

## 2012 Honda Civic Natural Gas

By Brian Sy, LeftLaneNews



As compact cars go, the Honda Civic has long come closest to having something for everyone. Whereas a Ford Focus is basically one car offered in two shapes and Toyota took eons to give the Corolla any option more adventurous than a trunk spoiler, the Civic has been there year in and year out, pleasing masses and niches alike with its multiple body styles, wide array of engines (paired with automatics, stickshifts, and CVTs), and specialty models like the race-ready Si and fuel-frugal Hybrid. At one point this family even had 4WD wagons, two-seat hot hatchbacks, and a frisky convertible running around.

Honda takes the diversity thing one step farther with the Civic Natural Gas, a variant that, as the name implies, uses the Earth's cleanest-burning fossil fuel as its source of propulsion, rather than dirty old gasoline. Formerly known as the Civic GX, the natural gas-powered Civic has actually been around since 1998, but wasn't available for retail sale until its 2006 arrival in but a single state (California, of course). It eventually trickled into three others, but for 2012 that number explodes to 36, making this most unique of Civics national news for the first time.

To back up a bit, note that this news is supplemental to the broader story of the whole Civic line being redesigned for 2012. On that front, things are mostly uneventful. It's got a marginally smaller footprint, the same engine, and barely altered looks. The interior returns with a minor variation of the same sensible control layout, comfy seats, usefully flat rear floor, and crisp digital instrument cluster, even if some materials seem more cheaply constructed this time around. The most prominent differences were to its driving character, which has been blasted by the press for being diluted and degraded. The word on the street is that the Civic's formerly fun spirit got sucked right out, leaving a comatose chassis without an ounce of joy. Wow, really?

Luckily, Honda had some mainstream model Civics on hand for check-testing. Having logged a few hundred miles in the previous generation, I can report that the 2012 edition still feels like a Civic -- in other words, your typical middle-of-the-road Japanese compact. The 140-horsepower engine gives pretty good pep in town, with

VTEC kicking in for an extra surge when you need it and its seamless 5-speed automatic making a worthy partner in crime. As many have noted, steering response has indeed been slowed down: you can now turn the wheel 3.1 times from end to end (up from 2.7). But that's pretty close to the class average, still faster than the Civics of the 90s, and still feels trusty and accurate, so I don't see what all the hubbub's about. There's a fair amount of road noise, but that's always been a Civic mainstay. My biggest complaints are the increase in up-and-down bounce over bumps (indicating a dumbed down suspension with less control) and the transmission's over-eagerness to downshift when descending hills, which gets the engine all worked up for nothing. But for the most part, this car drives just fine -- probably better than most competitors -- and the record must show that reports of the Civic's castration have been greatly exaggerated.

By comparison, the Natural Gas version drives like a Civic with a bunch of junk in the trunk -- "junk" meaning a massive fuel tank that holds the equivalent of 8 gallons of gas. Unfortunately, that plus the fortified engine results in a 143-pound weight penalty, which combines with the loss of 30 horsepower (now 110) to confine Civic Natural Gas drivers to life in the slow lane. You'll definitely feel the automatic downshifting more than in other Civics, and the car doesn't quite zoom ahead with the same abandon. Still, let's not confuse below average with below adequate. 60 MPH can be had in just over 10 seconds, and for the most part, this car has enough juice to get the job done.

Anyway, the big deal of the Civic Natural Gas isn't driving it, but rather the perks and warm fuzzy feelings that come from owning it. Honda claims reductions of 25%, 75%, and 90% in CO<sub>2</sub>, NO<sub>x</sub>, and particulate matter. The EPA seems to agree, having declared every edition dating back to the original as having "the cleanest internal combustion engine on Earth" -- an accolade backed up more recently with the ACEEE's award for being the Greenest Vehicle in America, even after the mass invasion of hybrids (the Nissan Leaf couldn't dethrone it either). The Civic Natural Gas even maxes out with the highest honors set by eco-elitist California, nailing Golden State certifications for SULEV (Super Ultra Low Emissions Vehicle), PZEV (Partial Zero Emissions Vehicle), and ILEV (Inherently Low Emissions Vehicle), all while standing alone in qualifying for federal Tier 2, Bin 2 emissions. And just in case moral superiority won't suffice, California will even throw in one of its new white carpool lane stickers -- making the Civic part of a rarefied club otherwise restricted to electric and hydrogen-powered cars (all hybrids got the boot in July).

As with all alternative fuel cars, the Civic Natural Gas raises the question of value. The 2012 model just launched with an opening price of \$26,905 -- roughly \$7,000 above a Civic LX after adjusting for equipment differences. While both cars average right around 30 MPG, Honda claims that natural gas costs roughly half as much as gasoline at the moment: ~\$2/gallon vs. ~\$4. If that difference were to hold steady, it would spell out an \$800 payback every year, meaning you'd get your money back in just under nine years -- probably sooner after factoring in all the time and gas saved from sailing along in the diamond lane. Seeing as how the average car on the road is now 11 years old and any well-treated Honda can go twice that long with two

tires tied behind its back, the Civic Natural Gas can easily be a profitable proposition. (This equation changes for owners who pick up the garage-installed home refueling station known as Phill, which runs \$3,500 but drops fueling down in the ballpark of \$1.35/gallon, and can replenish half the tank on an overnight fill-up.)

Of course, keeping a car that long is a decision that will vary by owner, as will the value judgment of prioritizing pros like Earth-friendliness and special driving privileges against cons like slower performance and slight fueling inconveniences (fill-ups every 200 miles, scarcer stations). But as the only mass-produced car in America to offer the choice of natural gas at all, the Civic has come that much closer to being all things to all people.