

2013 Acura ILX

New Acura wraps premium persona in a smaller package.

Overview

The Acura ILX is a new nameplate for Honda's upscale division, a front-wheel-drive compact sedan conceived to give potential buyers an entry into the premium car class at sub-luxury prices. The 2013 ILX essentially replaces the slightly larger TSX as the division's most affordable offering, the first Acura with a sub-\$30,000 base price since the 2009 model year.

While it's all-new to Acura, there is much about the new ILX that is adapted from the Honda inventory. Specifically, the basic platform, model lineup, and powertrains all began with the latest Honda Civic sedans.

But this is not to say the ILX is basically a rebadged Civic: there are as many hardware distinctions as there are similarities. For example, while the basic ILX shares the standard 5-speed automatic transmission employed by its humbler Honda cousin, the transmission is paired with a 2.0-liter four-cylinder version of the engine, generating 150 horsepower, versus the 140-horsepower 1.8-liter in the mainstream Civic.

More important, while the fundamental architecture is shared, the chassis and bodyshell dimensions differ between Civic and ILX. The ILX rides a shorter wheelbase (105.1 inches versus 106.3), and is longer, lower, and wider than the Civic sedan: The ILX measures 179.1 inches overall, 70.6 inches wide, and 55.6 inches tall. Also, the ILX is distinguished by its own front suspension setup. Instead of adopting the Civic's front struts, the compact Acura employs a more sophisticated, more expensive, double wishbone system.

There is no shared sheetmetal between the Honda and the Acura. The Acura ILX cabin is furnished with high grade materials, with no sign of the interior cost-cutting that diminishes the latest Civics, and the ILX benefits from more sound-deadening measures. Acura also claims higher rigidity for the ILX's unibody, although the company refrains from furnishing specifics on this score.

The ILX is reasonably roomy by compact car standards. Two average size adults can ride comfortably in the rear with only minimal cooperation from front seat occupants. Like almost all sedans in this premium compact class, the ILX is rated for five passengers and, like almost all of them, that center rear position is only suitable for someone of diminutive stature, or someone you don't like, or someone who answers both descriptions. From a practical standpoint, it's a four-seat car.

While the ILX bears little physical resemblance to the Civic, there are a couple of identical elements under its hood. Make that hoods. The entry-level Acura ILX 2.0L comes with a 150-horsepower 2.0-liter four-cylinder engine and a 5-speed automatic with Sequential SportShift and Grade Logic Control.

The ILX 2.4L is motivated by a 201-horsepower 2.4-liter four-cylinder engine paired with a 6-speed manual gearbox (no automatic option); this same powertrain is employed in the Civic Si, the hottest member of the Honda compacts.

There's also a gasoline-electric ILX hybrid, a first for the Acura division, with a 111-horsepower 1.5-liter four-cylinder engine augmented by a 23-horsepower electric motor sandwiched between the engine and the continuously variable automatic transmission. The basic combination is identical with the one used in the Civic Hybrid, but with an intriguing distinction. In the ILX, the hybrid's computer management is programmed for a little more punch when the driver tramps hard on the throttle.

That extra punch, which is all but intangible, comes at the expense of fuel economy. The Civic Hybrid carries EPA ratings of 44/44 mpg City/Highway. The ILX is rated for 39/38 mpg. But like the Civic, the ILX hybrid includes a little dashboard button marked Eco. Punch the button, and the system computer adjusts its mapping to make the hybrid more miserly.

Pricing for the ILX starts below the \$30,000 threshold, but close enough to put the ILX in a competitive arena, call it compact premium, that is thinly populated. Acura sees key ILX competitors as the Audi A3, BMW 1-series, Buick Verano, and Volkswagen CC.

Model Lineup

The 2013 Acura ILX lineup comes with a choice of three powertrains. The ILX 2.0L (\$25,900) comes with a 150-hp 2.0-liter four-cylinder. The ILX comes standard with cloth upholstery, automatic climate control, 160-watt audio system with six speakers, AM/FM/CD with RDS readout and MP3 and WMA compatibility, USB interface for iPod, auxiliary input jack, Pandora internet radio interface, Bluetooth HandsFreeLink, SMS text messaging, Keyless Access System with smart entry and pushbutton start, tilt/telescope steering column, power moonroof, 16-inch aluminum wheels with 205/55HR16 Continental ContiProContact M+S tires.

The Premium Package (\$3,300) upgrades the ILX 2.0L with leather seating surfaces, heated front seats, a power driver's seat, an upgraded 360-watt stereo system with XM radio, HID headlights, foglights, 17-inch aluminum wheels with 215/45VR17 Michelin Pilot HX MXM4 M+S tires, a multi-view rearview camera and an Active Sound Cancellation system to make for a quieter cabin. (All prices are Manufacturer's Suggested Retail Prices, which do not include \$895 destination charge and may change at any time without notice.)

ILX 2.4L (\$29,200) comes with a 201-hp 2.4-liter engine. The ILX 2.4L comes standard with the Premium Package and its leather upholstery and all the other features above. The optional Technology Package (\$2,200) upgrades it further with the ELS Surround audio system including AcuraLink Satellite Communication System, Acura Navigation System with Voice Recognition, AcuraLink Real-Time Traffic with Traffic Rerouting, AcuraLink Real-Time Weather with radar image maps and HomeLink garage door opener. The navigation system makes use of a hard disk drive (HDD) with 60 gigabytes of storage capacity, including 15 gigabytes that can be specifically allocated for music storage.

