

ARIZONA DRIVER

THE ENTHUSIAST'S GUIDE TO LIFE BEHIND THE WHEEL

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Perfect Fit?

- As gas prices head sky-high, Honda and others get small in the US market

Plus...

- Honda Civic Si test drive
- Honda Element 4x4 test drive

And...

- Russo and Steele sets more Monterey records!

Timing is everything

by Joe Sage



Hop behind the wheel of the Honda Fit Sport, and you will find not only a comfortable cabin, but 5-speed paddle shifter, MP3 connectivity and more.

With one eye on the gas gauge, one on the wallet, and a third on what's coming down the pike, literally and figuratively, we looked forward to our week with the Honda Fit with great anticipation.

The Japanese have no shortage of small cars in their domestic fleets, but the smallest of the small haven't made it to our shores lately, and even this is not the smallest of the small, not by a long shot. We do, however, suddenly have the Toyota Yaris, Nissan Versa and Honda Fit arriving pretty much simultaneously. And the Koreans are sending us a new Hyundai Accent, while Smart is finally (we hope) set, once again, to gain US distribution. The MINI opened the door a bit, but gas at three dollars a gallon has made a lot of people want to see what's on the other side of that door. The time is right to give small cars a try.

With a name like Fit, the puns just flow like water in a monsoon storm, but we're trying hard to resist them, because really the name just... err... fits. It's short and sweet, like the car itself. (Dang. Impossible to avoid all puns.) Actually, Fit is too short a name in this case, as we tested the Honda Fit Sport. Honda is famously short on options, which makes choosing and buying quite easy. Both feature a 1497cc in-line 4-cylinder 16-valve SOHC aluminum alloy powerplant, putting out 109 hp and 105 lb-ft of torque. Both have LEV-2 CARB emissions ratings. Both achieve virtually the same gas mileage, although the Sport with automatic is a point lower on the highway end (5-speed manual, 33/38 city/highway; 5-speed automatic, 31/38 for the Fit and 31/37 for the Fit Sport). There is no difference in the body construction or suspension, both with MacPherson strut front and torsion-beam rear suspensions, 21mm front stabilizer bar, and electric power-assisted rack-and-pinion steering. The Fit Sport does have 15" alloy wheels with P195/55 all-season tires, compared with 14" P175/65s for the standard



KEEP RIGHT >>



Perhaps less distinctive than the front view, the rear of the Honda Fit Sport nonetheless features very well-executed fit, finish, utility and design detail.



Honda teamed with House of Blues Entertainment to create this one-of-a-kind Fit for a summer charity auction. Can major SEMA efforts be far behind?



Fit. The Fit Sport also features steering-wheel-mounted paddle shifters (with the automatic transmission), Drive/Sport mode with instrumentation (an indicator), and cruise control with illuminated steering-wheel-mounted controls. A 200w 6-speaker sound system with 5-mode equalizer and MP3/WMA links replaces the 160w 4-speaker sound system of the base Fit. The rest is largely cosmetic, with performance undertones, such as body-colored spoilers underbody and at the rear roofline. Base prices are \$15,170 (manual; \$15,970 auto) for the Fit Sport versus \$13,850 (manual; \$14,650 auto) for the base model Fit.

The conundrum presented therein is the usual one: when buying an inexpensive small car, do the savings justify bumping up to the better model with all it adds? Or is savings the whole point, so go with the base model? That is a decision, as always, for the individual buyer's budget and needs (or desires)

Our test vehicle was top-of-the-line as far as price and fitment, i.e. the Honda Fit Sport with 5-speed automatic and paddle shifters, though we would have loved to try the manual. We'd have to admit we had less interest in trying the standard Fit, by comparison, though for long-term purchase, if it suits the buyer's budget, we are sure they would find much the same enjoyment from that model.

