FIRST DRIVE

Honda Jazz

Featured model: SE Sport

HONDA'S STOP-GAP SUPERMINI was a flop – the Logo was no go. However, its successor, the Jazz (known as Fit in Japan), promises to be the real thing – a big player in the B-segment, dominated by Fiesta, Fabia, Yaris et al.

Clever packaging, thanks to the short-nose/tall-build design, gives spacious accommodation. While rear legroom isn't anything to write home about (it's no match for several rivals', for example), kneeroom, headroom and footspace are all generous. There's also enough width for three in the back, using a trio of "proper" seatbelts.

Then there's the Jazz's nifty party piece. Thanks to the fuel tank's central location, there are two different ways of folding the 60/40 divided back seat. This so called "magic seat" will tip forwards to create a completely flat load floor or, with cushions raised (like cinema seats), open up a spacious load area in the middle of the car. This elegant arrangement is clever, because you still have the seats with you if needs be.

Height adjustments for the steering wheel and shaped seat give an excellent driving position with a good view of the stylish dials. Big mirrors aid vision, which is even better when the rear head restraints are removed. The gearchange is smooth and slick, and there's no peering or fumbling for the convenient controls.

Up front there's a new all-alloy, single cam 1.4-litre engine boasting several innovative features, including a twin-spark plug cylinder head and variable valve timing. It's a little smoothie, and although ours seems to lack zestful get up and go (low mileage?), Honda's claim of 0-62mph in 12sec is perfectly respectable. It's a pity there's an unpleasant engine boom from 3500 or 4500rpm, though (that's from 70mph in top). Avoid this and it's a quiet cruiser with low tyre and suspension noise – and promises 50mpg overall.

The Jazz's ride isn't as composed as it could be. At least, it felt quite firm and fidgety on Spanish B-roads during the launch. Progress was calmer on better-surfaced highways and, indeed, the Jazz feels good to drive – it has stable handling and is nimble in traffic. This is partly due to the light electric power steering which is, however, marred by the absence of informative feel. No complaints about the ABS and EBD equipped brakes, though, which also benefit from "brake assist" (lighter pressure in an emergency).

Careful fit and finish give the well-equipped, air-conditioned cabin a quality feel, confirmed by the way the doors shut with a satisfying "thunk".

VERDICT

Honda's roomy and ingenious newcomer is set to rattle a few cages. It's already proved a huge success in Japan and deserves to do well here. But it will be even more convincing if Honda can engineer more composure into the ride and quell that engine drone. Sort these out and the Jazz will be a front runner in the supermini stakes.

AT A GLANCE

considering size, price and rivals

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

THE JAZZ RANGE

size and type 5-door supermini (mid-priced)
trim levels S, SE, SE Sport
engines petrol: 4 cylinder/1.4 litre/82bhp; diesel: none
drive front-wheel drive, 5-speed manual (7-speed semi-auto due mid- 2002)
notable features twin-plug cylinder head, tip-up rear cushions give central load area, ABS/EBD/brake assist, electric power steering

VITAL STATISTICS (cm)

length x width *(inc mirrors)*	383x188
front - legroom	90-108
- av headroom *(no sunroof)*	100
rear - typical legroom	94
- typical kneeroom	74
- headroom	96
- hiproom	126
load space *(all seats in use)* *(litres/cu ft)*	385/13.6
load length *(seats up/folded)*	63/150
load width	102-129
load sill height *(inside/outside)*	15/61

LIKES ...

prospect of Honda reliability
group 3 insurance
impressive safety/security features
angled rear toeboards

and GRIPES

space-saver spare wheel
head restraints restrict rear view
speedo calibrated 20, 40, 60 etc
poor lower door sill protection

© The Automobile Association Limited 2002