

The exception that redefines the rules

BY JOE SAGE

Honda Ridgeline has always played in a tough league, tackling one of the most popular and well-established vehicle categories there is. They'd be the first to tell you they're doing things differently—"reinventing the pickup" was Ridgeline's mantra when new in 2006—building a truck with unibody construction and a front-drive basis.

Ridgeline has shared its bones with Honda Pilot (and Acura MDX) since birth, first on that dedicated platform, now on a universal platform shared also with Honda Passport and Odyssey. Calling it a

unibody on Ridgeline, though, is an oversimplification—the pickup is built on a proprietary Honda Advanced Compatibility Engineering (ACE) body structure, with fully boxed frame members for the body sides, and a rear tailgate frame with truss-style inner construction. The resulting overall body rigidity is a plus for tough terrain and load capacities, while also enabling Ridgeline's fully independent suspension, rare in a conventional pickup.

Honda brought the first version to us on its original reveal tour in 2005, and gen two, introduced in 2016, has been a regular at the Texas Truck Rodeo (which we drive and vote in), where the group granted its rear bed trunk and audio system a Best Technology award. We've also had the current generation for weeklong drives here. It felt as though

we'd become familiar with the truck, but it turns out there was more to experience and learn.

The 2021 Ridgeline looks all new, but it's the same gen-two truck—with totally revamped styling from the firewall forward. This eliminates a prior challenge in the broader pickup market—it had looked more like its close cousin the Honda Pilot SUV than like other pickups. It's a significant change, well done. The unibody build, suspension and front-drive basis remain the same, though all Ridgelines are currently all-wheel-drive-only.

The HPD treatment

Priced at \$36,490, the Sport model driven here is the base level of four trims. As is typical for Honda, ours adds no options or packages other than its

extra-charge paint—with one exception. New this year is an HPD package, with input from Honda Performance Development (see Baja sidebar).

Add-ons are cosmetic—a stylish, rugged grille, black fender flares, HPD decals, and distinctive bronze-hued wheels—and available on any trim level for \$2800. Of this, wheel and tire size is the same on all trims, so these are just for looks. The grille is also available as a standalone for just \$395. We could take or leave the decals, but we do like the fender flares, which add to its truck persona and are not available as a standalone.

The HPD package brings a Sport close in cost to an RTL (which has leather, heated seats and other significant upgrades), creating a potential buying conundrum that continues on up the lineup.

Picking up the groceries and kids

The cab feels spacious, with seating position, legroom and headroom (enough for a cowboy hat) on a perceptual par with many a bigger truck.

Size and weight are very similar to more conventional entries in the growing midsize pickup category. Its construction delivers a tradeoff: a bit less tow capacity but a fair amount more payload—boosted by the fact that Ridgeline's 5-foot-4



bed is longer than its prime competitors.

Power and acceleration feel and sound strong, with a satisfying subtle growl from its V6. Handling is tight and accurate, enticing us to even give it some enjoyable throttle through urban curves (it's not a sports car, but its suspension is for greater things). We're not fans of the Acura-pioneered shift interface—a collection of circles, squares and trapezoids you push or pull, pretty much guar-

(cont'd)

A popular—and award-winning—feature on Honda Ridgeline is its 7.3-cu.ft. In-Bed Trunk®, lockable, drainable and secured by a closed tailgate. Our Sport model has a decent 215-watt 7-speaker audio system, while upper trims have a 540-watt system with truck-bed audio. Equal parts utility and party center, Ridgeline's bed is key to your work or fun weekend.

SPECIFICATIONS

ASSEMBLY	Lincoln, Alabama
ENGINE/TRANSMISSION	USA/USA
BUILD / SEATING	unibody / five
ENGINE	3.5L V6, 24v SOHC i-VTEC
HP/TORQUE	280 hp / 262 lb-ft
COMPRESSION RATIO	11.5:1
DRIVETRAIN	i-VTM4 intelligent AWD
TRANSMISSION	9-spd auto, shift-by-wire
SUSPENSION	F: MacPherson strut, 25.0mm solid stblzr bar; R: multi-link, 26.5mm stblzr bar
STEERING	elec pwr-assist rack & pinion
BRAKES	power assist; F: 12.6 vented; R: 13.0 solid
WHEELS	(standard) 18" shark gray alloys
TIRES	245/60 R18 105H a/s
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	210.2 / 125.2 in
TURNING CIRCLE	43.4 ft
APPRCH / BRKOVRR / DEPART	20.4 / 19.6 / 19.6°
HEADROOM (F/R)	40.1 / 38.8 in
LEGROOM (F/R)	40.9 / 36.7 in
BED LENGTH	64.0 in
BED WIDTH	at wheel wells 50.0 in
IN-BED TRUNK CAPACITY	7.3 cu.ft
2ND ROW UNDER-SEAT STORAGE	2.9 cu.ft
GROUND CLEARANCE	7.64 in
PAYLOAD CAPACITY	1583 lb
GVWR	6019 lb
TOW CAPACITY	5000 lb
WEIGHT	4436 lb
WEIGHT DISTRIBUTION	57.1 / 42.9%
FUEL / CAPACITY	reg unl / 19.5 gal
MPG	18/24/21 (city/hwy/comb)

