Solid Acura TSX excels in freak storm, but it's low on vitality

by Mark_Maynard

Although I didn't get as much driving in as was planned, I had an hour behind the wheel on dry pavement, then plenty of snow driving. The car kept me safe, but it also might be too safe and free of emotion.

ACURA - The spirit of the $30,000 2009 Acura TSX speaks through the six-speed manual. The gearbox is so slick that it seems meant for speed shifts. CNS Photo courtesy of Acura. SPECS

2009 Acura TSX

Body style: compact, five-passenger sport sedan

Engine: aluminum, 2.4-liter DOHC i-VTEC four-cylinder

Horsepower: 201 at 7,000 rpm

Torque: 172 (manual) or 170 (automatic) foot-pounds of torque at 4,500 rpm

Transmission: six-speed manual or five-speed automatic with Sport mode and steering-wheel paddle shifters

EPA fuel economy estimates: 21 mpg city, 30 highway; 20/28 manual; 91 octane recommended

DIMENSIONS

Trunk space: 12.6 cubic feet

Front head/leg/shoulder room: 37.6/42.4/57.8 inches

Length/wheelbase: 185.6/106.5 inches

Curb weight: 3,485 pounds automatic; 3,419 manual

FEATURES

Standard equipment includes: remote locking; power glass moonroof and sliding sunshade; dual-zone, automatic climate control with air filtration; leather-covered front center console with sliding armrest; map lights; overhead sunglasses storage; two 12-volt power outlets; 10-speaker ELS surround audio with six-disc CD with USB and digital music input; perforated leather seats; leather-wrapped sport steering wheel (with audio, cruise and climate controls); heated front seats; eight-way power-adjusted driver seat; two-way power front passenger seat; front seat-back pockets; locking 60/40 split, fold-down rear seat; rear seat armrest; carpeted floor mats; power windows-locks-mirrors; high-intensity headlights; fog lights; stainless-steel door-sill plates; heated and folding mirrors

Safety features include: dual-stage front air bags; side air bags with passenger-position sensors; front and rear side-curtain bags; front belt pretensioners and load limiters; tilt-telescopic steering wheel; four-wheel disc brakes with ventilated front rotors; ABS with brake assist; vehicle-stability assist with traction control

PRICING

Base: $29,000-$35,000, estimated

Warranty: four-years/50,000-miles limited coverage and Total Luxury Care and roadside assistance; powertrain: six years/70,000-miles

PLUSES: Capable all-weather sporty sedan. Enthusiasts will want the manual transmission. Great seats. Handsome cabin.

MINUSES: Large, 40-foot turning circle. Vague sport-sedan identity for automatic-transmission cars. The 2009 TSX does not go on sale until later in April, and details were released at the New York auto show.

Pricing is expected to be $29,000 to $35,000, which is similar to the 2008 model.

The TSX has a taut suspension that on rough surfaces feels every seam and bump. On concrete interstate the ride can be harsh and jittery. On a race track, I'd like it.

The electric steering is also busy. Even on what appeared to be flat surfaces, the steering wheel required little inputs to maintain a straight course. At times the response felt distant and didn't convey tire or road feedback, which is expected in a sport sedan. Several other journalists had made similar notes and generally blamed the electric steering, but the TSX symptoms aren't indicative of all systems.

The only engine choice is a 201-horsepower, 2.4-liter four-cylinder. Peak horsepower is reached at 7,000 rpm, about 500 rpm higher than most in this segment. And the engine seems to encourage high rpm shifts.

There are transmission choices of a six-speed manual or optional five-speed automatic with sport mode and steering-wheel paddle shifters. The automatic's shift points are timed for fuel efficiency in Drive, which is a nice way to say mundane. Sport mode extends shift points for performance and locks out fifth gear, but it's still not exciting.

The spirit of Acura speaks through the six-speed manual. The gearbox is so slick that it seems meant for speed shifts. The clutch is effortless, and brake and accelerator pedals are placed for heel-toe shifting. This car could be a lot of fun on dry roads.

The all-season, high-performance 17-inch Michelin Pilot tires are good enough for everyday conditions - including snow - but more aggressive drivers would want to switch to summer tires for more grip in warm weather.

The 40-foot turning circle is too large for nimble parking maneuvers.

The list of standard features is long, including a power moonroof, perforated leather seats and six air bags.

The cabin is tight and solid, but not as sound-isolated as I expected. There is tire noise and some wind noise. But even in these early cars - mine was No. 55 - the quality of assembly was quite good.

The matte finish to the dashboard cover is attractive and the colors are handsomely coordinated. The headliner and visors are covered in a well-done woven fabric. Visors have lighted and covered mirrors but no shade extenders.

The doors close with machined precision. Sightlines and driving position are good, and the tilt-and-telescopic steering wheel is large and comfortable. The seats are a standout for fullness and comfort. The front passenger seat has power fore and aft, but no height adjustment.

The back seats are particularly full-bodied, and the center seat also has a head restraint. The exhaust tunnel is not overly intrusive to the center seat foot-room.

The trunk is roomy but somewhat oddly shaped.

The TSX is based on the European Honda Accord and is slightly smaller. The exterior styling is less awkward, but does not generate an emotional, love-at-first-sight response.

I didn't have the usual week to test the new TSX, but I sensed compromise in how the car is being presented. It seems to be losing its Acura edginess. The car is larger and wider than last year's model, but why? And there's no option for a V-6, which is almost expected in this luxury segment.

And there were other questions. The company says there are no plans for a coupe to replace the RSX. Its V10-powered NSX "supercar" is slowly coming back online, but no on-sale date or updates can be determined.

The marketing plan for TSX is to attract younger buyers and lower the average age of owners to 30 years, down from the young 40s, which already is a young-buyer demographic. However in this application, the TSX seems more of an effort to stay relevant to the thousands of young professionals who have bought the previous-generation TSX and who may return, this time married and with young children.

And then the weather created an unexpected impression.

If this driving event had put potential TSX customers through the extremes of weather that the journalists experienced, I expect many consumers would have visited a dealership the next day to order a car. The front-wheel-drive TSX with stability and traction controls, anti-lock brakes, heated seats and outside mirrors, plus real-time weather and traffic updates and rerouting, was as capable or more so than some all-wheel-drive vehicles.

I drove through wind, rain, sleet and heavy, wet snow. Although cars and trucks spun out around me, there wasn't a misstep from the Acura. It was planted and confident, whether changing lanes across a ridge of snow or stopping on a snow-packed downhill with cars ahead and behind.

In these conditions the real-time weather and traffic updates were helpful. Several times the digital readout

noted crashes and delays along my route and I was able to find alternate routes as needed. The navigation system is easy to use. As part of the optional Technology Package, it would have more than paid for itself in that situation.

I still don't care for Acura's use of many buttons for the climate, audio and navigation controls, but I used them so frequently on this trip that I became comfortable finding the right one.

With no coupe model to appease many years of Acura loyalists, the TSX had to have a wide footprint of appeal.

It is a rev-happy sport sedan with the manual transmission. With automatic transmission, it is mundane but appealing and capable in all seasons.

And, as a bonus, it is a more attractive choice for the Honda Accord shopper who just doesn't want a bigger car.

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