

Shifting Gears

[What Does \\$25,000 Put on the Road? And Would You Want to Drive It?](#)

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Let's say you are looking for a compact family sedan for under \$25,000.

For years, the low end cars in domestic and foreign automotive fleets were little more than basic transportation: bells and whistles cost a lot more. Still, there is nothing wrong with wishing that you could get a small family car which wasn't boring to look at, was comfortable to sit in, had enough gadgets to keep everyone happy and, if you floored the gas pedal, actually took off.

For many motorists, that was the turf of the **Honda Civic**, long the entry level workhorse of the popular Honda line. They were short on flair and long on utility, but consistently reliable, efficient, durable and, with an EPA rating of 41 miles per gallon in highway driving, easy on the pocketbook. What they provide, however, is basic transportation: the Civic is not a balm for the ego or a rolling sculpture destined to grace the driveway.

And if you are willing to get the basic, no-frills version, you can roll out of a Honda showroom with a Civic HF for under \$20,000. But the Civic is actually a family of compacts, from the no-frills, HF box to the competitive \$25,000 EX sedan.

The bare bones version of the Civic HF has plain cloth seats, but they are wide, manually adjusted. The dashboard is contoured, to give it a little character. And the dials, in blue and

white, are easy on the eyes with digits easy to read. The doors had mostly hard, molded plastic with a thin layer of padding where the elbow rests and, as a result, were not very comfortable on long trips. Surprisingly, the car lacked Bluetooth communication, but it did have a single disc CD player, and connections for MP3, iPod, and USB. Its four-speaker, 160-watt sound system was adequate for the small interior, but nothing special. There is room in the rear for a couple of average sized adults, but the only cup holders are in the front. But the HF is intended to be just basic transportation.



For about \$5,000 more, the Civic can be upgraded to the EX model, which better reflects the quality of the Honda line. At that price, the cloth gives way to thick, padded leather seats which are power adjustable and heated. Overhead is a power sunroof, which gives the compact a feeling of spaciousness. And the bare bones entertainment system is replaced by a navigation system, satellite radio, and Bluetooth. At that point, the Civic is a car one can look forward to owning for several years.

Under the hood, the Civic HF has a 1.8-liter, four-cylinder engine producing just 140 horsepower. Thus the small car is fine on the road, but sluggish when you take off or need to accelerate. That small engine, however, is why the Civic has an EPA rating of 29 miles per gallon in city driving and 41 MPG on the highway. And on the open road, the Civic HF handle with the assuredness expected of a Honda in any price range.

I awakened to find there were five inches of loose, powdery snow one Saturday morning, and the stuff was destined to fall intermittently all day. The main roads were kept relatively clear by municipal plows, but home owners on most of the side streets had to fend for themselves in the slippery stuff. This was no problem for the Civic.

The compact, with its all weather tires, had no trouble on hills, curves and uneven surfaces though more expensive vehicles were skidding that morning through the same slippery terrain. The Civic's snow-oriented traction control compensated for the bad road conditions – which showed that not all safety technology is saved for the expensive players. With the Civic family, Honda is trying to get a lock on the low end of the compact sedan market.

But Honda doesn't have the small car field all to itself.

The Zoom-Zoom guys would like a word with you about their **Mazda 3**.



On the outside, the 3 doesn't room to exhibit the styling flair of Mazda's bigger models – but it's not a rolling box, either. It has a small, aggressive, black grill flanked by recessed intakes that give it the appearance of a miniature racer. There is a sharply sloping front hood leading to a wide expanse of glass. The sloping roof line leading to a sharply cut-off rear prevents the 3 from having the boxy look.

Underneath that hood is a 2.0-liter, four cylinder engine producing a respectable 155 horsepower – which is a lot for a light car like this one. The small engine is also light on the gas consumption, with an EPA estimate of 28 miles per gallon in city driving, and 40 MPG on the open road. The Mazda 3 has a six-speed transmission which, in manual mode, can hope like a respectable sports sedan. The double-spoke, 16-inch wheels make the 3 look sportier than it really is.

But while the outside is pleasant, it is far more important what Mazda put inside, where you spend your time. And here, the Zoom-Zoom crew gave a lot of thought to the interior of the 3 so that it didn't look or feel like the low end of their automotive line.

