

LIBER- HONDA

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When the Honda Pilot debuted in 2003 it was quickly received very well in the sport-utility segment, with the flexibility of an eight-passenger interior, the largest cargo carrying capacity in the segment and best-in-class safety, fuel efficiency and emissions. And it has stood the test of time.

DESIGN – The Pilot is Honda’s version of the popular Acura MDX, with more of a family orientation and complete with a multitude of storage spaces, 12-volt electrical outlets and fast-food holders throughout the vehicle.

The exterior styling is uninspired but a timeless design that will look fresh for years. Like all Honda products, the Pilot is very well built and is simple in design and operation. The Pilot comes in three very well equipped models, the basic LX, mid-level EX and top-of-the line EX-L complete with all the goodies like heated sets and a navigation system.

MECHANICAL – All models are powered by a 244-horsepower, 3.5-liter VTEC, V-6 engine and paired with a five-speed automatic transmission and innovative VT-M-4™ (Variable Torque Management 4WD) full-time four-wheel drive.

PERFORMANCE AND HANDLING – With its muscular V-6 engine, the Pilot offers

respectable performance with 0 to 60 mph times of 8.2 seconds. With its four-wheel independent suspension, variable assist rack and pinion steering and front and rear stabilizer bars the Pilot drives more like a family sedan than a truck.

Fuel economy is a little better than the average SUV. We averaged 19.5 mpg; EPA ratings are 18 mpg for city driving and 24 mpg on the highway.

COMFORT – To make egress and ingress easier for the third row passengers, the Pilot features a second row that is now adjustable fore and aft with an improved slide feature. The third row seating is small and best left to youngsters or petite, agile adults.

All models are equipped with air conditioning, cruise control, AM/FM/CD/cassette stereo, driver and front passenger front and side airbags, as well as power windows, mirrors, keyless entry and door locks. The EX and EX-L models add more conveniences and special features as part of a standard package.

PRICE RANGE – See information in sidebar. We appreciate Honda’s simplified pricing that builds vehicles with a generous level of standard equipment so customers don’t have to add a long list of options to reach the right equipment level. ■



OUR DRIVE

In the realm of SUVs, the Honda Pilot wouldn’t seem to offer many surprises. Based on the same chassis as the wildly popular and capable Acura MDX, the Pilot offers a more conservative style and a lower price point. But, as with all Hondas, it is nonetheless fully equipped. Honda is a very small, family-owned company, and they keep things quite basic: option lists are not their thing. Since pricing is so reasonable, as well, this is a very nice approach, with as little as the mid-to-upper \$20s bringing you a very complete package in the Pilot.

From the moment we sat down in the driver’s seat, the verdict seemed clear: if you like this car, it has no shortcomings and will do the job well. As your test pilot is over six feet tall, we did notice that the seat doesn’t go back as far as we’d like, and the tilt steering wheel doesn’t rotate high enough to be able to see all the instruments. The first could be customized to fit; the latter, not.

Controls are clean, simple and functional, and they include a navigation screen as complete (and intuitive and actually useful, unlike some) as what’s found on the more expensive Acura... right down to automatically changing to a rear TV image when backing up. Nice. And at a Honda price.

Some controls seem slightly odd, such as a three-knob radio on which the center knob is power and volume, counterintuitive to most drivers. The HVAC (heat-vent-air conditioning) controls are also centered, just above that, so ultimately it could become an easy habit. Most such test-drivers’ quibbles are not at issue for an owner, who has more than our typical week to get used to these and only these controls on an ongoing basis.

Prices on the Honda Pilot start at \$26,996 for the very well equipped LX two-wheel-drive, and climb to \$35,245 for the EX-L with 4-wheel-drive and navigation, plus \$595 delivery. ■