Honda puts fun into CR-Z Hybrid

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When you're in Sport, the ring stays red all the time, almost glaring at you. In Normal, the ring transitions from green to blue to the point it is a like a video game where bring green means you're good. Soon you find yourself feathering the throttle and braking hard to increase regenerative power to the battery in order to be as green as possible.

Econ mode means green almost all of the time. But there's a catch.

Econ retards the IMA and engine to the point that the car is very sluggish off the line. You'd think this would be great in the city, but with all manner of high-powered cars and trucks behind you, operating in Sport is almost mandatory.

Surprisingly to me, Econ worked best on suburban streets on the outskirts of the big city where the pace is more relaxed and civilized.

Hit Sport when you're in Normal and you'll feel the surge of power come in. Go from Econ to Sport and the CR-Z vaults ahead. Go from Sport to Econ on the highway and it's like you popped a parachute.

At a stop, the engine shuts off and turns off the air to cut fuel consumption. Press in the clutch and the IMA starts the engine and off you go.

Out on the road, the handling was like a small sportscar, precise and with great feedback. At a closed course slalom, people were throwing the CR-Z around with great abandon with one journalist delighting in the low-end torque and the fact he could get the tail to hang out on hairpin turns.

On a highway north of Toronto, I drove the car mostly in Normal and my co-driver mostly in Sport. The sports tuned suspension is already pretty good, but it's even better in Sport allowing you to enjoy the car and stay under the posted speed limit all at the same time.

We also got a lot of looks in the CR-Z, mostly from kids but also from a lot of Honda driver/owners.

At a stop for coffee a woman pulled up beside me in a Honda Insight Hybrid and exclaimed how she and like-minded hybrid owners are changing the world as she lit up a cigarette ≠ go figure.

One thing you will have to get used to is the view through the rear window panel. Like the Insight Hybrid the liftgate is chopped off at the back with a vertical window. The problem is there is a thick seam where the liftgate window meets the back window that is directly in the line of sight, partially blocking the view of cars behind.

There is cargo space for up to 711 litres. The CR-Z comes with a rear cargo cover that can be fitted at three different levels. In addition, there is a rear cargo console behind the front seats providing a hidden storage area complete with two-zone tray.

I said there are several ways to have fun in this car and another is cost. If you were expecting to pay $30,000 or more, forget it.

The 2011 CR-Z Hybrid with standard six airbags, electronic stability control, Xenon High Intensity Discharge (HID) headlights, 16-inch alloy wheels, four-wheel disc brakes with traction control, tire pressure monitoring system, Bluetooth hands-free phone link and 360-watt premium sound system with seven speakers is $23,490 for the manual and $24,290 for the CVT.

That means, along with the Civic Hybrid and the Insight, Honda offers the three lowest priced hybrids on the market.

And how much fun it that?

HONDA CR-Z HYBRID 2011
(at a glance)

BODY STYLE: Compact hybrid sporty car coupe.

DRIVE METHOD: front-engine, front-wheel-drive.

ENGINE: 1.5-litre SOHC engine/electric motor (combined, 122 hp, 128 lb/ft).

FUEL ECONOMY: Regular; six-speed manual, 6.5/5.3/6.0L/100 km city/highway/combined; CVT, 5.6/5.0/5.3L/100 km city/highway/combined.

PRICE: six-speed manual, $23,490; CVT, $24,290.

WEB: www.honda.ca

The interior of the 2011 Honda CR-Z is very modern, almost space age in appearance.

†Limited time financing offers based on new 2010 Honda models. 0.9% purchase financing available for up to 60 months on new 2010 Civic and Accord models / for 36 months on new 2010 CR-V models through Honda Financial Services on approved credit. *Purchase example based on new 2010 Civic DX-A MT Sedan, model FA1E2AE4X available through Honda Financial Services on approved credit. Purchase agreement based on a purchase price of $18,820.00 which includes freight and PDI, and environmental and OMVIC fees of $1,530, and 130 bi-weekly payments of $148.08 with $0 down payment and 0.9% purchase APR. Cost of borrowing is $430.40 for a total finance obligation of $19,250.40. Taxes, license, insurance and lien registration (if applicable) are extra. Retailer may sell for less. Retailer order / trade may be necessary. ¥Limited time lease offers based on new 2010 Honda models. 0.9% lease rate available for 24 months on new 2010 Civic, Accord and CR-V models through Honda Financial Services on approved credit. #Lease example based on new 2010 Civic DX-A MT Sedan, model FA1E2AE4X available through Honda Financial Services on approved credit. £2.4% lease APR for 48 months. Monthly payment (includes freight and PDI, environmental fees and OMVIC fee) is $148.44. Down payment or equivalent trade of $4,950.00, first monthly payment and $0 security deposit due at lease inception. Total lease obligation is $13,779.89. Taxes, license, insurance and lien registration (if applicable) are extra. 96,000 kilometre allowance; charge of $0.12/km for excess kilometres. Retailer may lease for less. Retailer order / trade may be necessary. ΩΩ$500 Gas Card offer applies only to retail customer purchase, lease or finance agreements for new 2010 Civic models concluded, respectively between July 5th, 2010 and August 3rd, 2010. ΩΩ$500 Gas Card offer includes GST, PST, HST, QST where applicable. Valid only on purchase, lease or finance agreements concluded at participating Honda retailers.†/*/¥/#/£/ Offers valid from July 5th, 2010 through August 3rd, 2010 at participating Honda retailers. Offers valid only for Ontario residents at Ontario Honda Dealers locations. Offers subject to change or cancellation without notice. See your Honda retailer for full details.