

## Shifting Gears

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### [A Taste of Green Sports: The Hybrid Honda CR-Z](#)

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A car doesn't have to be ugly to be fuel efficient.

Nor does a car have to sacrifice pizzazz to save the planet.

Starting with those dictates, the challenge to the guys with the crayons at Honda was to come up with a low end, compact sports car, which had hybrid technology and better gas mileage than the little, Plain Jane, Honda Fit or its stalwart workhorse, the Honda Civic. So the designers threw out the old templates, melted their crayons drawing something that oozed a sense of hot and, since they couldn't think of a clever name for it, settled on the CR-Z.

Outside, the CR-Z is a stunning little sports car with a tapered front and aggressive little grill, sliding to a flared rear end. From its profile, the CR-Z resembles a jet engine waiting to be ignited. It is the kind of car that easily passes the whiplash test – it fairly

screams for a second glance. And there is nothing about it that says, well, Honda.

That part's the good news. The rest of the car needs some work.



Under that sloping hood is a two-part power system: the gasoline engine, and the electric motor. The primary power comes from a 1.5-liter, four-cylinder gas engine producing just 122 horsepower, followed by an electric motor feeding off a 100-volt, nickel-metal hydride battery pack. The combination is mated to a six-speed manual transmission that, in typical Honda fashion, is quick and responsive. The car is not as fast as it looks, however, and the handling is, well, ordinary.

This is not, however, a full hybrid in that you can't drive on just the electric motor. Rather, the motor serves as an augmenting system for the gasoline engine, shutting it off when you are idling or stopped. That boosts fuel efficiency to an EPA estimated 37 mpg. That is still good fuel mileage, and places the CR-Z fifth among all cars behind the 50-mile per gallon Toyota Prius, 42 MPG Honda Civic Hybrid, 41 MPG Honda Insight, and the 39 MPG Ford Fusion.

The power system in the CR-Z differs from other hybrids in another manner: it is not automatically activated when you turn the car on. While the electric motor does shut the gasoline engine off when you are in gear, if you turn on the car to warm it up, the gasoline engine just keeps chugging away. The car is also noisy at higher speeds, something that comes as a surprise given its svelte shape and the fact that Honda's are generally quiet cars.



Unlike the Honda Civic which has four seats – even though the ones in the rear have very little leg room – the CR-Z is not designed for rear passengers. There is no second row of seats, just two bins on a shelf, or you can lay the trunk lid down and extend the rear cargo area. There are usable storage areas for cell phones and other items,

including a small pop up bin on top of the dash.

The test car had a navigating system and a 6.5-inch screen and voice recognition. Surprisingly, however, the CR-Z only offered AM/FM radio and a single-disc, CD player but no satellite radio system or capability. Lack of satellite radio is surprising for a \$23,000 car, but the navigation system is a good one. And the backup camera is crystal clear. The sound, from a 360-watt system with seven speakers, was more than enough to envelope the small passenger compartment.

The car does have Bluetooth for easy cell phone pairing, and the layout of the dash was eye catching, with back-lit blue dials surrounded by a pulsing red line which let you know how fuel efficient you were. You can make up for the absence of satellite radio by bringing along your iPod, MP3 player or USB drive and plugging into the car's sound system.



If there is a major problem it is that the sight lines are atrocious.

The rear side windows are small triangles, which means you can't really see traffic out of them and you have to depend on the small side mirrors to see if any cars are approaching. That makes changing lanes something of a rolling guess. The rear roof tapers and then is cut off in a four-inch square back. That little window slit is not enough to see what is behind the car, particularly at night.

There are always tradeoffs when you have a roadster. But Honda needs to rethink that one. The Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution initially had a wide spoiler across the center of its back window which pretty much blocked out everything except oncoming Mack Trucks. They dropped that spoiler in the 2011 edition of the Evolution because it blocked too much of the rear view. Instead, they mounted a spoiler at the end of the trunk, where it is functional, attractive, and not a road hazard. The hatchback design of the CR-Z doesn't lend itself to that solution, but the current system leaves a lot to be desired and is not up to Honda's usual thoughtful standards or the promise of such a good looking car.

But nearly all new iterations of a car have design pains. And if one is in the market for an attractive, fuel efficient roadster, the CR-Z isn't a bad place to start.



### **2011 Honda CR-Z**

**MSRP:** **\$23,310**

**EPA Mileage:** **31 MPG City** **37 MPG Highway**

**As Tested Mileage:** **34 MPG Mixed**

### **Performance / Safety:**

1.5-Liter, SOHC, 4-cylinder engine producing 122 horsepower and 128 pound/feet of torque; 100.8 volt electric motor; 6-speed manual transmission; power assisted Rack & Pinion steering; anti-lock brakes; vehicle stability assist; daytime running lights; 16-inch alloy wheels; fog lights; high density headlights; dual stage front and side airbags; side curtain airbags.

### **Interior / Comfort:**

AM/FM radio; 360-watt, 7-speaker sound system; CD and MP3 player; iPod and USB port; tilt & telescope steering wheel with fingertip audio and cruise controls; navigation system with voice activation; Bluetooth.