control? Head restraints -⋘ 39m 9kg × front ●●○○○ rear auto window closure? **-** ← 28m load deadlocks? Interior 25¹/2m (ABS working) 15kg Pedal safety padding Luggage 24¹/2m (1.03g – best stop) driver's airbag? secure from interior/hidden other airbags? from view Distance 10m 20m 30m 40m 50m 60m side impact protection •••OO Alarm X engine immobilised? Fuel anti-spillage

O factory fitted option

standard on test car

not available

Fade test: pedal load required for a moderate (34m/.75g) stop:

10kg at start of test,12kg at end of test. (Ideal brakes show no change)

after rapid overtaking, is more questionable. But to get the best from this Civic, that's what's expected; note how the maximum speed is a full 16mph slower in top than in fourth – that's the hallmark of a true overdrive!

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If all this sounds too much, CVT is the obvious solution - let the gear train take the strain. This transmission is blissful to live with; Honda has really clinched its superiority over other auto 'boxes by eliminating the minor glitches earlier CVTs betrayed. No jerky or delayed take-offs from rest, no odd noises off, and there's "creep" when you want it (on a hill), but not when you've got the footbrake on in Drive. Honda seems to have thought of everything, even the fact that this CVT can be towed when the engine isn't running, and it's as easy to push as a manual car.

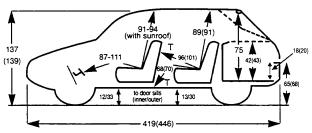
Our acceleration times actually proved quicker than the 1.5 manual's, if the S slot was used on the selector lever. Two distinct ECU programmes differentiate the car's accelerator response in D and S - the latter making it more peppy and revvy, as well as enabling better stopwatch times to be attained. L is ideal for hill descents or provides formidable engine braking when, say, slowing for a roundabout; the tacho stays at 4000rpm as the car slows and the gearing pulleys do their stuff.

When accelerating away, the same steady engine speed, accompanied by seamlessly varying gearing, creates a fair imitation of an airliner approaching takeoff, with the revs dramatically falling away once one's intended cruising speed is reached.

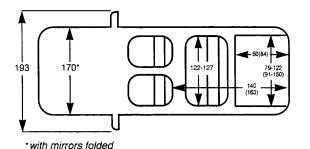
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MEASUREMENTS FOR 3-DOOR

Centimetres 4-door in brackets, where different



T: typical back seat space behind medium-sized front occupants



FOR THE TECHNICAL (BOTH MODELS)

ENGINE

Type transverse four cylinder, with alloy block and head:

5 main bearings

man: 75 x 84.5mm = 1493cc Size auto: 75 x 90mm = 1590cc

Power 115bhp at 6300rpm Torque 1.5: 102 lb ft at 5200rpm

1.6: 106 lb ft at 5000rpm Valves belt-driven single overhead camshaft, actuating four

valves per cylinder via rockers, with variable inlet

valve opening

Fuel/Ignition electronic multi-point injection integrated with fully

programmed ignition. 45-litre tank with low-level warning lamp. Lean-burn fuelling combined with

exhaust catalyser

TRANSMISSION

five-speed manual on 1.5. CVT auto with steel Type

element pusher belt and pulleys on 1.6

Mph per 1000rpm 1.5: 24.2 in 5th; 18.1 in 4th

1.6: 4.6-25.1 (theoretical) 24.4 cruising at 70mph on

level road (2860rpm)

CHASSIS

Suspension front: independent by double wishbones and coil

springs. Rear: independent by wishbones, coil springs and trailing arms. Telescopic dampers all

round, with front anti-roll bar only

power-assisted rack and pinion with 3.5 turns Steering

between full locks. Turning circles average 10.55m between kerbs, with 17.75m circle for one turn of

the wheel

Wheels 5J steel with 175/65R14H tyres (Bridgestone on test

cars). Full-sized spare wheel

Brakes ventilated discs front, drums rear with vacuum servo

and electronic anti-skid control (ABS) standard

Likes ... and gripes

Good, fully folding electric mirrors . . . but rear wiper blade too short and lacks "delay"

Low-level fuel lamp now provided ... but lamp for heated window too obscure

Impressive radio performance . . . but fiddly controls hard to master

Deep sun visors ... but driver's visor has a mirror with no cover

Sensible diffuse vent on facia top ... but no rear footwell heater outlets

Clearly marked dials ... but speedo and tacho both read high

Plenty of oddments spaces ... but none is lined to prevent objects sliding

EVT selector free-acting in N, D and L ... but release button awkward for arthritic hands

Well-placed left footrest ... but auto lacks double-width brake pad



However, our carefully programmed fuel consumption tests revealed that for all its virtues, this CVT still lacks the mechanical efficiency of a manual gearbox. Overall, the losses average 12 per cent, but it's worth saying that 38mpg overall is still excellent for a 115bhp 1.6-litre saloon that can go from 30 to 70mph in 10 seconds! Many rivals with manual boxes can't manage that.

This Civic rides well and the steering is better weighted than on the five-door we tested – both would benefit from a "quicker" rack, to sharpen initial correction from straight ahead, however. The hatch turns into the corners with little roll and few complaints from keener drivers. Tyre noise is dominant at times, but engines are really hushed when cruising at any legal speed – both CVT and manual are helped by

their tall gearing in this respect, turning over comfortably below 3000rpm at a true 70mph.

VERDICT

The UK-built five-door has arguably the most practical shape, but with even smoother and faster engines, the imported four-door has a lot to offer, including remarkable fuel economy. The three-door's appeal lies in the eye rather than on the tape-measure – you don't need us to sort out your priorities here. However, at present, it's the only way to enjoy the seductive delights of Honda's new CVT – the sooner it's installed in the four- and five-door, the better, so far as we're concerned. If you hanker after diesel economy but don't like diesels, this Civic is the best solution yet.

