



TOURING WITH THE OLDIES IN A BRAND-NEW HONDA INSIGHT

BY LARRY EDSALL

I thought I'd be disappointed in the 2010 Honda Insight. But over the course of four days and 1000 miles, the car changed my mind.

I'd driven the new 2010 Toyota Prius a few days before taking the new 2010 Insight on the Copperstate 1000 rally. The Prius is a marvel. My co-driver and I had averaged 60 miles per gallon without really trying in a car that is full of all the latest technological marvels, including a solar sun roof that provides power to vent hot air from the car's interior when it's parked in summer sun.

And the Prius can operate, can move down the road, at least briefly, without using any gasoline. The Prius is a full hybrid, which means its gas/electric powertrain is set up to run on battery power at low speeds – in parking lots or when pulling away from a stop sign or light.

Honda, however, does mild rather than full hybrids, using the electric motor and battery pack more as a supplemental power source that supports rather than supplants the internal combustion engine. Thus the Insight moves only when that engine is running.

As I said, I anticipated being unimpressed, and more so when I saw how much the new Insight looks like the old Prius. We'd better get used to this fish-like shape, the result of wind tunnel sculpting to achieve the most aerodynamic form that will carry four adults and some luggage down the highway.

The Insight I drove was the EX version; base price \$21,300. There's also a \$19,800 (base) LX or, for \$23,100, an EX with a navigation system.

The non-nav EX comes with paddle shifters on the steering wheel, 15-inch alloy wheels, vehicle stability control, heated mirrors with turn signal indicators, a center console with storage, cruise control and a 160-watt audio system with six speakers and portable music device interface.

All 2010 Insights have anti-lock brakes, tire-pressure monitors, automatic climate controls, power windows/locks/mirrors, 60/40 split and folding rear seat, tilt and telescoping steering column, 160-watt audio system with four speakers, a backlit multi-information display and Honda's Integrated Motor Assist powertrain with 1.3-liter four-cylinder engine, electric motor/battery pack and continuously variable transmission.

Honda says the new Insight is a car for "...everyone with a left brain. And a right foot."

The federal government certifies the new Insight at 40 miles per gallon in city driving and at 43 on the highway. Where the right foot comes in is a Sport button that maximizes power output and optimizes gearing for things such as climbing the Pinals or scaling Mingus, or simply for merging onto a fast-moving freeway.

A couple of years ago, I was sentenced to a week in a Honda Civic Hybrid, which I drove from Phoenix to Flagstaff and back on

Interstate 17. With the underpowered Civic, I had no choice but to tuck in behind those big, barely moving semis and hope I could keep up on the long mountain grades. With the Insight, I simply punched the Sport button and shot around the trucks.

For those who are both left-brained and left-footed, there's also an ECO mode button to help you sip fuel as efficiently as possible. A variety of information system displays encourage you to drive efficiently. On one, you earn leaves and can even build a flowering plant for fuel-efficient driving.

I earned lots of leaves, though my plant never flowered. I simply drove the car, used the air conditioning as comfort dictated (at a stoplight, the gasoline engine shuts off to save fuel but thanks to the electric motors the air conditioning keeps blowing cold air), and I engaged Sport mode whenever I felt the need. Nonetheless, I filled the fuel tank three times, averaging 40.2, 46.6 and 47.3 mpg.

I'm confident I would have gotten even better figures in a Prius, and could have matched the Insight numbers in something like a Volkswagen Jetta clean diesel, a car that would have been much more fun to drive for the enthusiast driver. But my point in this paragraph is not to dis the Insight but to point out that automakers are starting to offer us a variety of cars that are fuel efficient and fun to drive.

Pardon the pun, but my experience on the Copperstate was most insightful. ■