And enjoyment we did find. Other than the aforementioned MINI, this is the first of the new wave of really small cars to hit our test fleet, and it was a great place to start. These are, of course, not the absolute first very small cars on the road; witness the Chevy Aveo and its predecessors and stablemates. However, those have been pretty well overrun on the road by the ubiquitous BMW and Mercedes fleets of the Valley freeway set. From inside the Fit Sport, we quickly experienced the expectations of the larger predators. Pull up to a two-lane red light, and in the rearview mirror, you'll see the big sedans and SUVs jockeying for position in the other lane. A quick launch when the light turns green is

clearly not what they expect from this little car. But they are surprised! As were we, pleasantly so. Although the specifications and statistics will not have you bragging at the Porsche club meeting, in normal use, this is one balanced, peppy and sure-footed car. Leaving a light, ripping through a corner, accelerating up the on-ramp to a freeway, the Honda Fit Sport very much holds it own. An M5 could still eat it for breakfast, but the surprise factor gives the Fit and edge for now.

The car also does very well with its style points. MINI benefited from its inherent panache, as well as from being available at the same dealerships as BMW. A Honda may be a Honda, but the stylists did a great job with this vehicle. Personally, we're more enamored with the front view than the rear quarter, but in the available space, they've developed a car that has contemporary cues, superior fit and finish, and as with the ride, a fine sense of balance. This is a car that boasts its smallness and avoids any stigma from that, at the same time.

That leaves only the inside, and inside the car delivers as promised: a package that is seemingly miraculously larger inside than out. The aforementioned exterior styling balance masks, or perhaps enhances, the fact that this small car has a tall greenhouse and large interior volume, with spacious front seats and comfortable controls. We did not give the back seat a tryout in our tenure, but as the accompanying photographs attest, it is a real back seat, with room for legs and feet, which of course some tiny cars seem to leave out of the equation. The rear storage space, enhanced by split folding rear seats, will get you through a weekend's errands with room to spare.

Mildly sporty sedan without a trunk, sport hatchback, small crossover wagon, small car period, however this car is classified to you, it is a fully capable small car, with admirable design and engineering, tremendous value, and we would anticipate the usual Honda reliability. ■



Arizona

ATTRACTIONS & EVENTS

Chiricahua State Park
HCR 2, Box 6500 • Willcox AZ 85643
520-824-3560

Grand Canyon National Park
PO Box 129 • Grand Canyon AZ 86023
923-638-7888 Visitor Info Recorded Message

Lake Havasu State Park
699 London Bridge Dr. • Lake Havasu AZ 86403
928-855-2784

Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument
10 Organ Pipe Drive • Ajo AZ 85321-9626
520-387-6849 Visitor Information

Petrified Forest National Park
PO Box 2217
Petrified Forest National Park AZ 86028
928-524-66228 Visitor Information

Saguaro National Park
3693 South Old Spanish Trail
520-733-5153 Visitor Info Rincon Mtn District

Sport Compact Drag Racing
Every thursday at Firebird Raceway
www.dragracing.com/phx

Wupatki National Monument
Flagstaff Area National Monuments
6400 N. Hwy 89 • Flagstaff AZ 86004
928-679-2365 Visitor Information
928-526-1157 Visitor Information, HQ

California

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Palm Desert Visitor Information Center
72-990 Highway 111 • Palm Desert CA 92260
800-873-2428 • www.palm-desert.org

MOTOR MUSEUMS

Petersen Automotive Museum
6060 Wilshire Blvd. (at Fairfax) • LA CA 90036
323-930-CARS • www.petersen.org

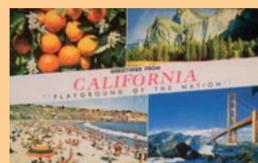
Colorado

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Colorado Activity Centers, Inc.
737 N. Tenmile Drive - Suite 35
PO Box 129 • Frisco CO 80443
800-777-8642 - www.coloradoinfo.com

MOTOR MUSEUMS

Shelby American Collection
5020 Chaparral Court
PO Box 19228 • Boulder CO 80308-2228
www.shelbyamericancollection.org
303-516-9565



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VEHICLE TEST : 2007 HONDA FIT SPORT

New Honda is Fit for driving fun

By Barbara and Bill Schaffer



Honda Fit Sport

STANDARD EQUIPMENT:

Air conditioning with air filtration; Power windows and door locks; Tilt wheel; Remote entry and security system; Fog lights; 200-Watt AM/FM/CD audio system with MP3/WMA playback capability and Auxiliary audio jack; Speed-sensitive volume control.
Base Price: \$15,170
Options:none
Freight.....\$595
Price as Tested.....\$15,765

DIMENSIONS

EPA SizeSmall wagon
Weight.....2,471 lb.
Wheelbase96.5 in.
Length.....157.4 in.
Width.....66.2 in.
Height60.0 in.
Fuel Capacity10.8 gal.
Cargo Capacity21.3 to 41.9 cu. ft.

