

The Universal Appeal of the Element

By Barbara and Bill Schaffer



Sunset Orange Pearl is the must-have color this year, especially on the new fully-painted body style.



Other than a brief drive in the new Element SC a few weeks earlier, it had been a couple of years since we had driven the Element, so we were anxious to spend some time in the boxy little Honda. For 2007, the Element has been updated inside and out to give it a fresh new look, and we think it's a big improvement. We drove this one to Palm Springs, for a break from our usual hardship duty. Other than being a practical hauler of everything from bikes and surfboards to nursery plants and antiques, the four-passenger Element turned out to be a wonderful road trip car. The ride was comfortable, the vehicle is quiet, and it offered plenty of performance to make those high-speed merges into fast-moving Southern California traffic.

The styling upgrades for the 2007 Element include a new grille and headlights, along with composite body panels on the fenders that are more dent-resistant than the previous steel panels. The composite panels are black on the base LX model, but are body colored on the EX and SC, giving those models a much cleaner, sophisticated look.

The new SC "Street Custom" gets 10 exclusive features not found on other Element models, including a sport-tuned suspension with lower ride height, 18-inch alloy wheels (a Honda first) and cosmetic

enhancements like an "aero" grille, projector beam headlights and unique painted bumpers. Inside, the SC has carpeted floors, center console with storage, piano black trim and exclusive interior fabrics.

All versions of the Element are powered by the same 2.4-liter, 166-hp four-cylinder engine with a standard five-speed manual transmission and optional five-speed automatic. The engine is a DOHC configuration with Honda's i-VTEC variable valve timing system and a new Drive-by-Wire™ electronic throttle system. Like all other Hondas we've driven, the manual transmission in our tangerine-colored Element was typical Honda, easy to shift with well-spaced gears and precision linkage.

Both the LX and EX models are available with front- or four-wheel drive (4WD) making them perfect for snow country or heading into the desert sand.

Element pricing starts at \$19,495, including destination charge, for the two-wheel drive LX with manual transmission. A 4WD EX with manual is \$22,905, while the new sporty SC goes for \$24,090 with automatic transmission or \$800 less with the manual.

While not luxurious, the Elements are well equipped with features like removable rear skylight, heat rejecting glass, power windows and locks, cruise control and



audio with AM/FM and CD. EX and SC models have XM Satellite Radio and MP3 capability. We enjoyed nearly everything about the Element on our trip, except that it did not come with a navigation system. There is also a high level of safety equipment. The new Element exceeds government requirements, with side curtain airbags, driver and front seat passenger side airbags, Vehicle Stability Assist™, Tire Pressure Monitoring System, Occupant Position Detection System, anti-lock brakes and a pedestrian safety system.

Weighing in at about 3,500 pounds, the Element isn't designed to be especially fleet of foot, but it does turn 0 to 60 mph in under 9 seconds. It is, however, quite well balanced and agile, with a tight 34.9-foot turning radius.

EPA fuel economy ratings are 21 mpg city and 24 mpg highway with manual transmission and AWD. Surprisingly, the automatic with AWD gets a 21/26 rating. Our actual fuel economy during our trip to and from Palm Springs averaged 23.7 with 70- and 80-mph freeway driving.

The Honda Element turned out to be a good road car. The interior is very roomy, comfortable and quiet. With its spacious cargo capacity which can be expanded from 26.0 cubic feet to 77.1 cubic feet with the rear seats removed and easy-to-clean interior, it would be a great vehicle for owners with an active lifestyle. ■

OUR DRIVE

Is it possible to consider the Honda Element without thinking of the terms Swiss Army knife, can opener, or Transformer? Those are good things, as this is one very versatile machine.

We reported on the 2004 Honda Element in March/April 2004, a full two and a half years ago. If anything has changed in the interim, it's the familiarity of the vehicle in the real world. In 2004, with the likes of the Element and Scion xB testing the limits of style and utility at the same time, we received a number of reactions keyed around the narrow demographic niche those vehicles were seeking. We figured this, too, was a good thing, from a marketing standpoint, and we were sorry that those outside the targeted demographic might miss this great all-around vehicle.

While Barbara and Bill took their SC to Palm Springs, we took the EX on rough roads to the northeast of metro Phoenix. (We also drove it on Valley streets and freeways, where we found it perfectly comfortable and pavement-worthy.)

Departing the pavement for the dirt was smooth and easy. The Honda AWD system maintains traction and stability well, and grip and handling were as good on smooth but hilly dirt roads as on the paved roads approaching them. When the road got rough and narrow, we found the Element still fully capable. We never took the vehicle off-road, but as long as undercarriage clearance allows, the short approach and departure angles, great AWD and general apparent ruggedness of the Element should be more than enough for normal outdoor adventure. On the highways, the limited 3/4-rear visibility was less than we'd wish, but that comes with the overall package. All in all, the Element is a keeper. ■