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Canada's Online Auto Magazine

Friday, October 26th, 2007



CanadianDriver

April 4, 2005

Test

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Drive: 2005 Honda Accord Hybrid

by Paul Williams

The Honda Accord is Canada's best selling intermediate-sized car. It comes with a choice of two fine engines - a 160 hp inline-four and a 240 hp V6 - that both return excellent fuel economy.

But Honda is also committed to hybrid technology - this is the company that makes the Insight and the Civic Hybrid -- and it's chosen the V6 version of its popular sedan to receive the latest developments in hybrid drive, theoretically returning even better fuel economy.

But looking at the \$36,990 Accord Hybrid, you'd be hard-pressed to immediately identify this as what it is - which is, arguably, the most advanced hybrid car on the planet.

Update: July 2005

Whether it was the cold winter conditions in which I initially drove the Accord Hybrid, or the fact that it was pretty much a brand new vehicle, the fuel consumption I experienced was not as good as I expected. Granted, it's a 255-hp car that delivers its power with turbine-like smoothness, but I

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Except for the discreet "Hybrid" badge on the trunk lid, and the equally diminutive trunk lid spoiler, it looks like any other Accord sedan. (No Accord Hybrid coupe is available.)

That's the way the company likes it. "Honda doesn't like to blow its own horn," says Nadia Mereb of Honda Canada. "It's not the company's way to make a big deal out of itself." So as far as the engineering in this car is concerned, I'll let CanadianDriver do it for them.

The Accord Hybrid adds Integrated Motor Assist or IMA, Honda's hybrid Technology, to the standard V6. It increases horsepower in the already-powerful car to 255, and raises torque to 232 lb-ft, from 212 in the conventional V6.

When accelerating, the multi-talented IMA acts as a motor and supplements the V6, drawing power from a battery located behind the rear seat (the location of which eliminates a folding seat). When the car is decelerating, the IMA functions as a generator and recharges the battery. It is also the starter.

Like all hybrids currently on the market, the Accord doesn't require

felt a second opportunity to test the car was in order.

The very same car was used, now with 11,000 km under its hood. The warm summer weather was in stark contrast to our original test drive, and now the car was carrying two adults, instead of one. This time the Accord Hybrid achieved 6.2 L/100km in a full day of mostly highway driving. Our speeds ranged from 80-115 km/h, with occasional bursts of rapid acceleration when passing, and some stop-and-go driving in small towns.

At the end of the day, and with the "low fuel" warning light on, the car took just under 50L of fuel (regular grade, I should add), which would give the Accord Hybrid, in these conditions, a cruising range of 950 km. We think that with conservative driving, there's 1,000 km available from a tank in the Accord Hybrid - a truly sensational range given its power, size and level of appointment.

PW

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plugging in to recharge the system.

The IMA also permits the engine to run on three cylinders when torque is not required (a green light comes on to let you know this mode is operational). This cylinder deactivation technology, which is also used on the redesigned six-cylinder 2005 Honda Odyssey minivan, is designed to further reduce fuel consumption and emissions while running on regular-grade fuel.

Furthermore, the engine will shut off at stoplights. Even though the audio, climate controls and lights are operating with power from the IMA battery, you're not using any gasoline at all.



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All this wizardry is managed by very sophisticated on-board software that allowed engineers to design in unprecedented control over the operation of the drivetrain. But from the driver's seat, it goes largely, but not entirely, unnoticed.

In addition to receiving this most advanced drivetrain, the Accord Hybrid comes fully equipped with occupant amenities, save for a sunroof which is unavailable on this model. It has a leather interior, side curtain airbags, dual electronic climate control, a six-disc CD changer, trip computer, multi-functional steering wheels, special lightweight 16-inch alloy wheels, electronic power steering, heated exterior mirrors and just about every other feature you'll need or want.



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The Hybrid-specific, compact five-speed transmission shifts smoothly and is geared to provide low engine speeds on the highway. Traction control is also standard, as are anti-lock brakes.

The interior is spacious and room for rear seat passengers is generous.

Visibility is excellent all around, the instruments are easy to read and the

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vehicle handles very well. It's also very quiet inside, as it comes with Active Noise Cancellation, also found on Acura models, to reduce the effect of outside distractions. Side impact airbags are standard.

In short, there are good reasons why the Accord is the best-selling intermediate in the country: it is a superbly built and high-quality product packed with desirable features, and consequently has a high resale value.

But it's the Hybrid we're talking about, and there are some differences between driving it and conventional Accords.

When starting the car, there's no cranking at all. You turn the key and the engine simply comes to life. Even in brutally cold weather as low as -30 Celsius, it starts right up.



