

Daily Herald

AUTOFOCUS

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SECTION 9

## AutoSunday

## Honda Fit will help slim a fat budget

By ANN M. JOB  
For The Associated Press

Here's an easy way to remember the 2009 Honda Fit. It's a Frugal, Intelligent Traveler, especially for today's pared-down households.

With a starting manufacturer's suggested retail price, including destination charge, of \$15,220 for a base Fit with manual transmission and \$16,020 with automatic transmission, the Fit has the lowest starting price of any 2009 Honda.

The five-door, four-cylinder Fit also is the top gasoline-powered hatchback in the country in federal government fuel mileage ratings. A base, 2009 Fit with five-speed automatic is rated at 28 miles per gallon in city driving and 35 mpg on the highway.

## At a glance

Price as tested: \$17,580

Engine: 1.5-liter, single overhead cam four cylinder engine with i-VTEC

City/highway fuel economy: 27/33 miles per gallon

Length: 161.6 inches

Wheelbase: 98.4 inches

Curb weight: 2,604 pounds

Built: Japan

This tops other small, five-passenger hatchbacks that run on gasoline, such as the 2009 Chevrolet Aveo, which is rated at 25/34 mpg with automatic, and the 2009 Nissan Versa, which is rated at 27/33 mpg with a continuously variable transmission.

The new Fit is an intelligent choice, judging by the "better than average" reliability rating bestowed by Consumer Reports magazine and the fact the Fit was the highest-ranked subcompact car in J.D. Power and Associates' annual Initial Quality study, released in June. The study surveys early owners of new cars to determine which vehicles have the fewest problems.

To be sure, the starting price for the 2009 Fit is increased \$600 over the previous Fit, which was in great demand as gasoline prices skyrocketed.

And shoppers will find many small cars with lower prices. For example, the 2009 Chevy Aveo hatchback starts at \$12,120, while the 2009 Versa hatchback starts at \$13,685.

But the Japan-built Fit is a spunky, easy-to-manuever car that doesn't come across as cheap. Nor does it try to masquerade as a luxury car. It is what it is: a practical five-seater that sips fuel and has more room inside for cargo than can be believed.

For instance, I took all the recyclables — bottles, newspapers, etc. — stored in the cargo area of a 1992 Nissan Pathfinder sport utility vehicle and fit them into the back of the 2009 Fit. With the second-row seats folded down, the Fit offers an SUV-like 57.3 cubic feet of space.

For 2009, the Fit is revamped slightly with a new platform for a better ride, new front styling, bigger wheels, more powerful engine and new features.

The first and lasting impression of this 13.5-foot-long car is how spacious the interior feels. Because the Fit is a full 5 feet tall, there's as much headroom in the front seat — 40.4 inches — as in the front seat of a 2009 Cadillac Escalade. Two adults can be comfortable in the back seat. Three adults fit snugly. But everyone gets an adjustable head restraint.



ASSOCIATED PRESS/Courtesy of Honda  
The 2009 Honda Fit Sport is remarkably spacious inside.



El Barrio Car Club President Vince Zenteno entered his lowrider 1984 Oldsmobile Delta Eighty-Eight in the World of Wheels custom car show Jan. 24 in Chicago.

## Shared passion fuels strong bond

By ELENA FERRARIN  
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## Area lowrider club unites car lovers, member's families

When Juan Tovar's 1965 Chevrolet Impala SS convertible broke down on the Kennedy Expressway about three years ago, he immediately called his two brothers for help, but neither was around.

Weighing what to do next, the last thing he expected was to see a fellow car aficionado pull over to help.

"He was a black guy with a lowrider and offered to help. I had ran out of antifreeze, so he gave me a jug," said Tovar, 33, who lives on Chicago's Northwest Side. "I offered to pay him, but he said no. He just said, 'If the same thing happens to me, it will be your turn to help.'"

This spirit of camaraderie is what unites car fanatics like him, Tovar said. It's not just about getting attention by showing off a fancy car, but about a true love for the vehicles and a bond with those who share the same passion.

"I didn't know him, but we had something in common — the car," he said.

Tovar is a member of the El Barrio Car Club, whose nine members live in Chicago and the suburbs. In order to belong to the club, one must own a lowrider, but most importantly, one must be a decent and trustworthy person, said El Barrio President Vince Zenteno of Hillside.

"It's about the quality of the person, about their attitude and being family-oriented," he said. "You could have the baddest car out there, but if your attitude (is bad), we don't need you."

El Barrio has an unequivocal "no drugs" rule, which was established by founder and former President Gerardo Ramirez. Zenteno took over as president after Ramirez passed away in July 2005. Club members drink socially, but always look out for one another to

make sure everyone stays responsible, he said.

"We all have families now, and that is the main thing for us," he said. "If you don't trust somebody at your house, you really don't need them."

Zenteno, who works as an industrial mechanic, joined the car club at age 22, after meeting other members at "The Incinerator," a spot where car lovers congregate in Chicago's Northwest Side.

"We would hang out, cruise and mess with the cars, and that's how I bumped into these guys," he said. "My car wasn't the nicest, but apparently (former President Ramirez) liked something about me."

The car in question is a 1984 Oldsmobile Delta Eighty-Eight, which over the years Zenteno has souped up with new rims, upholstery, a paint job and more. He is working now on other cars, including a 1963 Lincoln Continental convertible.

Most El Barrio members bring wives and children along to meets and car shows, said Zenteno, 35, who has three children ages 12 to 6. "I'm very lucky that my wife is very patient and enjoys what we do," he said. "Every chance I have, I take the kids."

