

pit  
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# Honda faces VW in econocar shootout

By Jim Williams

It's shootout time at the Econocar Corral, between the Volkswagen Rabbit and Honda Civic CVCC.

For car freaks with guilt pangs about their fun or those who enjoy asking for "a dollar's worth" at the pumps, these are prime contenders. Along with the Datsun B210 and the Chevette (both somewhat underpowered), they hold top honors in the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) lists.

While the Rabbit and Civic are not interchangeable, they were designed with similar ideas. Both are front-wheel-drive (FWD) square-tailed 4-passenger sedans.

Lately, much ink has gone toward convincing the public of the superiority of fwd, but it overworks the front tiers, causing "understeer" (the tendency of the car

to straighten out in a curve). Many "safety experts" think understeer is best for the unskilled driver, and most Detroit cars are set up to provide it, but it's more pronounced in the Rabbit and Civic. If you step hard on the gas in a curve they will run wide toward the outside. It's easy enough to get used to, but makes it harder to do drifts and other competition techniques.

The real advantage of fwd is that the running gear does not intrude on the interior.

The extra space is more noticeable in the Rabbit. It's about five inches longer than the Civic and 100 pounds heavier, and inside it's clever and cavernous.

Open the rear hatch and a neat lid flips up to expose a trunk big enough for several suitcases and safe from prying eyes. It's impressive enough for a small car, but I don't

think I own enough property to fill the Rabbit's maw with the rear seat folded away. It should make home-to-dorm moving a snap.

With the back seat unfolded, four carefully pleated 6-footers may be inserted, there to stay with adequate room. Heads and knees rub on the fixtures, but it would take a long trip to make it really oppressive—which can happen in a Thunderbird, too.

The driver sits very straight, with knees tight under the rather numb steering wheel. The brake and clutch are equally vague, but nothing compared to the 4-speed shifter, which manages to be both stiff and balky without feeling connected to anything. I hit third gear several times trying for first.

For many drivers, these minor imperfections are a small price for the Rabbit's astounding cargo space and solid feeling. The price is \$4,128 for a 2-door, 4-speed Rabbit with radial tires and the desirable interior options—but it doesn't seem unreasonable for a car of these capabilities, which include EPA ratings of 39 and 25 miles a gallon for highway and city driving, respectively.

Slipping into the Honda, you immediately notice that it is a smaller car, with less rear seat room, headroom and storage space. A hatch back model provides for more cargo.

But the CVCC Civic feels much more like the cars I enjoy than the Rabbit, with its lie-down seats and neat three-spoke wheel.

The shifter is incomparably better than the VW's, although reverse is so far to the right you date may think you're reaching for more than a gear. The transmission is connected to Honda's brilliant stratified-charge engine, which burns inexpensive unleaded gas and eliminates the Rabbit's catalytic converter.

But forget all that. I certainly did when I got the Civic on the road. A Rabbit feels like a well-sorted sedan, but the Honda is—well, gobs of fun. Every control is crisp, alive, it's a ball to drive... a smirking, ecstatic little Easter-egg of a car that begs you to go out and play with it.

Taller people or those who regularly carry a lot of stuff probably should look at the Rabbit first—but try both; they're winners.



Photo by Jim Williams

Mark Young, senior history major from Hat City, Iowa, checks out the rear end of a Honda Civic CVCC.

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