

Honda has delivered more of everything in its bigger, redesigned Accord

by Mark_Maynard

How big can you go for a midsize sedan? I think Honda has found the limits in its 2008 Accord, which is longer and larger than last year's car and technically a "large" car by government interior specifications.

HONDA ACCORD - The redesigned 2008 Honda Accord is longer and larger than last year's model, with more choices for features and horsepower. More length and a longer wheelbase have also allowed for a more spacious back seat space. CNS Photo courtesy of Honda. Accord gives buyers plenty of choices

In an era of choices - paper or plastic; regular or decaf - the redesigned 2008 Accords from Honda are no exception.

The cars come in sedan or coupe body styles with three trim levels for each. There are three transmission choices, two four-cylinder-engine choices and one big, new V-6. And all run on 87 octane.

There's more.

The four-cylinder Accord sedans have a choice of five-speed manual or five-speed automatic transmissions. The V-6 sedan gets just the five-speed automatic. And the coupe V-6 has a no-cost choice for a six-speed manual or five-speed automatic.

The four-cylinders are rated 21 mpg city, 31 highway. The V-6 with the five-speed automatic is rated 19/29. The performance-tuned coupe V-6 with six-speed manual gets 17/25 mpg. Except for the four-cylinder with five-speed manual transmission and coupe V-6 with six-speed manual transmission, all engines have partial zero-emission certification.

There are pricing choices, too.

Sedans start at \$20,995 for the base LX with a 177-horsepower, 2.4-liter four-cylinder engine and five-speed manual transmission. The LX-Premium with five-speed automatic is \$22,795.

The step-up EX, \$23,695, gets a 190-hp version of the 2.4-liter engine with freer-breathing exhaust; add \$800 for the automatic transmission. And the full-featured EX-L with automatic and navigation system is \$28,695.

V-6 models range from \$26,595 to almost \$31,000. And coupes range from \$28,945 to \$31,145.

The choice is yours. In pushing the size package, Honda wanted its Accord to be the trump card in the deck, spokesman Sage Marie said. And there is a significant deck in this segment, which includes the Toyota Camry, Nissan Altima, Ford Fusion, Chevrolet Malibu, Hyundai Sonata, Chrysler Sebring and others.

Make a list of the new Accord's assets and you might be tempted to buy one without testing the others, but each car has its merits. Consumer Reports, for example, rates the Altima one point higher for its performance. I think the Accord is years ahead of the Camry in interior refinement and size. But the Malibu is sharp with desirable styling.

Accord sedan styling is stronger now, but seems to be a grouping of individual themes that when put together are an acquired taste.

The headlights and taillights are three-dimensional and the fender bulges and overall stance are aggressive, particularly with the larger, 17-inch wheels. But the horizontal "zicka" line just below the door handles is a treatment right off the Acura TL, which is fair-enough poaching from the company's luxury division. But the BMW kink in the rear-window treatment should be considered trademark infringement.

There aren't many other kinks in this car. The redesign plan for Accord was to deliver more of everything, Marie said.

And it does, not just in features but in choices, such as sedan or coupe body styles with three trim levels for each. There are three transmission choices, two four-cylinder-engine choices and one big, new V-6. And all run on 87 octane.

The four-cylinder Accord sedans have a choice of five-speed manual or five-speed automatic transmissions. The V-6 sedan gets just the five-speed automatic, and the coupe V-6 has a no-cost choice for a six-speed manual or five-speed automatic.

The four-cylinders are rated 21 mpg city, 31 highway, and the V-6 with the five-speed automatic is rated 19/29.

The performance-tuned coupe V-6 with six-speed manual gets 17/25 mpg.

Except for the four-cylinder with five-speed manual transmission and coupe V-6 with six-speed manual transmission, all engines have partial zero-emission certification.

There are pricing choices, too.

Sedans start at \$20,995 for the base LX with a 177-horsepower, 2.4-liter four-cylinder engine and five-speed manual transmission. The LX-Premium with five-speed automatic is \$22,795.