The three spoke steering wheel is leather wrapped, tilts and telescopes, and has push button controls for every function. The seats are wide, thickly padded, and leather rather than cloth. The front seats can be heated, which is a great antidote to cold weather or sore backs. The driver's seat is powered, while the front passenger seat is manually operated. But there is thick, faux leather padding on the doors, arm rests and dash board which makes the 3 look more expensive than it is and, functionally, is comfortable for long drives. The dash is curved, instead of a plain, straight slab, and provides individual spaces for the front occupants. There is also soft, blue lighting under the dash and along the floor boards at night so you don't have to fumble around in the dark.

And in case one is changing lanes in a hurry, there is a blind spot warning light in the side mirrors which lets the driver know if there is a vehicle in either blind spot. For the night



vision, add bi-xenon, self-leveling headlights.

Most cars in this price range would not have a navigation system and color information screen. The 3, however, is different. There is a recessed, color, three-inch screen – similar to the screen on a hand held Garmin – which serves the navigation system. Depending on the strength of your glasses, it can be difficult to read the names of cross streets, but most of the information on the screen is quite legible and the system is easy to use. It can be accessed manually from the center console or the buttons on the leather steering wheel, or run by voice.

For entertainment, the 3 has AM/FM and XM satellite radio, a six-disc CD player, as well as iPod, MP3, and USB connections. The surround sound emanates from a 10-speaker, 265-watt, Bose system. And if you keep your music on your smart phone, the Bluetooth will access it and play through the system.

If one listens to the Republican presidential contenders, the auto makers in Detroit should have folded up shop three years ago. But they didn't, and not only has General Motors paid back its taxpayer loans, but it reported record profits for 2011. One of the reasons for its comeback is the snappy **Chevrolet Cruze**. Here, Chevy borrowed a trick from Nissan, which put a turbocharger in their four-cylinder Juke, and put a turbocharger onto their equally small Cruze engine.



But the Nissan speedster sells for more than \$27,000, and the Cruze is aimed at a lower end. So it has fewer amenities than the Japanese sedan, but at \$20,000, is more competitive in the economy end of the auto line.

The Cruze sedan has the low, wide stance similar to that of the Camaro, but that is the only similarity. The trademark Chevy badge and wide grill on the Cruze forms more of a smile

welcoming family motorists, than the dark, aggressive grimace gracing the sports car.

Under the hood, the Cruze sports a 1.4-liter engine cranking out just 138 horsepower. But with the turbocharger, it never feels underpowered. The engine is billed as getting 26 miles per gallon of regular gas in city driving and 37 MPG on the highway. That seems a bit wishful: the test car got 23.7 MPG in mixed driving.



GM was thoughtful in designing the interior, though frugal with some of the amenities. The interior has attractive, two-toned seats, but they are unheated and cloth rather than leather like the Mazda 3. The seats are manually operated and, depending on your weight, may not be the easiest to maneuver, particularly when you are trying to adjust the seat's height. The seats are, however, are wide and comfortable. The two-toned motif is used all around the interior, with the padding on the doors and dash matching the look of the center of the seats. The dash itself is a double curve, providing a separate space for the driver and passenger and demonstrating that a car does not have to be plain to be inexpensive.

There is enough leg and head room in the rear for two tall passengers to travel comfortably, and the rear seats fold flat for additional storage space.

For entertainment, the Cruze came with AM/FM and XM satellite radio in addition to the CD and MP3 players, and the iPod and USB connections. The six-speaker sound system, with sub woofers in the front doors, was more than ample to envelope the cabin in sound though it doesn't quite compete with the Mazda's Bose. And the car's wind suppression is effective enough to allow you to easily hear every note in a soft solo even though the car is rolling down the road at triple digit speeds.

There is no navigation system in the Cruze, but the car has both Bluetooth connection for your smartphone and OnStar, GM's satellite communications network. So one can either use an app like Google's navigation system or push the OnStar button and get turn-by-turn directions as the system's satellites follow you down the highway.

In addition to the trans-Pacific competition, the Japanese auto makers are also facing challenges the Koreans, whose **Hyundai Elantra** seeks a share of the small car, under \$25,000 market.



The Elantra, priced in the middle at just over \$22,000, is not just a means of getting around. It is the latest model out of a California design studio which takes its “fluidic” styling cues from the imprint of waves along the Pacific coast sands. In January, the Elantra was voted Car of the Year by jurors at the North American International Auto Show in Detroit.

The win partly stems from the fact that even though it’s a small car, the Elantra is individually, stylistically beautiful. It does not resemble a truncated version of a larger model like the Genesis, which won the 2011 award, or the full sized Sonata, which is so popular its resale value after a year is higher than its original sticker price.

