

Restyled Honda wagon does it all

by Mark_Maynard

For many buyers opting out of a larger, thirstier car or SUV, the Honda Fit is a little big car.

Few small cars or wagons are as roomy or have such a wide, flat, tall and square cargo space and all that wrapped in speedy styling.

Designated a small station wagon by EPA standards, Fit has about the same interior room as the Civic sedan but it is 15.7 inches shorter, 2.3 inches narrower and 3.5 inches taller.

The 2009 Honda fit is new with sharper styling, more standard features and access to more technology options. Photo courtesy of Honda Motor Co. Ltd. SPEC BOX

2009 Honda Fit Sport

Body style: subcompact, front-wheel-drive, five-passenger small wagon

Engine: aluminum, 1.5-liter, 16-Valve SOHC i-VTEC four-cylinder

Horsepower: 117 at 6,600 rpm

Torque: 106 foot-pounds at 4,800 rpm

Transmission: five-speed automatic with steering-wheel-mounted paddle shifters

EPA fuel economy estimates: 27 mpg city, 33 highway; 87 octane recommended

Front head/leg/shoulder room: 40.4/41.3/52.7 inches

Rear head/leg/shoulder room: 39/34.5/51.3 inches

Length/wheelbase: 161.6/98.4 inches

Curb weight: 2,604 pounds

FEATURES

Standard equipment includes: air conditioning, four-speaker CD audio system with MP3/WMA playback and Radio Data System, auxiliary audio input jack, power windows, mirrors and locks, 15-inch steel wheels and wheel covers

Fit Sport features include: 16-inch alloy wheels, underbody aero kit, rear roofline spoiler, fog lights, security system with keyless remote entry, cruise control, six-speaker audio system with five-mode equalizer and a USB audio interface

Safety features include: dual-stage, dual-threshold front air bags, dual front-side air bags, side-curtain bags, anti-lock brakes and electronic brake-force distribution

PRICING

Base: \$17,780, including \$670 freight charge

Where assembled: Suzuka, Japan Those dimensions make it a Handy Dandy Does It All vehicle.

It can handle five passengers without cramping and has versatile storage options. The rear, so-called Magic Seat now has a one-motion, fold-flat function (no more removing the head rests first) or the seat bottom can be flipped up for easy transport of school science projects, flat-screen TVs, flats of water or whatever. And Fit can be flat-towed behind a motor home.

If the side doors were rear-hinged, it would be an ideal car for wheelchair users to somewhat handily load and unload their second set of wheels. This is the second generation of Fit, and it has been completely re-engineered to make the image more youthful, with sharper design, larger tires and more technology features and options.

Honda considers Fit a premium entry in the compact segment. Sold in base and Sport models, pricing begins at \$15,420 with a five-speed manual transmission; add \$800 for a five-speed automatic. Standard equipment includes air conditioning with pollen filter, four-speaker CD-MP3 audio system and power windows, mirrors and locks.

The Fit Sport starts at \$16,930 and adds 16-inch alloy wheels, underbody aero kit, rear roofline spoiler, fog lights, security system with keyless remote entry, cruise control, six-speaker audio system with five-mode equalizer and a USB audio interface. A five-speed automatic with steering-wheel paddle shifters adds \$850.

Fit Sport with satellite-linked navigation system, \$18,780 with manual transmission, uses a 6.5-inch-display screen and allows voice activation to set destinations.

Premium features include a quality appearance of materials and a lighted gauge/speedometer display (visible in all light levels), tilt and telescoping steering column and a secret storage box under the second-row seat bottom. (Only other Fit owners know where a wallet or other valuables may be stashed.)

Honda gets a lot of buzz, literally, out of a smallish, 1.5-liter, four-cylinder engine. The 117-horsepower engine is spinning at about 3,500 rpm at 65 mph. On streets, the Fit manual can be wound up like a hummingbird to flit from errand to errand.

Unless you are buying this model to deliver pizza, the automatic drops the revs to a more ear-pleasing 2,500 rpm at 65 mph. Mileage is increased and calm restored to the cabin. And with steering-wheel shifters in the Sport, it's just fun to click off gear changes.

The base model with five-speed manual gets 33 mpg on the highway, but the automatic is rated 35 mpg. Typically, a manual will get the higher mileage.

A six-speed transmission "expected of an all-new, premium economy vehicle" would have eased shift points and added 1 or 2 mpg, which would be nice, a Honda spokesman said. "But, for now, it (a six-speed) would be a little pricey."

Despite its size, the Fit feels robust and rugged. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration gives it top ratings of five stars for driver and front passenger crash protection, five stars for front side protection, and four stars for rear protection and rollover resistance.

Honda also applied its Advanced Compatibility Engineering body structure for improved front-crash resistance between vehicles of different sizes and ride heights. Standard safety features on all Fits include six air bags and anti-lock brakes and electronic brake-force distribution. Electronic vehicle stability control is optional.

The Fit has comfortable in and out access for all occupants, unlike the Civic, which is much lower to the ground. The second row has good center-seat foot room and a head restraint. And the low, wide and square cargo area will hold a stack of 40-pound bags of dog food.

Over-the-shoulder views for the driver were improved with the new body design, but there is still a lot of wasted space at the dashboard with the cone-style front end. And the forked windshield pillars create opportunities to block sight of pedestrians in crosswalks.

Fit's contemporary styling shields its wagon designation, and its flip-and-fold versatility allows it to take the place of a much larger vehicle. Fit is a good stimulus package for those who are doing more with less.
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