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2005 Honda Accord Hybrid

Batteries included.

By Douglas Kott
December 2004

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Third time's a charm, and the Accord Hybrid is now No. 3 in the Honda hybrid lineup, supplementing the Civic Hybrid and Insight. On sale mere weeks after you read this, it's also the first V-6 hybrid available, beating Lexus' RX 400h to market by at least two months.

But do you really want or need an Accord Hybrid? Let's examine what you get — and don't — for about \$30,000 (actual price yet to be set), which is roughly \$3500 dearer than a comparably equipped Accord V-6 EX.

- The right to smirk and/or stare condescendingly at drivers of huge, fuel-slurping, ladder-frame SUVs because, by Honda's reckoning, you can get 30 mpg city/37 mpg highway, up to 43 percent better than the fossil-fuel-only model and in the ballpark of a 4-cylinder Civic. Yes, *Civic*. At the heart of this feat is Integrated Motor Assist (IMA), whose core is a 2.7-in.-thick brushless DC motor that also serves as a generator under braking, and as the engine's flywheel. It's cleverly sandwiched between the 240-hp 3.0-liter V-6 and the 5-speed automatic transaxle.

The fuel savings come about through reduced throttle demand under acceleration thanks to the motor's contribution (which, of course, is reapplying some of the energy captured under braking that would normally be lost as heat), an idle-stop feature that shuts the engine down at stoplights, and a cylinder deactivation system that disables the rear bank of three cylinders during deceleration and light-load cruise. Highway range, by Honda's estimation, is a bladder-challenging 633 miles.

- Slightly better acceleration than the standard V-6 Accord. With an additional 16 bhp and 100 lb.-ft. of torque from the motor, which draws from a 144-volt pack of 120 Sanyo nickel/metal-hydr ide cells, you can spin the Accord Hybrid's front tires in a frenzy of ecological sensitivity. Honda claims a 0.5-second improvement to 60 mph (from 8.0 sec. to 7.5), and midrange torque did feel a little fa tter during our drive near San Diego.
- Additional road-hugging mass. Allow me to explain: the IMA, battery pack and all associated electronics add about 285 lb. But nearly two-thirds of that is offset through increase d use of aluminum elsewhere: in the bumper beams, hood, rear suspension knuckles, lighter 16-in. wheels, and many non-structural elements of the chassis. So overall, curb weight has increased by only about 120 lb., to 3500 lb. Wider tires (215-mm section, up from 205s) and slight revisions to spring rates and shock valving help compensate for the extra *avoirdupois*.
- Less sun and storage. No sunroofs allowed, because when it came down to crunch time, t he Accord Hybrid was on the verge of being bumped up another EPA weight class and something had to go. The space-saver spare is another casualty; instead, buyers get a tiny air compressor and a can of tire sealant. Trunk volume is reduced but only by 18.6 percent; it's to make room for the battery pack, a slab that nests vertically against the rear seatback. You do lose the ability to fold the seat down.
- Other cool stuff. The air-conditioning compressor itself is a hybrid, with both engine- and motor-driven portions. The electric side allows the a/c to continue functioning when the V-6 is shut down for extended periods. And Bose active noise cancellation generates opposite-phase sound waves that quiet the boom of the V-6 when in 3-cylinder mode. The waves are delivered through the audio system's speakers, whether or not the system is turned on.
- A normal driving experience. There are no strange hums or whirs, and only a slightly grabby feel when you first apply the brakes from speed that signals the "regen" function is in play. A simple bar-graph display along the bottom of the instrument cluster keeps tabs on regen and motor assist, and a small green "Eco" indicator lights up whenever you're in 3-cylinder mode (a transition that's otherwise imperceptible).



A 3.0-liter V-6 hybrid combines better performance with improved fuel economy.



Neat technology here, but worth all those C notes? You don't have to be Milton Friedman to realize that \$3500 buys a lot of gasoline, and that the break-even point on a purely economic scale is far, far down the road. Of course there are the intangibles of virtue and altruism. As the MasterCard commercials might put it: "Feeling good about yourself by conserving the planet's resources? Priceless."

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