

Honda Civic Si Coupe offers performance, economy

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Road Worthy

If you haven't noticed, the price you pay at the pump for performance has taken off faster than a dragster.

Having monster engines with 400 and 500 hp is all well and good but when it takes the high side of \$100 to fill the tank, well, there has to be an alternative.

Honda, never an automaker to miss a developing trend, may have found the answer with the 2006 Civic Coupe Si. The Coupe Si joins the Civic Hybrid and Civic Sedan/Coupe at a time when gasoline is fueling the flight of consumers away from lumbering trucks and SUVs back to more sensible modes of transportation.

Canadians have had a love affair with the Civic since it debuted in 1973, and to date, have purchased more than 1.2 million of them.

Hot rod Civics have been around since the CRX Coupe and they have been spun off into a whole of line of sporting Civics not to mention tuner cars too numerous to count.

The "hot rod" Civic has always been a winner, but proof



The Si version of the Civic Coupe looks fast standing still. With a starting price of \$25,800, it adds new meaning to the term "bang for the buck".

of the pudding came recently when the Civic Si was named Best New Sports Car at the annual Car of the Year testing conducted by the Automotive Journalists Association of

Canada. In taking that honour, it dusted off the likes of the Pontiac Solstice, the Mazda Miata GT and the redoubtable Corvette Z06 among others.

The Coupe Si shares the same 'one-motion' profile concept of the 2006 line with a steep windshield rake, negligible front and rear overhangs, and a reduced gap between the wheel wells and the tires for a sweeping, cohesive appearance. It's much sexier than the last generation Civic.

Adventurous too is the instrument panel. This two-tier instrument panel positions priority gauges like the speedometer up high in the driver's field of vision.

A digital speedometer, fuel gauge and temperature gauge are housed in the upper level to be more in-line with the driver's line-of-sight. The lower level of the instrument panel houses a tachometer, multi-information digital display, odometer with trip meter and a variety of warning indicators.

While the standard Civic Sedan/Coupe has a 1.8-litre engine with 140 hp and 128 lb/ft of torque, the Coupe Si has a model-specific 2.0-litre, DOHC four-cylinder with 197 hp and 139 lb/ft of torque. Honda uses variable valve timing along with all the knowledge gained through motorcycle and Formula One racing to extract that kind of high-revving power that just sings out.

The air intake and the exhaust systems were tuned to provide a deep sound and resonance for the kind of feedback found on competition cars. Another thing learned from racing is the use of drive-by-wire throttle body technology that gives smooth acceleration response along with a chain driven balancer unit in the oil pan that minimizes engine vibration.

In fact, this car can hit the 8,000 rpm redline so fast, there is a red warning light set high on the dash that starts flashing at 7,400 rpm as you approach top end.

A six-speed manual ensures that the engine is pulling at maximum through the gears and there is a helical-type limited slip differential to route that torque evenly to the front wheels. Even so, you can still get the tires squealing in first, second with even a chirp in third.

On the inside, the coupe is noticeably roomier than the 2005 SiR Coupe, closer to an Accord for that matter. The interior treatment is unique to the Coupe Si with red stitching on the seats and front seats bolsters so big; you almost have to climb in over them.

On the outside, the 17-inch alloy wheels (18-inch optional) on 215/45-series tires give away the fact this not a plebeian Civic. For those who want even more grip, Michelin Pilot Exalto rubber is optionally available.

To compound the more sinister look, it has Si badging, aero cladding, and a rear wing that I'm told is functional.

But this is also 2005/06 and safety is now, I'm glad to say, a major decision on the buying process of Canadians. Like its Civic siblings, the Coupe Si has standard front, side and side curtain airbags along with standard four-channel ABS with Electronic Brake Distribution (EBD) and an advanced body structure that absorbs and dissipates energy in a collision.

Honda has always poured a lot of time and effort into its suspensions. The Coupe Si takes the MacStruts front and multi-link double wishbone rear and enhances it to match the greater power and grip of the Si.

Both coupes are actually smaller than the sedans. This was done because Honda realizes one size does not fit all when it comes to the range of Civic buyers who literally cover all demographics.

The roofline, because of the swept back windshield and the high bolstered seats, is not conducive to graceful entrances, but once seated, it's pretty roomy in there. At first, the two-tier instrument panel seems awkward, but once underway, the logic of it is clear. All you really need, after all, is the speedo to keep you out of mischief, which is hard to do in a car like the Si.

The Si shifter was specially designed for short, fast, positive gear changes. Couple that to a very, and I mean very light clutch and you have the recipe for spirited motoring. But the main dish on this menu is the Si engine. It revs with the merest nudge of the fly-by-wire throttle. Tromp it and the Si shoots forward with a slight dose of torque steer that is manageable as long as you know it is coming.

Being a front-driver, the Civic Si oversteers, meaning it likes to go straight when you want to turn. Luckily, the steering weight is also light, but not soft to the hands. Because the body is so rigid, you do feel the big bumps and potholes but it's firm, not jarring.

The best part is listening to the harmonic tune of the intake and exhaust systems, but watch for the red warning light because when the rev limiter cuts in, it makes a heck of a noise as the juice is cut to cylinders begging for more.

The Si proves that motoring in a quick and tidy manner does not have to cost the better part of fifty grand.

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