

2009 Acura TL: Powerful personality

by Mark_Maynard

The 2009 Acura TL Super Handling All-Wheel-Drive Tech model is the Type A personality of sport sedans.

It is pointed â€” literally in design â€” and absolute in power and purpose.

The 2009 Acura TL Super Handling All-Wheel-Drive Tech gets 17 mpg city and 25 highway on premium fuel. Photo courtesy of Acura. SPEC BOX

2009 Acura TL

Body Style: Midsize, five-passenger sedan

Engine: aluminum, SOHC 3.7-liter V-6, with Variable Valve Timing and Lift Electronic Control (VTEC)

Horsepower: 305 at 6,200 rpm

Torque: 273 foot-pounds at 5,000 rpm

Transmission: five-speed automatic with Sequential SportShift, F1-style paddle shifters and Grade Logic Control

EPA fuel economy estimates: 17 mpg city, 25 highway; 91 octane required

Length/wheelbase: 195.3 /109.3 inches

Curb weight: 3,986 pounds

FEATURES

Standard equipment includes: keyless entry and push-button ignition, power moon roof with auto open and close, navigation system with voice recognition, real-time traffic and weather, full-grain perforated Milano leather-trimmed upholstery, solar-sensing dual-zone automatic climate control with auto humidity control, front sport seats and sport steering wheel, Acura/ELS 10-speaker audio system with XM satellite radio-USB-MP3, heated front seats, 10-way power driver's seat, eight-way power front passenger seat, high-flow sport-tuned exhaust with four tips, 18-inch alloy wheels and all-season tires

Safety features include: six air bags (with side curtains), vehicle stability assist, anti-lock brakes

PRICING

Base price: \$42,995, including \$760 freight charge

Where Assembled: Marysville, Ohio

Warranty: four years/50,000 miles basic coverage with Acura Total Luxury Care and Roadside Assistance; six years/70,000 miles powertrain; 100,000-plus miles no scheduled tune-ups. Redesigned for 2009, the TL is sold in two models, front-or all-wheel drive with a five-speed Sequential SportShift automatic transmission. The Technology Package adds features such as a high-end audio system, navigation system with real-time weather and traffic, backup camera and keyless Smart Entry with push-button ignition.

The base, front-drive model has a slightly smaller, 3.5-liter V-6 versus the 3.7 in the SH-AWD. The base TL has a starting price of just less than \$34,000. The SH-AWD Tech is just under \$43,000, which includes most luxury conveniences and technology features now available.

The new TL is 6.1 inches longer, a little more than an inch wider and it has the presence and substance of a large car.

The base TL is tuned for a supple, comfortable ride — a step up from the last generation TL. The SH-AWD replaces the previous Type-S and is intended for the driving enthusiast. The ride is firm, intensely so on some stretches of concrete interstate, and, like other Acuras, a little noisier at speed than seems necessary. But the SH has more ability than most drivers will ever be able to apply outside of a racecourse.

I didn't test the car in the snow, but it powered along rain-slicked roads like a spider running across a web. And never did I sense electronic correction or intrusion in athletic driving. When it's bad outside, SH-AWD is good.

Acura dynamics engineer Mike Unger said in an e-mail that the torque vectoring capabilities of the SH-AWD system allow the car to perform exceptionally well in all weather conditions. He also said there would be no problem driving in snow with the standard all-season tires.

The disc brakes are large for both models — 12.6-inch vented in the front and 13.1-inch rear — but the SH adds front, fascia-integrated cooling ducts. Integrated with the brakes are ABS, Vehicle Stability Assist and traction control.

Like so many things about Acura, this car pushes limits, styling among them. If Universal Pictures planned a fourth "Back to the Future" film, the TL could replace the DeLorean as the car adapted for space travel.

From one who wasn't ready to see the last TL design go away, the new styling, which exaggerates V shapes, breaks rules at the front and rear. Or maybe it establishes new rules. But as different as the front and rear ends are, there are also design elements of BMW and Lexus in the lines.

I don't love the styling, but I forget all about it when I'm behind the wheel. The precision of the car is penetrating. It can be felt in how little movement is required to activate brakes, steering or acceleration.

The cockpit styling emphasizes rapid transit, but with comfort and quality materials. The sport seats are full-bodied but not overly bolstered to hinder entry and exit. The full-grain perforated Milano leather is rich in aroma and nicely accented with double stitching.

The steering wheel is thickly padded and loaded with buttons for eyes-up adjustment of just about everything from climate and cruise to audio and voice controls.

I like the standard Smart entry and push-button ignition. Grasp the handle to unlock the door, touch a foot to the brake pedal, punch the red start button and then pull on the seat belt. Then it's time to roll. But wait, a kindly female voice and warning tones will remind you to "please release the parking brake."

The backup camera is handy but not completely necessary for rear visibility. There isn't a front parking alert, but it would be appreciated for protecting the pointy nose from parking curbs and ends of garages. It is still to be decided whether California TL owners will chunk up the front design by affixing a license plate by law at the apex of the pointy part.

Despite seat belts for five, the TL is really set up as a four-passenger sedan, with rear-sport bucketlike seats

at the windows and a raised, narrow center position. The seat bottoms are short for legroom, but space is still tight for average-size occupants.

The turning circle of 38.5 feet is wide but not unwieldy, and the chin will scrape on some driveway angles. The trunk, smallish at 13.5 cubic feet, has a high lift-over for parcels and a fairly narrow opening.

The SH-AWD is heavy at nearly 4,000 pounds empty, but it seemingly sheds a lot of pounds when put through its paces. Acceleration rolls on sharp and forceful, particularly when the transmission is in Sport mode.

Fuel economy is 17 mpg city and 25 highway, and premium fuel is required.

The five-speed SportShift automatic has well-spaced shift points, and a flick of the steering wheel shifter brings immediate response. On downshifts, there is a light blip of the throttle to match revs of the engine.

But, for a car that emphasizes technology, it seems yester-tech to bring out an all-new model with a five-speed transmission when the competition has moved on to six, seven and eight speeds. A six-speed might bring more fluid movement between shifts and possibly 1 or 2 more mpg.

Available this fall for the SH-AWD will be a six-speed manual transmission, featuring hill-start assist. The close-ratio transmission is also 110 pounds lighter than the SportShift.

I go back and forth with many points and counterpoints to the TL, but much will be forgiven by its quality, substance, long warranty and long list of desirable features.

There is enough of a performance gap between the base and Super Handling TLs to allow for a midrange model. Maybe an SH without AWD? But for any driver with an enthusiast's pulse, the SH is the TL to have.

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