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Drives

Issue 47

THIS MONTH Honda Jazz p54 / Fiat Grande Punto p58 / Audi A6 p60 / VW Polo p62 / Skoda Laura L&K p65 / Porsche 911 GT3 p66



HONDA JAZZ

'Go buy this car. Really. If you're an upwardly-mobile urban buyer who doesn't need a third box to feel like a man or a woman - yes, you, this is pretty much perfect for you'

HONDA JAZZ

Space cadet

IT'S CALLED THE JAZZ, BUT HONDA'S LATEST IS ACTUALLY A ROCK STAR.
VARDHAN KONDIKAR IS IMPRESSED BY THE CAR, DEPRESSED BY THE PRICE

THIS IS THE BEST CAR Honda's brought to India. How about this one-line review? It's raining outside: can I go out and play? No? Damn. Oh, all right.

We start our story with a car whose name, exact shape, size and price we don't know yet, or even its exact launch date. But we know it's ridiculously important. This little *éminence grise* is Honda's upcoming small car, an i10 rival, due for launch somewhere in late 2010. Honda wants to establish a foothold in this ferocious little playground before

such an important event, soften up the crowds a little. Being Honda, they'd like to be the premium choice in that class, and hence introduced a premium hatch so Indians could get to terms with a boot-less Honda before the big plunge.

Enter the Jazz.
Which is a City without a boot, if you want to sell it very short. What it really is, is a European-style supermini in the shape of a mini-MPV. Sophisticated, clever and high-quality – and thanks to Asian markets and Indian excise laws, a bit

schizophrenic. See, Asian markets love cars like the City – straight-forward, efficient sedans, cars you don't have to explain to the neighbours. However, Europeans – and a growing class of urban Asians – prefer smart, hip hatchbacks, which often sell for a higher price than the traditional sedans. It's true: the Jazz is more expensive than the City sedan in Thailand.

Why? Why not? Start with the gobsmacking interior. First of all, it looks fantastic, with the warp-station dashboard, Civic-style steering wheel and three big aircon knobs. And it isn't even complicated – the stereo controls are easier to find and use than in the Accord and the little display for instant fuel consumption is easy to read and understand.

The space inside is tremendous: Clarkson, I think, would have little trouble fitting in either in the front or the rear, given the amounts of leg- and head-room you get. There's an airiness in here as well, thanks to the one-box shape and all the glass.

It's all chock-full of cubby-holes, with two proper glove-boxes, big

door pockets and eight holders for bottles or cups, including two mounted on the dash, in front of the aircon vents. How clever is that?

The big talking point of course is the load-carrying versatility. The boot itself is surprisingly large, more than enough for weekend trips, and easy to load with its low lip. The magic though is in the rear seats. Want to carry a, I don't know, a bazooka? Fold the rear seats down (and watch them shift themselves a little lower for your comfort and convenience), fold the front passenger seat backwards on top of them and you have a load bay nearly as long as the car. Want to carry potted plants? You do? Fine, fold the squab, the seat-bottom, of the rear seats upwards, like in a movie theatre, and you have a tall, secure little compartment for stuff you don't want bouncing around. And there's my ultimate test: can I fit a Great Dane in the back? With the seats folded flat I can, technically, though it's not certain yet whether the folded seats can take too much weight on their thin backs.

Zooming around needs some wringing of the 1.2 engine's neck





All it takes is a little imagination: cabin is big, fun and easy to use



Enough space for a corpse. In parts



There are issues of course. A big one is that sitting in the centre of the rear seat is – literally – a pain. The squab is pretty high and hard, with a sharpish edge, and the split of the 60:40 seat digs into your right shoulder-blade. Then, there's the lack of height-adjust on the driver's seat: you end up sitting pretty low, which could be a problem for women in particular – who I think will constitute the majority of buyers. It's especially problematic because none of the trim levels has this, which is a bit puzzling. Finally, a couple of trifles. One, I hate the skimpy gearknob, which ruins the otherwise slick shift, and I don't like the steering-mounted radio controls to be on the left side. Lots of cars have these, and they make no sense at all, because you need your left hand free to shift gears on demand. Third, the felt-like material used on the door panels is going to snag lots and lots of dust: keep your vacuum cleaners handy.

