

Totally on track

by Barbara and Bill Schaffer



The 2006 Honda Civic has dominated the awards this year with its suite of sedans and coupes. With its unique Integrated Motor Assist (IMA) and Continuously Variable Transmission (CVT), the Hybrid is capable of 49/51 mpg city/highway making it one of the most fuel stingy cars available in the US.

Powered by a highly-efficient 1.3-liter (110-hp) four-cylinder gasoline engine with 20-hp electric motor assist, the Hybrid maximizes fuel usage on the road. When it's stopped, the gas engine shuts down to save fuel, plus it benefits with other fuel-saving features like electric-assist power steering. When the car starts off again, the electric motor assists, as it does when more power is needed for, say, passing. The electric motor also doubles as the starter, and it assists in charging the battery. The battery is also charged from regenerative braking and when the car coasts. Unlike electric vehicles, the hybrid does not need to be plugged in.

Driving the Civic Hybrid is no different than driving any other car, other than it's not necessary to start it, in the traditional sense. Once the ignition is on, and the CVT is in gear, the driver simply presses the accelerator and the vehicle moves the appropriate direction with the gasoline engine starting. The entire engine starting and stopping process is done silently and seamlessly with no driver intervention. Often the only way the driver can tell what is happening is by looking at the charge-assist gauge and the tachometer in the lower instrument pod.

The Civic Hybrid accelerates at a respectable rate, producing 0 to 60 mph times of 10.8 seconds. EPA fuel economy estimates are 49 mpg for city driving and 51 mpg on the highway. Our actual mileage during a week of combined driving averaged 41.7 mpg.

Civic Hybrid prices start at \$22,700. With the DVD navigation system (the only option), the price goes to \$24,200. ■

OUR DRIVE

Besides the Civic Hybrid Barbara and Bill tested for a week on the coast, we received one here at headquarters and certainly looked forward to it. We were quite impressed with the original Civic Hybrid (see *Arizona Driver*, March/April 2005), so much so that we actively anticipated the Accord Hybrid that followed (see *AZD*, May/June 2005). So a new Civic Hybrid? Full of improvements and a year's new technology in this rapidly changing realm? Bring it on! And bring it on, they did. Honda delivered us the new Civic Hybrid on a beautiful late March afternoon.

We oriented ourselves to its fundamentals, and the next day we drove it halfway across the Valley to a meeting. Having learned "defensive parking" as well as defensive driving long ago, we eyed a nice spot, in full view, nothing much in front, behind, or side-to-side, and plenty of room for others' maneuvers through particularly wide lanes. During our meeting, someone came at the door and asked, "Is that your Honda outside?" Gee, we're in a meeting, not a great time to discuss hybrid technology... but... "Yes, that's ours." Well, the gentleman was obviously quite honest, but he wasn't there to learn about hybrids—he was there to let us know he hadn't seen it as he got in his full-size pickup from the other side, then backed right into it. We were devastated—it's not our car, it's brand new, it's on the rare side, it's full of technology that might not take well to a good whack, and so on. We set up the accident report steps and drove back.

We weren't too focused on the hybrid aspects by then, but we can say they were as transparent as the situation probably warranted. We were more focused on whether the car would track well at freeway speeds and generally hold together. Well, this little magic Honda is built very soundly. Despite high side winds, we tracked and maneuvered at normal speeds, all the way back to the office. Honda could not have been nicer about it all, but we certainly are disappointed. ■

