

AutoSunday

Honda Fit delivers goods in small package

Go figure. Even in a bad economic year like 2009, Honda surpassed its original sales projections for its compact Fit hatchback.

Maybe it was the fact the five-door Fit ranks second-best in government gasoline mileage among hatchbacks while offering more cargo space than many larger cars. Perhaps it was the Fit being a consistent "recommended buy" by Consumer Reports magazine. Or was it the fact the Fit is ranked as the best entry compact car in retaining its value after three years of ownership?

The Fit also has been cited as one of the "10 Best Cars" by Car & Driver magazine for every one of the four years that the car has been sold in the United States. And it has higher crash protection ratings than two major hatchback competitors — one from Nissan, the other from Toyota.

Whatever the reason, the unassuming-looking Fit continues to endear itself to buyers even though its starting retail price is higher than many competitors'.

Starting manufacturer's suggested retail price, including destination charge, is \$15,610 for a base, five-passenger, 2010 Fit with 117-horsepower, four-cylinder engine and manual transmission. The 2010 Nissan Versa hatchback starts at \$13,870 with 122-horsepower four cylinder powerplant, while the 2010 Toyota Yaris hatchback has a starting retail price of \$13,405 with 106-horsepower, four-cylinder engine. Both the Versa and Yaris base prices include manual transmission.

Note that the Versa and Yaris also are sold as sedans, while the Fit only has one body style. So every one of the 67,315 Fits bought last year was a five-passenger, tallish hatchback. Honda officials had projected annual sales of 50,000 when they introduced the Fit to the United States in 2006.

From the outside, the Fit looks pleasant. It's one of the few cars where small wheels and tires — they're 15- or 16-inchers, depending on which Fit you get — look OK. Just 13.5 feet in length from bumper to bumper and 5.5 feet wide, the Fit is, well, easy to fit into small parking spaces and makes U-turns without fuss.

Best of all, visibility for the driver and passengers is good. Everyone sits up on seats that are positioned higher than those in a regular car. Using the manual height adjustment for the driver seat in the test Fit Sport model, I even had my legs extending downward in a more bus-like fashion, rather than merely extended forward.

The Fit has more headroom in its two rows of seats than does a Cadillac Escalade sport utility vehicle. The Fit's tallish roofline also is key to the 57.3 cubic feet of cargo space that's available with rear seat backs folded down. This kind of storage is akin to that of some SUVs.

Anyone who's short in stature will love the low floor height and negligible liftover at the back hatch opening. Tall items don't always have to be laid down back there. The Fit's innovative rear seat cushion can be moved upward with one swift lift motion, exposing the second-row floor for large items that can be left to stand upright.

I averaged the government fuel mileage in city driving of 27 mpg as well as the government's combined city/highway rate of 30 mpg. Note the tester was a Fit Sport, which has more equipment than the base Fit that has the 28/35-mpg rating that ranks second among gasoline-powered hatchbacks in the country. The No. 1-rated gasoline hatchback is the Yaris at 29/36 mpg.

The Fit comes with many standard features, including curtain air bags, tilt and telescoping steering wheel, power door locks and windows, grocery bag hooks in the cargo area and under-seat storage in the second row.

In U.S. government crash tests, the Fit earned 5 out of 5 stars for protecting front-seat passengers in a frontal crash and the driver in a side crash. The Fit had 4 out of 5 stars for rear-side passenger crash protection.

According to Automotive Lease Guide, a new Fit can be expected to retain more of its purchase price over three years of ownership than any other entry-level compact.



ASSOCIATED PRESS/Courtesy of Honda
The 2010 Honda Fit comes with many standard features, including telescoping steering wheel.



1962 PONTIAC

Lean, mean and clean, the Grand Prix delivered impressive performance and sold in impressive numbers

GP

G R A N D P R I X

BY MALCOLM GUNN
Wheelbase Communications

Simple, tasteful and elegant are words not normally associated with most bulky cars built by North American automakers in the early 1960s. The revolutionary 1962 Pontiac Grand Prix is the exception as it became a benchmark for style and sophistication.

Before its arrival, the personal-luxury category was dominated — and even outright owned — by the second-generation Ford Thunderbird that was introduced in 1958. That year marked the beginning of the four-seater 'Bird, a larger but eminently more practical version of the two-seat original.