2021 HONDA RIDGELINE LINEUP

Sport	\$36,490
RTL	39,470
RTL-E	42,420
Black Edition	43,920

BASE PRICE	\$36,490
PLATINUM WHITE PAINT	395
HPD PKG: fender flares, 18" HPD alloy wheels, HPD grille, HPD decals/emblem	2800
DESTINATION CHARGE	1175
TOTAL	\$40,860



anteering you have to take your eyes off the road at critical moments (it saves no space, so seems to us purely a gimmick). Quick and responsive, Ridgeline nimbly conquers the usual high-speed game of multi-lane Tetris on the freeway. All in all, this truck provides a very positive experience as a daily driver in town.

Off-pavement time

While all Ridgelines share the same basic build, the rugged look of our Sport with HPD package especially demanded we give it a rugged run, and 30 miles off-pavement was another big eye-opener.

We headed north out of the Valley, considering either Boulders Off-Highway Vehicle Park or Castle Hot Springs Road. A great drive north on freeways, Interstate and wide open paved two-lanes must have inspired us to stick with the open road, simply transferring to Castle Hot Springs and gravel.

Once the pavement ended, we decided to check out drive modes (intelligent traction management) which include snow, mud and sand. It was a dry summer day, so neither snow nor mud sounded right, though for sand, we envision the Glamis Dunes. But we tried sand. An instrument warning reminded us they all shut off full traction control, so, figuring our gravel conditions at speed were more consistent, we switched back to normal.

As much fun as the road is, it's some of the pull-

offs that are most enlightening. The gravel flood plain in our lead photo looks harmless enough, but was as loose, soft and deep as the lunar surface. We churned our way in, then revisited the drive modes for a better exit. Again, snow, mud or sand. This spot had grip and softness issues comparable to degrees of any of those, but then again it was clearly none of those. We opted for sand again, because if nothing else, it was hot and dry, though we suspect any would work similarly here.

There's a berm between the road and this river bed, created by road graders over time, so we had to burn our way through the deep gravel, then crawl over the berm, two moves at odds with each other. But this rig handled both superbly. All that berm-climbing and tight turning gave us an appreciation for the unibody build of this midsize truck. Suspension is firm and strong, with great degrees of travel from independent front and rear. The Ridgeline handles tight crawls or hammers along on open gravel equally well—nice and tough, nice and firm, nice and smooth.

At one point, we decided to double back in a canyon section with no pull-offs, necessitating a five-point turn. Easy enough in theory, you can get a high-speed surprise quickly from either direction—a scenario aggravated by that shift interface and having to look down to either read the markings or identify the shapes to shift.

Fuel mileage

We don't hypermile our weekly drives (with the exception of some alternative drivetrain experiment). We find real world driving to be more useful to our perceptions and to you. Though not checking regularly, late in our week we noted a readout of 15.3 mpg, average for all our time with the truck to that point—town, highway, off-pavement, off-road—in line with many a familiar 4x4 pickup.

As for the nine-speed automatic, we realized late in the week that (other than its shifter) we had never really thought about it. In all sorts of conditions, aside from shifting between forward and reverse, we had never noticed its shift points and power curves. That's a positive: it was unusually responsive and did its job well, delivering power smoothly and largely transparently.

Conventional pickup comparo

Diehard pickup drivers that we've long been (with an equal appreciation of off-road SUVs), we found ourselves repeatedly contemplating the spot this unibody truck occupies. It's easy to visualize a new Honda Ridgeline owner heading out on a similar drive for the weekend with some friends, some in pickups, some in utilities, to tackle these same trails. And it's not hard to imagine thinking, you know, I wasn't sure whether to get a pickup or an SUV, and this thing does a damn good job at both.

We understand the benefits of cab-bed-ladder frame, rear-drive build, the appeal of a huge V8, an 8-foot bed, and a big mechanical transfer case. Some people specifically need the load, volume and tow capacities of these trucks, and others certainly just want them. But if you don't specifically need those differences, the Ridgeline is a great contender. And if you do specifically need those differences, you'll still get a kick out of giving it a try. You may even reassess some of those needs.