Then, a trifle reluctantly, we move outside. The Jazz's styling is a matter of opinion – and of distance. From

far away it looks futuristic, smooth, zippy, and distinctive. Closer up, you see that a lot of the detailing doesn't gel well. The roof- and window-lines are not smooth arcs but a series of angled lines, which aren't easy on the eye. Then there're the too-small wheels, the Getz-like tail-lamps that could've been more imaginative – small things that may or may not bother you.

Now, why I say the Jazz justifies a higher price tag than the City is because it's more sophisticated, more versatile, giving you higher quality in a more city-friendly length, without losing out on anything. I honestly don't know what people in smaller towns would think of a car like this, but in the metros at least, it makes more sense than a sedan.

In India of course, it's thirteen different kinds of suicide if you price a hatch above a best-selling sedan – hence the 1.2 engine, the only way Honda could price this car below the City, thanks to India's mad excise laws. This is where the schizophrenia comes in, because the Jazz cries out for the 1.5-litre engine, shared with >





the City in other Asian markets.

To be fair, the 1.2 engine is not by itself a bad lump. i-VTEC sorcery gets this small motor to pump out 89bhp and 110Nm, which sounds fine for a sub-four-metre hatch. The problem is the nationwide obsession with fuel economy, which has affected the engine's character. It's refined all right, and there's enough low-end torque to keep you trundling along at low speeds, which is of course what works if you want fuel efficiency. The problem pops up when you try to overtake. From about 2,200 to 4,000rpm you have a sleepy zone, where you get a thrashy engine note, slow movement up the rev-band and a decided reluctance to eat up a truck on an undivided

highway, which made things interesting on our evil highways.

The only solution is to drop two gears – two, not one – and get yourself above 4,000. Here, the engine gives a throaty growl as the valves open up, and you get plenty of punch. The performance is there, then, it's just that accessing it is too much hard work, which is entirely against the unruffled nature of the rest of the car.

Just so you know, this isn't a car for boy racers: the height and fuel-efficiency tyres (change them if you can, quick) ensure this. It's a fairly neat handler, managing to keep body roll under the panic limits and being very easy to steer, as long as you don't get too excited. The pedals

are heavier than I'd expected, and the steering offers just a hint of feel – I thought it'd feel a bit anesthetized, like the last-gen City, and it's nothing like that. It rides well too, especially given the wheel size, and with its decent visibility, one-box shape and compact size, it'll be a happy bunny in town.

Go buy this car. Really. If you're an upwardly-mobile urban buyer who doesn't need a third box to feel like a man (or a woman – yes, you, this is pretty much perfect for you), you should go buy this car.

On second thoughts though, you should wait for Honda to lop Rs 70,000 off the price and then go buy this car. Why in tarnation is it so expensive? Rs 7.43 lakh for a hatch? Really? Why? This is the best thought-out car they've shown us yet – and they've hurt its chances with this price. Yes, it'll still sell of course – it's a Honda, dummy – but it could have been Honda's biggest seller by a massive margin. I think Honda, in looking mainly to get a presence in the hatch segment, have decided that this car never had much of a chance anyway, and that it would always be overshadowed by the City and the small car below it. I think they've underplayed their hand here. Honestly. Drop that price and I'll go buy one now. 📌



No boot, no worries. Flip seats forward and there's plenty of space



Clear, readable, but a little, er, jazzy



Jazz 1.2 i-VTEC



We say: Expensive but fantastic hatch. Refined and versatile, it's better than a sedan any day.

Price: Rs 7.43 lakh (ex-Mumbai)
Performance: 0-100kph in 13.0secs, 175kph max speed, 16.1kpl (all figures estimated)
Tech: 1198cc, 4-in-line, FWD, 89bhp, 110Nm, 1055kg

16
2