The step-up EX, \$23,695, gets a 190-hp version of the 2.4-liter engine with freer-breathing exhaust; add \$800 for the automatic transmission. And the full-featured EX-L with automatic and navigation system is \$28,695.

V-6 models range from \$26,595 to almost \$31,000. And coupes range from \$28,945 to \$31,145.

That it has.

The 268-hp, 3.5-liter i-VTEC V-6 is the biggest engine so far for the biggest Accord, but it also adds Honda's latest technology for variable cylinder management. It switches seamlessly between six cylinders for power and four- and three-cylinder modes for efficiency.

The Accord was sized to seat four adults comfortably. And it does, even in back where there are three head restraints and a low exhaust tunnel that doesn't greatly compromise center foot room. The Malibu omits the center head restraint.

The wider body allows other subtleties, such as a wider front center console and armrest and more and larger storage areas. The power seat adjustments accommodate drivers of all sizes, and sightlines are good, though the dashboard is large. Doors close with machined tightness.

The folding and lockable rear seat back expands trunk space, which is oddly shaped but wide and roomy.

Safety features include side curtain air bags and front dual-chamber side bags, electronic stability control, large four-wheel anti-lock disc brakes and much more.

I tested two Accords, a 144-hp, LX-P and a topline EX V-6.

The LX-P is a fresh bowl of vanilla ice cream. Most Honda cars do everything so well that no one thing stands out. There wasn't much to mark the LX as a bench mark because much of the engineering advancements are beneath the skin, including no scheduled tune-ups for 100,000 miles.

Interior styling is functional but plain, not at all like the contemporary attitude of the Malibu.

I assumed the LX-Premium was the volume model of Accord, but not so says spokesman Marie. The Accord EX is the bigger seller and not by families but by professionals, he said.

When he heard my quip about vanilla ice cream, he sent down an EX V-6 the next week. He said it is the "hero" car, of which the R&D team is most proud.

And it is a stunner to drive, with luxury-class leather interior and more trim accents. Cornering, braking and steering response are sport-sedan crisp. Acceleration is visceral, and the transmission is eager to please the urges of the right foot.

If you don't require sport-sedan power, you can get the enhanced EX features with what must be an overperforming 190-hp four-cylinder.

What's not to like?

The interior has more ambient road noise than the Malibu, even with the active noise cancellation feature.

And it will take time to learn the center-console array of button choices for audio and AC.

"You don't think it's intuitive?" Marie asked.

Not as much as everything else about the car.

SPECS - 2008 Honda Accord EX-V6

Body style: large midsize, five-passenger, front-wheel-drive sedan

Engine: aluminum 268-horsepower, SOHC 3.5-liter V-6 with variable valve technology and variable cylinder management

Transmission: five-speed manual; optional five-speed automatic

EPA fuel economy estimates: 19 mpg city, 29 highway; 87 octane recommended

Length/wheelbase: 194.1/110.2 inches

Curb weight: 3,567 pounds

FEATURES

Standard equipment includes: remote locking, power moonroof, air conditioning, tilt-telescopic steering wheel, fog lights, cruise control, illuminated steering audio and cruise controls, center storage console with

sliding armrest, blue ambient lighting, map lights and sunglass holder, trunk light, floor mats, door pockets, eight-way power driver's seat with power lumbar, six-speaker audio with six-disc CD changer and digital music input jack, 17-inch alloy wheels and all-season tires

Safety features include: side curtain air bags, front dual-chamber side bags with a passenger-side occupant-position-detection system, dual-stage and dual-threshold front bags, active front-seat head restraints, electronic stability control, four-wheel anti-lock disc brakes with brake assist and electronic brake-force distribution

PRICING

Base: \$26,595, including \$635 freight charge

Honda has delivered more of everything in its bigger, redesigned Accord by Mark_Maynard