The ILX Hybrid (\$28,900) features the gasoline-electric hybrid powertrain with CVT. The Hybrid comes with cloth upholstery and the standard 2.0L features. The Technology Package (\$5,500) for the ILX Hybrid adds all of the Premium Package and Technology Package features listed above except that the Hybrid comes only with the 16-inch aluminum wheels with 205/55HR16 Continental ContiProContact M+S tires.

Safety features include driver- and front-passenger dual-stage front airbags, front side-impact airbags, active head restraints, three-point seatbelts for five passengers, front seatbelts with automatic tensioning and load limiters, LATCH Lower Anchors and Tethers for Children, Vehicle Stability Assist with Traction Control System, ABS, EBD, Brake Assist, rearview camera, tire-pressure monitor.

Walkaround

The Acura ILX looks like an Acura. As noted, there is no sheetmetal commonality between the ILX and the Civic. The Acura design team did a good job of giving the ILX a divisional family look, not vastly different from the TSX albeit with a little more sculpting in the front end and a little more surface variation along the side panels. The beaky chrome strip that tops the main grille opening is familiar, and Acura has diminished the size and serpent's tooth appearance that has marred other recent offerings.

Overall, the look is subdued. There's too much front overhang and not enough at the rear, making the proportions seem awkward when viewed from the side. But the design is otherwise quietly conservative and inoffensive, though it remains to be seen whether it will measure up to target market research. Acura's goal for the ILX is to attract Gen Y buyers, professionals in their early to mid-20s, and the sum of the research indicates that these prospects prioritize value and cool styling. Whether the ILX is perceived as cool will be in the eyes of the beholders.

Interior Features

Inside, the Acura ILX contains nothing that's likely to remind anyone of the Honda Civic. Materials are high quality, the dashboard design has a distinct Acura flavor, strongly reminiscent, in particular, of the layout in the TSX. While many carmakers are moving to touch-screen controls, a variety of buttons and knobs govern many of the secondary controls in the ILX's center stack, with a good many duplicates appended to the steering wheel hub.

The front seats are moderately supportive (no one will confuse them with something from a BMW), but comfortable, and adjustable enough to fit a wide range of body types and physical dimensions. That, plus a tilt/telescope steering column ensures a good driving position.

The seats are clad with cloth in the basic car, but leather is available as part of the Premium Package, which also includes heated front seats, power adjustability for the driver seat, rearview camera, active sound cancellation, and a seven-speaker 360-watt premium audio system with a USB port, Bluetooth audio, Pandora internet radio interface, SMS text messaging.

The navigation system, which is baked into the Technology Package, includes voice recognition, real-time traffic info, real-time weather, and a satellite communications function that will keep track of your appointments. Other elements of the package include the upgrade audio features that are also part of the Premium Package.

Driving Impressions

Acura has drifted a long way from the days when its Integra coupes were performance pacesetters in the compact class. Though the division would like the ILX to be perceived as sporty, that character trait is present only in the hotter ILX 2.4L version, with its 201-horsepower engine and slick 6-speed manual transmission.

Acceleration in the basic ILX 2.0L version is tepid. Forward progress is not enhanced by its 5-speed automatic, which seems anomalous compared to competitors offering 6-speed automatics, as well as 6-speed manuals. The ILX 2.0L automatic has a Select Shift manual mode with paddle shifters, but it adds little if anything to the car's fun-to-drive index. Up- and downshifts are relaxed compared to the snappy responses of Volkswagen's dual clutch DSG automatic, and only slightly quicker than simply leaving the shift lever in Drive.

Fuel economy from the ILX 2.0L is an EPA-estimated 24/35 mpg City/Highway. ILX Hybrid is EPA-rated at 39/38 mpg. Acura recommends Premium gasoline for all three powertrains.

Steering is another soft point in the dynamic resume of the ILX. Electric assist power steering is far from new to Honda and Acura, and in some applications, such as the late (and lamented) Honda S2000 sports car, it has delivered exemplary precision. But in the ILX the steering feels numb on center and vague when the driver turns the wheel. The electric assist system adds weight to steering effort as speeds increase, but road feel is essentially absent.

However, there are redeeming traits. The combination of a stiffened body shell and firm suspension tuning gives the ILX a sense of character that's totally absent in the standard Civic. Handling responses are reasonably prompt and wholly predictable, with no sacrifice in ride comfort. Quite the contrary; the ILX feels much like cars with autobahn pedigrees, such as Volkswagen's CC sedan. This is particularly true of the ILX 2.4L version.

Beyond that, Acura invested considerable time and money in sound deadening, which pays off in an exceptionally low interior noise levels at all levels. In this area, the ILX can go toe to toe with anything in its class, a plus for automotive audiophiles.

Summary

The new Acura ILX is quiet, smooth, and nicely appointed, with good road manners and suspension tuning that feels pleasantly firm but still irons out all but the biggest bumps. The ILX lacks the responsive handling of the Audi A3. Acura ILX pricing is competitive in this rarefied segment, however, Acura has solid durability/reliability credentials, and standard content is respectable, giving the car a good value quotient. There are more exciting cars in this price range, but if excitement isn't a high priority the ILX has its appeals.

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