

## 1970-72 Honda 600: “New Little Car in Town”

American Honda got its start in 1959 with a little storefront office on Pico Boulevard in Los Angeles. During that first year, Honda offered only six motorcycle models and had but eight employees—sales didn't even crack 200. But with good products and service in conjunction with effective advertising—“You meet the nicest people on a Honda”—sales exploded, and Honda was soon the world's largest manufacturer of motorcycles.

In the automobile business however, Honda was a Johnny-come-lately—having first introduced its tiny S-500 sports car at the 1963 Tokyo Auto Show. Other models followed, but it wasn't until September 1969 that Honda made its American debut in Honolulu. The model chosen was the N600, a little two-door sedan riding a 78.75-inch wheelbase. Sales began in December of 1969 in Hawaii, where 69 cars were retailed, then spread to the U.S. mainland in 1970.

A good many Americans got their first look at the N600 Sedan, called simply the 600 in the U.S., at that season's auto shows. What they saw was certainly novel: a four-seater that measured only 125 inches overall, 4.5 inches shorter than the '70 Cadillac de Ville's wheelbase! Not only that, the engine was air cooled, drove the front wheels, and had only two cylinders. The transmission was a four-speed manual, but even this was unusual in that the shift lever stuck out from beneath the dash. A Hondamatic gearbox with torque converter was optional. Other features included power front disc brakes and rack-and-pinion steering. Up front, the suspension consisted of MacPherson struts with coil springs and lower wishbones; at the rear was a rigid axle supported by semi-elliptic leaf springs.

The vertical overhead-cam twin had a  $2.91 \times 2.74$ -inch bore and stroke ( $74 \times 69.6$  mm), resulting in a displacement of 32.5 cubic inches (598 cc). Horsepower was a modest 36 at 6000 rpm; torque came in at 32 lbs/ft at 4000 rpm. The block and head were of light alloy construction, and there were four main bearings, solid lifters, and breathing was through a Keihin-Seiki sidedraft carburetor.

Unibody construction helped to keep the car's overall weight to 1355 pounds. The styling, if not particularly memorable, was efficient and boxy, though the grille seemed a trifle busy and the  $5.20 \times 10$  tires looked (and were!) too small.

The price of the Sedan was originally announced at \$1275 in 1968, but when it arrived it had risen to \$1398 (\$1522 with Hondamatic). This compared to \$1297 for the even tinier and uglier Subaru 360: 70.9-inch wheelbase, 117.9 inches overall, 925-pound unladen weight. The benchmark Deluxe VW Beetle cost \$1839, but was in another class altogether with its 94.5-inch wheelbase, 158.7-inch overall length, and 1808-pound curb weight.

Sales of the 600 got off to a slow start: 3772 units in the 1970 calendar year (or 4195 depending on source). Hoping to boost sales, Honda added the 600 Coupe for 1971. Though it shared the 600 sedan's platform and running gear, it sported its own bodywork and distinctive styling. The front end was completely different, featuring a more rakish windshield and a sportier grille. Upswept swing-open rear quarter windows, a large “Coupe” badge on the C-pillars, and a small hatch at the rear rounded out the exterior package. Though its styling wasn't universally admired, the Coupe helped sales, as Honda retailed 9509 600s during the calendar year.

Honda billed the '70 600 sedan as the “New little car in town.” “Welcome to the world of sensible driving,” proclaimed the brochure. “Unlike most automobiles, the Honda 600 was designed from the inside out. After maximum interior space and comfort were achieved, components were designed around the passenger compartment to maintain a relatively small exterior. A high-performance engine was developed to provide maximum efficiency for the automobile's size and weight. The result is the Honda 600 Sedan. A very practical small car with a lot of performance under the hood.”

“Sensible” and “practical” were to be the main marketing focus of the 600, though its appointments were also selling points: front bucket seats, flow-through

ventilation, hinged rear side windows, front bumper overrides, and a removable rear seat-back for carrying long items.

The U.S. automotive press soon took notice of the 600. In August 1970, *Road & Track* said “. . . it bears an unmistakable resemblance to the BMC Mini and has the same pert, aggressive shape.” *R&T* also commented that “There's plenty of friendly understeer and power-on cornering is a delightful way of life even if at the limit the Honda isn't up to Mini standards, either for pure speed or accuracy.” But *R&T* felt that, “Compared to the Subaru 360, the only other minicar now being sold in the U.S., the Honda is superior in every way. . . .” Performance figures were 0-30 mph in 5.8 seconds, 0-60 in 23.4, and the quarter-mile in 22.0 seconds with a trap speed of 59 mph. Top speed was 73 mph, and *R&T* said that, “On the highway, it will sing along at 70 mph and be perfectly happy and while it isn't exactly silent, the noise level is still tolerable.” Fuel economy averaged 31.6 mpg in normal driving, well below the 40 mpg figure Honda was touting. With a 6.9 gallon tank, *R&T* calculated the cruising range at 215 miles.

*Motor Trend* published a comparison test of the 600 Sedan and the rear-engine Fiat 850 sedan in November 1970. The 600 performed as for *R&T* (0-30 in 5.8 seconds, 0-60 in 22.2, virtually identical quarter-mile, 77 mph tops) except for fuel economy: *MT* averaged 38.2 mpg. Compared to the 42-bhp Fiat, the Honda was a trifle slower, didn't ride quite as well (“maybe a little rough”), and wasn't quite as roomy. On the other hand, the 600 was more economical (29.4 mpg for the 850) and \$300 cheaper. Both the 600 and 850 were criticized for being too sensitive to side winds.