It was precisely El Barrio's family-friendly attitude that inspired Addison resident Gilbert Catalan to join the car club about two years ago. "I started doing some research and I liked the way they are set up," said Catalan, 37, who works as a heavy equipment operator. "There was no other car club I would see with their wives or kids; it was mostly just guys."

Catalan and his wife, also a car club member, work on their cars

— his a 1953 Chevrolet five-window pickup, hers a 1964 Chevrolet Impala — with their children, ages 15 to 6. An older daughter lives on her own.

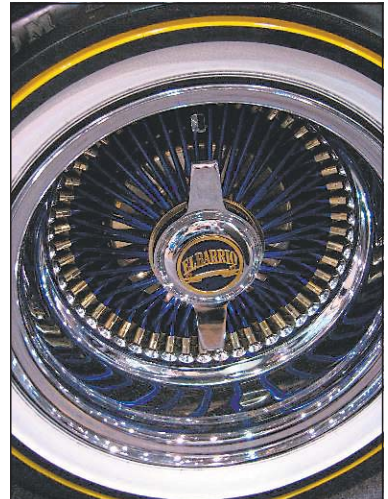
Catalan bought the Impala about four years ago, and redid the car "from the bottom up" by changing the frame and installing new floors, trunk and fenders, and applying a new paint job. "I always had a dream of having an Impala. It's the most popular car you see in music videos and old movies," he said. "Everybody wants to have it."

His 15-year-old daughter is already asking to drive the Impala when she turns 16 in March, but it will depend on how she does in school, Catalan said. "I told her if she graduates from high school and she does good, she could get a car," he said. "Hopefully by then they will change the driving age to 21," he added jokingly.

Tovar, 33, has been working on cars since he was 8 years old, when he visited relatives in Mexico and watched his uncle tinker with his 1964 Ford Galaxy. "He would wax it, he would wash it, he would work on it, and that's what kicked it out for me," said Tovar, who works as a mechanic for the Chicago Transit Authority.

His most recent accomplishment is the refurbishing of a 1971 Volkswagen Super Beetle, which he bought from a neighbor for \$800 about a year ago. "Me and my brother, we pushed it down the alley into my garage," he said. "We joke that it belonged to hippies, because the whole car was painted with these ugly murals. They had checkers, Jesus on the back, all kinds of weird stuff."

After Tovar put in about \$8,000 worth of work and equipment, the Super Beetle is now in perfect



A detail on one of the wheels of Zenteno's 1984 Oldsmobile Delta Eighty-Eight.

shape and painted a shiny copper orange. "My neighbor almost fell over when I told him it was the car I bought from him," he said. "He offered to buy it back, but it's not for sale. It's for my baby."

The newest El Barrio member is Humberto Ramirez, 29, of Elmwood Park, who also owns the newest car, a 2005 Chevrolet Malibu outfitted with air-ride suspension technology, nine speakers; and seven, 15- to 10-inch TV screens, the largest connected to a Play Station II.

"I was in a different club, but I used to hang out with (El Barrio members) at car shows, and I was more comfortable with them," Ramirez said. "They are more about working together; they help each other out."

Many of the car club members said that developing a passion for cars at a young age helped them stay off the streets.

"Working on cars kept me straight. My dad thought it was a waste of money, but my mom told me: 'Do what you gotta do, as long as you stay out of trouble,'" Tovar said. "I lived in a bad neighborhood, but the gang-bangers left me alone."

## Strut towers can be reinforced before rust spreads

**Q.** I have a 2000 Dodge Caravan with about 100,000 miles on it and the towers where the front struts connect are rusting out. It was mentioned to me when I had my oil changed but they did not know if it could be repaired or not. I love my van and it is in good shape other than that. Is there anything I can do about it?

**A.** You are in luck because there is a fix for that, provided they are not too rusted out. We have repaired several of these with a kit. It takes a full day to install it and let the super-duper space-age adhesive dry.



Doug McAllister  
Under the hood

extend the life of your beloved Caravan.

**Q.** I have a Lincoln Continental that I am having a continual "service engine soon"

We usually let the vehicle sit overnight with the wheels off the ground so there is no pressure on it. This repair has worked out very well and will

light coming on. Two months ago it had a code for the catalytic converter, which I had the shop replace. Now it is on again with the same code. Is this possible?

**A.** I would need a lot more information on your situation but I have seen this enough to fill in some of the blanks.

I will assume that the code is a Catalyst Efficiency code and the shop with the best of intentions put an aftermarket catalytic converter on your car to keep costs down. We have found that on some cars an aftermarket converter will

not work. You can try to see if there is a software update for your car's computer relating to Cat Efficiency and try it, but most likely you will have to put a factory converter on, which is about twice the price.

**Q.** The wiper blade on my car came apart and by the time I realized what the noise was I got a big scratch going across my windshield. Is there anything I can do about it?

**A.** You will probably have to have the windshield replaced. The glass shop tells me that any scratch you feel with your

finger nail cannot be repaired. Unfortunately the cure for this situation is more about prevention. It is always less expensive to refresh your wiper blades on a regular basis. Most wiper blade manufacturers make these new style mono-spring wiper blades that don't seem like they can scratch the glass even if they wear out.

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## Auto brief

## Jiffy Lube supports heart disease group

Jiffy Lube is partnering with the American Heart Association's Go Red For Women campaign to raise money and awareness to combat heart disease, the nation's No. 1 killer of women.

Now through March 16, customers can make a donation of \$3 at participating Jiffy Lube locations, for which they will receive a Maintenance Partners for Life savings book containing heart healthy recipes and \$100 in savings from Jiffy Lube. For information, visit [chicagoandjiffylube.com](http://chicagoandjiffylube.com).