Ford's product research had earlier concluded that Thunderbird sales would significantly increase if more room could be found for more passengers. After all, it was the 1950s, a time of rapid expansion across the land, including an explosion of multi-children families. The larger Thunderbird provided mom and dad with a place to stash the kids, but retained its sporty image by lowering the suspension, keeping the lines relatively chrome-free and stuffing a 300-horsepower V-8 under the hood.

The result was predictable. Sales of the '58 Thunderbird were nearly double those of the 1957 model, despite a price increase of more than \$200 for a hardtop and \$500 for the convertible. Over the next two years, the number of units sold soared even higher.

In the automobile business, one manufacturer's success story is another manufacturer's opportunity. Over at General Motors, the ever-rising number of Thunderbirds cruising the highways did not go unnoticed and the race was on to develop a similar vehicle.

An all-new design had been created by GM's styling department and was slated to go into production as the premium-priced 1963 Buick Riviera. In the meantime, Pontiac's engineering department was given the go-ahead to develop a similar, albeit less-expensive alternative,

Fine Lines

1962 Pontiac Grand Prix

dubbed the Grand Prix.

Their starting point was the existing 120-inch-wheelbase chassis and most of the basic body shell from the popular Catalina hardtop coupe. A special heavy-duty suspension developed for the car slightly reduced ground clearance, but improved handling.

All of the Catalina's side trim was deleted, replaced by a small chrome Grand Prix badge attached to the door and a set of stylish chrome rocker moldings. The front grille and rear panel between the taillights was also unique to the Grand Prix.

A variety of normally extra-cost items were also added to every Grand Prix, including air conditioning, cruise control, vinyl-covered bucket seats, a floor console, tachometer, dual exhausts and power steering, brakes and windows.

As a final touch, the Grand Prix was available with a spectacular looking set of 14-inch Kelsey-Hayes aluminum wheels that were each attached to the hubs using eight lug nuts.

To make the Grand Prix run as fast as it looked, a 303-horsepower 389 cubic-inch OHV V-8 with a four-barrel carburetor was housed between the front fenders. Additional tread-melting torque was available in the form of a 318-horsepower "Tri-power" 389 (three, two-barrel carbs), or a high-performance 389-cube 'Trophy V-8' that delivered either 333 or 348 horsepower depending on the carburetor setup.

For a vehicle weighing nearly two tons, the Grand Prix could generate some impressive acceleration numbers with the hottest version sprinting to 60 mph in less than seven seconds.

Three transmission choices were available to Grand Prix buyers: a base three-speed manual; optional four-speed manual; or a three-

speed automatic.

Creating the car from an existing design meant the 1962 Grand Prix was able to beat the Buick Riviera to the sales floor by one year. But the real ace up its sleeve was the attractive price. At an entry point of less than \$3,500, the car cost about \$700 less than the Thunderbird. Personal luxury with affordability had arrived at Pontiac.

New-car shoppers went wild for the value-laden Grand Prix, snapping up some 30,000 of them in its first year. Suddenly, the Grand Prix became the car to own, or to be seen in.

Encouraged by its initial success, Pontiac's image shapers planned an even more dramatic car for 1963. A new and exclusive formal roofline with a concave rear window was grafted onto the Catalina's body while what appeared to be fog lights (they were actually signal lamps) gave the car some added Euro flavor.

A 370-horsepower 421-cubic-inch engine also became the top dog under the hood. The result was predictable. Sales of the '63 Grand Prix more than doubled its 1962 counterpart.

In the 40-plus years since first being created, the Grand Prix name became a mainstay of the Pontiac fold, with breakthrough designs that stayed true to the idea of sporty looks and solid performance.

However, V-8 engines eventually gave way to V-6s and front-wheel-drive in the 1980s and '90s and the once-proud Grand Prix, along with the Pontiac division of General Motors, became the victim of generic styling, corporate downsizing and brand rationalizing.

Today, Pontiac might be on the way out, but the 1962-'63 Grand Prix remind us of a time when cars made our pulses race and our eyes widen.

• www.wheelbase.ws/mailbag.html.

Maintenance from a fleet manager's perspective

Maintaining one vehicle can be a challenge. Imagine being a fleet manager and responsible for maintaining dozens or even hundreds of vehicles.