*Car and Driver* checked out both the 600 Sedan and Coupe for its April 1972 issue, and concluded that the Coupe was more comfortable because there was little pretense in making a true four-seater out of it. In addition, the Coupe had 145SR-10 radial tires, a tachometer, and an “aircraft type” overhead console for the dome and reading light. And then there was that “. . . swoopier shape on the coupe. . . .”





Honda entered the U.S. market with the 1970 600 Sedan (top). To American eyes, it was tiny, measuring just 125 inches from bumper to bumper, this despite being a four-passenger car. Not only was it short, it was also very narrow—only 52.5 inches wide with a 46.1/44.3-inch front/rear track. This made it ideal for darting about in urban traffic, though the low 1355-pound curb weight made it vulnerable to attack from almost anything else on the road. Front bumper overriders were standard. A number of U.S. safety standards were already in effect for 1970; even so, the side marker lights (left) looked awfully large for the car. The vents at the rear were for flow-through ventilation, though some might have thought them for engine cooling! The Coupe (above) came on line for 1971, and remained in the lineup through 1972.





It's still as homely as a wet dog—the crisp lines of the sedan are easier to take—but most of the additions do the job. The improved aerodynamics are a big help. The coupe's windshield has more of a rake than that of the sedan's, and the roofline is two inches lower. That's good for an extra three mph down the freeway, 500 rpm over the six-grand redline in fourth gear, at about 75 mph." *C/D* also felt that the Coupe was more utilitarian because of the rear hatch and fold-down rear seat.

"Unfortunately, the Honda engines produce a few byproducts that are a trial to live with," *C/D* noted. "One of them is vibration. . . . The engine is a vertical twin and it shakes—that is the nature of it. The steering wheel tingles in your fingers at certain speed ranges, the instrument panel buzzes and some of the sheetmetal drones. Inside the car it's NOISY. . . . On wide-open acceleration, which is the usual mode in a 36-hp car, the interior noise level reaches 87 dbA. With the defroster on, it rises to 90. That's a record."

On the other hand, maneuverability and the fun factor were highly praised by *C/D*. "You *must* drive it well. It's one of the few cars that is never boring," even though it took 20.8 seconds 0-60. "Somehow though, that isn't the frustration it sounds like it looks on paper. In fact, poor acceleration is really a major component of this kind of sport driving. You have to stay alert—pick the best lane well in advance so you don't have to lift—always keep the revs up. If you're good you'll be competitive, if not, stay out of the way. Freeways are like Le Mans."

That was the fun of driving a Honda 600—the challenge of driving one well. This was also the case with the VW Beetle

(*CA*, April 1992) and many other small, low-powered cars. But like all but the VW, the 600 never caught on here in the States. Honda sold 20,500 cars here in 1972, but likely at least half of them were the new Civic that bowed in the fall as a '73 model. After 1972, the 600 was gone. It was the Civic, not the 600, that would put Honda on the automotive map in North America.

Still, either the 600 Sedan or Coupe would make a good daily driver for commuters, although one must always be aware of the much larger cars and trucks on the road. Honda itself, in fact, described the Coupe as "an ideal shopping cart." Forget long-distance travel—the 600 is

Many thought the Coupe ugly, mainly from the front, but it did offer a small hatchback rear opening and fold-down rear seat for hauling cargo. Note the spare tire location under the bumper.

simply too tiring for that. Finding one won't be too easy either, "But if you're the kind that goes to sea in a row boat you might find the Honda amusing between voyages," was how *C/D* put it. "At least it will keep your psyche in practice." Or as *R&T* concluded: "Every outing is an adventure. . . . If [the 600 Coupe] is best suited to an adventurer with lots of time, less money and a thick hide, blame the world, not the car."

### From the Back Seat

The Honda 600, Coupe or Sedan, is one of those love it/hate it cars. The love part includes the nimble handling and the fun aspect—you have to work with the car to get anything out of it, a challenge that makes driving it fun. The hate part is topped by the noise and roughness—not to mention the lack of performance and the unsafe-at-any-speed feeling you get driving one in traffic. But it's mainly the noise that gets to you—6000 rpm at a little over 70 mph means there's mayhem going on underhood—and after a point will drive you nuts. As a maneuverable, park-it-anywhere urban car, the little Honda has a place I suppose, but not in *my* driveway.

Duane O. Mackie

Talk about a car being slightly ahead of its time. Had the Lilliputian Hondas survived until the first gas crisis of 1973, Americans may have taken an entirely different viewpoint of these little hummers. Of course,

the first Civics were entrenched by that time, capable of equally impressive mileage figures, and many folks raised on block-long Buicks considered *them* far too tiny. By comparison to the 600, the Civic was a tank. At 147 inches in length, it was about half a foot longer than the Ford Festiva—and nearly *two feet* longer than the 600 Coupe. Make no mistake about it, the 600s were *tiny*. Weaving one of these microscopic mules through inner-city traffic is like entering a dogfight piloting a mosquito. You feel so . . . vulnerable. But they do have their advantages. Parking is rarely a problem. Dogs don't chase you because they feel it's not sporting. City buses, loaded semis, and kids on 10-speeds prove worthy adversaries in the stoplight-to-stoplight grand prix, so you're never bored. If the car dies, you can push it easily—even uphill. Besides enduring ridicule, you'll also have to find parts. The solution? Buy two—they're small.

Rick Cotta