MECHANICAL

Engine1.5L SOHC VTEC 4-Cyl.
Horsepower109@5800
Torque105@4800
Transmission5-spd man.
DriveFront wheel
Brakes.....Disc/Drum ABS
Tires195/55R15

PERFORMANCE

0 to 60 mph.....9.3 sec.
Top speed.....est. 110 mph
EPA economy rating33/38 mpg
Our actual fuel econ34.3 mpg

COMPETITORS

Chevrolet Aveo, Chevrolet Cobalt, Ford Focus, Honda Civic, Hyundai Elantra, Kia Spectra, Mazda 3, Mitsubishi Lancer, Nissan Sentra, Nissan Versa, Suzuki Aerio, Suzuki Reno, Toyota Corolla, Toyota Yaris.

The Honda Fit debuted in Japan in 2001 as the Jazz; it's now sold in 70 countries and has won awards in Japan, Australia, New Zealand and the UK. Automakers have been hiding some interesting products in foreign markets, or has it been that we weren't ready for such small, practical cars until the fuel prices moved into the \$3 per gallon range? It's interesting how quickly they adapt to changes in the US market when the need arises.

We've always enjoyed small cars, because of their better fuel economy and the agility the size brings. But there were always compromises, especially in driving dynamics—the steering may not be tight or precise, they may lean a bit in the corners and the brakes are a little weak.

The Honda Fit's steering and handling are precise and firm, more like a good sport sedan or sports car. The brakes are excellent, stopping the little car from 60 mph in just 118 ft.—about the same distance as a BMW M6 or Porsche 911 Turbo.

The only downside is the acceleration, which, while not bad, is not quite on par with the Fit's other driving characteristics. Zero to 60 mph times are in the low 9-second range with the manual transmission and a second or two longer for the automatic. But I remind myself that this is an economy car, not a sport sedan. As such, we did well, averaging 34.3 mpg during our driving, as compared with the EPA ratings of 33 mpg for city driving and 38 mpg on the highway.

The Fit has a sporty wagon look with an aerodynamically sloped hood and front windshield. The Sport version adds

ground effects, rear roofline spoiler and 15-inch alloy wheels, which enhance aerodynamics and give a nice sporty look.

The interior has about the same space as the Honda Accord, plus 21.3 cubic feet of cargo capacity behind the second seat. Using a 60/40 split Magic Seat®, seat backs and bottoms can be raised and lowered in a multitude of configurations for carrying taller cargo, or a lot of cargo, or seats can be laid flat in the “refresh mode,” so you could even sleep in it if you wanted.

Our test car had the 5-speed manual transmission For \$800 dollars, buyers can equip the Fit with a five-speed automatic, which on the Sport model comes with paddle shifters; these allow the driver to make quick, precise up and down shifts without taking hands off the wheel.

The suspension produces a stiff, controlled ride, but well within comfort levels. Steering is electronic with quick ratio and excellent response. Braking comes from a sophisticated anti-lock system with vented discs in front and drums in the rear.

Shoppers moving from a powerful sport sedan or SUV will find the Honda Fit to be a palatable transition. You won't be thrown into gadget shock: the Fit Sport comes with power windows, cruise control and keyless entry. The frosting on the cake is that this car is fun to drive and gets very good fuel economy.

The Honda Fit is more expensive than the competitors, but the level of features, the way it drives and the quality fit and finish makes it worth more. Until BMW comes up with something in this price range, think of the Fit as the BMW of the subcompacts. ■