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Put it in gear and you're away, with battery charging indicators on the dashboard keeping you up-to-date on the status of the IMA. You really don't need to monitor this, but the gauges tell you all is well with the system.

It's
when
applying
the
brakes,

especially when the car is cold, that you most feel the IMA system's presence; it is quite obviously supplementing your pedal pressure and can cause you to decelerate more abruptly than you expect. As the car warms up, this effect becomes less obvious but continues to be evident, probably because the transmission is programmed to downshift early to keep engine speed up to

enhance regenerative braking. You do get used to this, and adjust your driving accordingly.

Once up to speed, the IMA operates in response to current driving conditions, by supplementing the V6, charging the battery, and activating and deactivating the cylinders as required. This is not entirely transparent to the driver. Unlike the Honda Civic Hybrid, for example, a driver can feel the subtle workings of the IMA in the car. Passengers can't, unless you point it out.

When stopping, the engine will shut down at two to three km/hr, to conserve fuel before you've come to a halt. As soon as you take your foot off



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the brake, it starts again instantaneously. Honda's hybrid system does not permit the car to "creep" on battery power alone, although it would be appreciated in some situations.

Some have wondered if it's really safe to have the engine shut down in this fashion, questioning the possibility of the engine not starting when immediately required. It's a question that could be asked of any system in the car, be it the airbags, the steering or even a wheel falling off. A hybrid system, like any new technology found in cars today, is very sophisticated, and there are no indications that it has a propensity to fail. Certainly in my experience, the car ran flawlessly.

The Accord Hybrid has something that most hybrids don't: lots of power. With 255 hp under your right foot, you'll have no trouble accelerating up to speed or passing traffic. This car's a real flyer.

Handling is sharp and the car is easily controlled in all conditions, as the Accord is built like a vault. Bumps, cracks, or potholes don't phase the Accord as it rolls over them without complaint. There's no shuddering from the suspension, or transmission of jolts through the body. It's a very tight car.

I found that with the climate control set to "Auto" at 22



degrees Celsius, no further adjustments were necessary. In slippery, snowy conditions, the traction control system was one of the best in my experience, although the Bridgestone Blizzak winter tires no doubt contributed to this.

The Accord Hybrid falls short in exterior and interior colour choices, however. Black or silver frost metallic exterior shades pair up only with a black interior, while satin silver metallic exterior comes strictly with a beige or "ivory" interior. The combination of silver and beige on my tester was singularly unappealing; black with ivory interior would be nice, but is unavailable.

Other complaints are the tendency of front doors to travel past their détentes, closing too easily when you want them to stay open, or opening fully when you want them to stay halfway. Finally, the shifter in its centre console looks positively 1970s retro. A nice gated shifter would be more appropriate for this car.

Transport Canada rates fuel consumption for the Accord Hybrid at 7.9/5.9 L/100 km city/highway, which would be sensational if was close to what you could expect. My experience with the car returned 11.9/8.1 L/100 km, which is not particularly impressive. The highway figures are especially puzzling, as I drove a good 1,200 km at speeds under 120 km/hr, much of it on three cylinders. The Accord Hybrid comes with a trip computer that calculates fuel consumption, so you always know how the car's doing. Perhaps the generally cold weather was a factor.

I found the Accord Hybrid, like other Accords I've tested, to be an excellent car with numerous desirable features and qualities. I would like to have seen better fuel economy, however, and will be road testing another Accord Hybrid later this year for comparison.

Technical Data: 2005 Honda Accord Hybrid Sedan

Base price	\$36,990
Options	\$889 (Birdseye maple-look trim kit \$456; auto-dimming mirror \$433)
Freight	\$1,280
A/C tax	\$100
Price as tested	\$39,259
Type	Four-door, five-passenger sedan

Layout	Transverse front engine, front-wheel-drive
Engine	3.0-litre V6, SOHC, DC brushless electric motor
Horsepower	255 @ 6000 rpm
Torque	232 lb-ft @ 5000 rpm
Transmission	Five-speed automatic with grade logic control
Tires	215/60 R16
Curb weight	1,599 kg (3,525 lbs)
Wheelbase	2,740 mm (107.8 in.)
Length	4,813 mm (189.4 in.)
Width	1,814 mm (71.4 in.)
Height	1,449 mm (57.0 in.)
Cargo capacity	307 litres (10.8 cu. ft.)
Fuel consumption	City: 7.9 L/100 km (35 mpg) Hwy: 5.9 L/100 km (48 mpg)
Warranty	Five yrs/100,000 km
IMA warranty	Eight yrs/130,000 km

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*Paul Williams is an Ottawa-based freelance
automotive writer and senior writer for
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