The Elantra continues the Hyundai practice of offering a lot for less. Under the hood is a typically small, four-cylinder engine producing just 148 horsepower. Unlike the Cruze, it is not turbocharged, and will not be mistaken for a racing car despite its sleek, flowing silhouette and 17-inch wheels.



The Koreans put their efforts inside. The Elantra has two-tone leather seats, and *both* the front and rear seats can be heated. For entertainment, the Elantra has satellite radio as well as Bluetooth audio and connections for iPods, USB and MP3 players. The sound system is the largest of the bunch, with a 360-watt premium surround sound system with six speakers and rear amplifier designed for tailgate parties. The Elantra comes with a navigations system and seven-inch touch screen that is mated to the satellite radio to provide real time XM traffic and road condition updates.

All cars provide basic transportation. But aside from that function, they are generally the largest investment a family makes in utilitarian art. In the category of the car as mobile sculpture, it is the aesthetics which determine what attracts a buyer and keeps a car owner happy for several years. If one is seeking a \$25,000 art project, there are a lot to choose from.

2012 Mazda 3

MSRP: **\$24,970**

EPA Mileage: **28 MPG City** **40 MPG Highway**

Performance / Safety:

2.0-Liter, 4-cylinder engine producing 155 horsepower and 148 pound/feet of torque; 6-speed automatic transmission with electronic manual mode; stability and traction controls; anti-lock and 4-wheel disc brakes; front wheel drive; rack and pinion steering; independent front & rear suspension; blind spot monitoring; automatic leveling, bi-xenon headlights.

Interior / Comfort:

AM/FM/XM satellite radio; 265-watt Bose audio system with 10 speakers; iPod, MP3, and USB connections; 6-disc CD player; Bluetooth phone and audio; powered sunroof; tilt and telescoping, leather wrapped steering wheel with fingertip audio, phone, cruise and entertainment controls; leather seats; heated front seats; powered driver's seat; navigation system with 3-inch screen.

2012 Honda Civic HF

MSRP: **\$20,225**

EPA Mileage: **29 MPG City** **41 MPG Highway**

Performance / Safety:

1.8-Liter SOHC, aluminum alloy, 4- cylinder engine producing 140 horsepower and 128 pound/feet of torque; 5-speed automatic transmission; MacPherson strut front suspension; multi-link rear suspension; front wheel drive; 15-inch alloy wheels; rack and pinion steering; stability control; driver and front passenger dual stage and side airbags; side curtain airbags.

Interior / Comfort:

AM/FM radio; 160-watt audio system with 4 speakers; CD player; MP3, USB, and iPod connection; tilt and telescope steering wheel with fingertip audio and cruise controls;

2012 Chevrolet Cruze

MSRP: **\$21,455**

EPA Mileage: **26 MPG City** **37 MPG Highway**

As Tested Mileage: **23.7 MPG Mixed**

Performance / Safety:

1.4-liter, DOHC, cast aluminum, turbo-charged engine producing 138 horsepower and 148 pound/feet of torque; 6-speed automatic transmission with manual mode; traction and stability controls; independent, MacPherson strut, front suspension; torsion beam rear suspension; 17-inch wheels; 4-wheel, anti-lock brakes; driver and front passenger front, knee, side impact, and head curtain airbags; rear side impact and head curtain airbags.

Interior / Comfort:

AM/FM/XM Satellite radio; CD and MP3 player; USB and iPod ports; 6-speaker sound system; Bluetooth and OnStar communications; tilt & telescope steering wheel; leather

wrapped steering wheel with fingertip audio, Bluetooth, and cruise controls.

2012 Hyundai Elantra

MSRP: **\$22,110**

EPA Mileage: **29 MPG City** **40 MPG Highway**

Performance / Safety:

1.8-Liter DOHC aluminum engine providing 148 horsepower and 131 pound-feet of torque; 6-speed manual transmission; independent MacPherson front suspension; torsion axle rear suspension; rack and pinion steering; ventilated front disc brakes; solid rear disc brakes; 17-inch alloy wheels; stability and traction control; fog lights; front, side impact, and rear curtain airbags.

Interior / Comfort:

AM/FM/XM satellite radio; CD and MP3 player; iPod and USB ports; 360-watt premium sound system with 6 speakers and amplifier; Bluetooth phone and audio; tilt and telescoping steering wheel with fingertip Bluetooth, audio, and cruise controls.