There are lessons to be learned from those who are in charge of maintaining a multitude of cars. Many of the same guidelines can be applied to your personal vehicle. Like you, fleet managers need to continually balance repair cost versus vehicle replacement.

Usually maintaining and repairing what you already own is least expensive in the long run. Be it a fleet vehicle or a personal vehicle, minor problems can become major ones if ignored. By being proactive and following a maintenance schedule, down time is minimized, the vehicle will live a longer life and be less costly to operate.

The best way for a fleet manager to measure his maintenance cost is to calculate the expenses on a cost per mile basis. There are two important factors to consider with the cost per mile viewpoint: The better a vehicle is maintained, the lower the cost per mile will be over the life of the vehicle, and cost per mile tends to increase with vehicle age.

If the cost per mile actually begins to increase, it is often a function of how well the vehicle has been maintained and driven. By tracking the maintenance and repair costs on a cost per mile basis, a plan can be developed. An effective maintenance program will provide the input needed to decide when it is time to replace the vehicle.

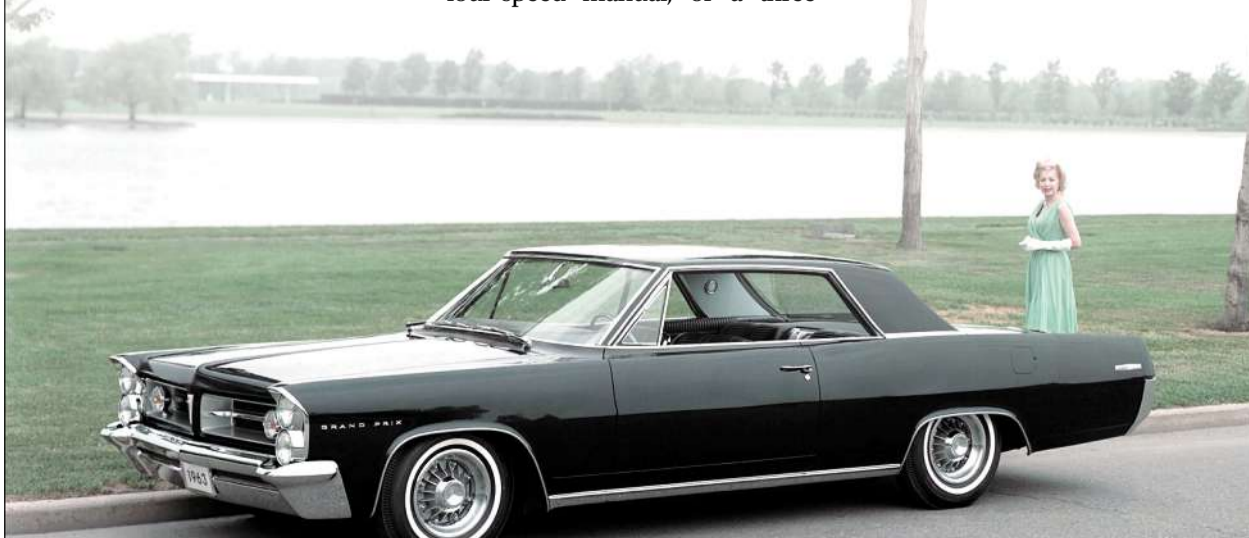
Controlling vehicle ownership costs requires a commitment to maintenance and repairing minor problems before they become major repairs. The second component of cost control is driver behavior — driving safely and sanely keeps the vehicle safer and in good condition, not only for users of the vehicle, but also for the safety of other drivers.

Lastly, a fleet manager needs to take into consideration the hidden costs of a breakdown that could be more significant than the repair cost. If a fleet vehicle is in the shop, it is not out making service calls or sales calls, which means a loss of revenue for the business. With a personal car there are hidden costs as well, and these come in the form of disruptions in day-to-day life, which can also be quite significant.

Be your own fleet manager:

- Develop a relationship with a quality repair facility that will help you track your maintenance.
- Follow the maintenance schedule for your car and make repairs right away before they become bigger problems.
- Track your expenses on a cost per mile basis.
- Drive your vehicle with costs in mind. Drive safely and sanely without stopping and starting aggressively.
- Remember multiple drivers typically create additional wear and tear on a vehicle.

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The stunning 1963 Grand Prix outsold the '62 model two-to-one.