Offering a large percentage of what most mid-size pickups do, a large percentage of what most SUVs do, and a decent bag of tricks all its own, Honda Ridgeline might be perceived as appealing to a narrow group—or to two wider groups. We once may have thought the former. But after more quality time in it, we lean toward the latter. This truck can appeal to more people than the sum of its parts, not fewer.

Trying to be all things to all people is an approach that often just displeases everybody. That's not the case here, as the Honda Ridgeline does a good job at so many things—it hits more targets than it misses for a wide variety of buyers.

That's surely how Honda hopes you look at it, and we've concluded they are on to something here. Could it convert a pickup buyer who adds it to their comparative shopping list? Surely some. Probably quite a few. ■

MOTORSPORTS : RIDGELINE WINS BAJA 500 AND MORE

Ridgeline Off-Road Racing racks up wins

The first-generation Honda Ridgeline was raced in a Stock Mini Truck class by the California Race and Rally team with success in 2008-10. The current racing program with Jeff Proctor's Honda Off-Road Racing Team began in 2015, originally in Class 2 for "Limited 4-wheel, two-seat open wheel vehicles with 3.5-liter forced air induction engine, maximum 105 inch wheelbase and minimum weight of 2000 pounds." The team and truck later moved to Class 7 for "Unlimited V6 race trucks," where it competes very successfully in both SCORE and other off-road racing events. The Honda Ridgeline Baja Race Truck features Honda Performance Development's 3.5-liter HR35TT V6 with the same block and cylinder heads as a production Honda Ridgeline, tweaked to 550 hp. Additional custom powertrain elements include an HPD-designed intake plenum and custom ECU programming.

Honda Ridgeline SCORE Baja wins

2008	....Baja 1000	.....Stock Mini Class winner
2010	....Baja 1000	.....Stock Mini Class winner
2015	....Baja 1000	.....Class 7 winner
2016	....Baja 500	.....Class 7 winner
2016	....Baja 1000	.....Class 7 winner
2018	....Baja 500	.....Class 7 winner
2019	....Baja 500	.....Class 7 winner
2020	....Baja 500	.....Class 7 winner
2021	....San Felipe 250	.....Class 7 winner
2021	....Baja 500	.....Class 7 winner

Recent SCORE Baja wins (2020-2021):

Baja 500 : September 2020

Following pandemic delays and an August Vegas to Reno run, the team resumed its string of Baja 500 successes last September with a Class 7 victory at the Baja 500.

San Felipe 250 : April 2021

Driver Jeff Proctor and navigator Evan Weller built an early lead along the rough 280-mile loop course starting and ending at the Gulf of California town of San Felipe. Despite two stops to replace cut tires, sand washes, ruts and jumps, they built a 35-mile lead with 20 miles remaining, cruising to the team's first SCORE win of 2021, and the sixth Class 7 Ridgeline victory in Baja.

Baja 500 : June 2021

The team continued its string of SCORE Baja Class 7 successes with a victory in June in this year's 25th running of the Baja 500, in a field of 243 entries—their fourth

consecutive class win in this event in the Ridgeline Baja Race Truck, and the fifth for the Honda Ridgeline overall in the last six years. Owner/driver Jeff Proctor and Pat Dailey conquered a single-loop course of 466 miles, starting and ending in the Pacific Coast town of Ensenada.

Additional Honda Ridgeline US wins

2018	.....Vegas to Reno	.....Class winner
2019	.....Parker 425	.....Class winner
2019	.....Mint 400	.....Class winner

Recent US podium finishes (2020-2021):

Mint 400 : March 2020

First run in 1968, the Mint 400 is the oldest off-road race in the US and one of the toughest. As pandemic lockdowns loomed last year, organizers moved Class 7 entries, including the Ridgeline Baja Race Truck, from Limited to the Unlimited category, now just behind bigger, heavier, higher horsepower Unlimited trucks at the start—Class 1 purpose-built racers with larger tires, creating massive dust, enlarging holes and exposing rocks. The team's strategy—to preserve equipment and tires through the grueling event—paid off with a solid lead for two-thirds of the race, till suspension damage in the third lap. Reducing speed to ensure a finish, the team placed second.

Vegas to Reno : August 2020

After a five-month pandemic delay, the Honda Off-Road Racing Team resumed its 2020 season with a second place finish in the "7200" class for unlimited V6-powered trucks in the General Tire Casey Folks Vegas to Reno off-road race. ■

