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Honda Civic Type-R

This is the *other* Civic Type-R. Just how good is it?

It's a familiar tale. Japanese manufacturer builds a corking drivers' car and tells the UK it can't have it. Enter the specialist importer who, with lower overheads and a more intuitive feel for the enthusiast market, decides to bring a few in to gauge demand. It happened with Skylines, Evos, STIs and FT0s, and now for the second time it's happening with a Type-R Honda.

Once again Iain Litchfield is at the forefront, having identified the four-door Civic Type-R as a hero in waiting. It might be based on a bigger, saloon bodysell, but as we're about to discover, this Civic is about as hardcore as it gets. The Type-R hatch that's on sale in Britain got a lukewarm response, so is this the car we've been craving?

Finished in dazzling Championship White, it's certainly an arresting sight. Sitting low on its distinctive 18in seven-spoke alloys and track-biased Bridgestone Potenza RE070s, and wearing an array of aggressive aerodynamic addenda, the JDM (Japanese Domestic Market) CTR exudes a true sense of purpose. The simple purity of an all-white colour scheme somehow intensifies the focus on its dynamic credentials, lifting it from humble four-door to Phwoarr-door like no blue or silver paintwork ever could.



It's a sinewy machine, the four-door Civic Type R. There's muscle all right, but its lean frame and steely hardware *imply* power and agility rather than shout about it. It's an honest looking car, too, with none of the gimmickry that already looks a bit try-hard on the UK Civic Type-R hatchback.

Inside is more dramatic, with an analogue tachometer supplemented by an LCD display showing speed and an array of shift lights. It's a weird design but it works well in practice, although it does emphasise how far back you sit in the car. Renault Espace drivers will certainly feel at home here. The seats are very supportive and particularly comfortable, and the relationship between the steering wheel and gearlever – topped as ever with a cool titanium knob – is more natural than the Vito van-like item in the UK CTR.

Powered by a 222bhp version of the familiar K20A i-VTEC in-line four-cylinder engine, the JDM Civic Type-R is both more powerful and more tractable than either the Integra or the UK Civic, and revs to a spectacular 8400rpm. The gearing has been tweaked slightly, with gears 1-3 shortened by 4 per

cent to improve acceleration, while gears 4-6 have been raised by 1 per cent to take full advantage of the more accessible torque, which now hits a peak of 158lb ft at 6100rpm.

The saloon bodyshell has been made lighter yet more rigid, with extensive use of aluminium, and adhesive bonding instead of welds. As a result the much bigger 'shell tips the scales just 1.8kg heavier than the Integra's, yet is 50 per cent more rigid.

Once on the move this sense of rigidity is all-pervading. There's no sneeze-factor in the steering, no slouch in the suspension or stop in the brake pedal, and certainly no squidge in the Bridgestone RE070s' sidewalls. Consequently your slightest twitch is translated into immediate response. It's an uncompromising car with a firm, physical ride, yet the damping is well controlled and it copes well with mid-corner bumps.

Traction is excellent thanks to the standard helical limited-slip differential, and there's only the slightest hint of wheelspin on a dry road, even over the sharp-edged crests along our test route in south Wales. The brakes also deliver, with a firm pedal

and powerful, linear response, but then they should be good, with 320mm front rotors and 282mm rears, gripped by Brembo callipers.

Throw the CTR into a tight corner and it turns-in without hesitation, slicing to the apex without a hint of understeer. Indeed once you learn just how much speed you can carry it will drift its way through, front and rear working as one, with no unseemly scrabbling or torque steer.

Like all VTEC-powered Hondas, the JDM CTR delivers its best above 6000rpm, but there's useful lugging power from 3500rpm. Of course it feels limp compared with the fireworks that kick-in on the angry side of the VTEC threshold – a point which is marked by the first of the shift lights glowing in the binnacle – but that schizophrenic delivery has always been a highlight of a Type-R model.

If you're used to the lusty swell of a turbocharged engine or the effortless muscle of a big-capacity motor, the amount of effort you need to invest in making the CTR fly may feel like hard work, but the rewards are significant and unforgettable, and completely appropriate in this hard-edged, angry sports saloon.

Fortunately, and in true Type-R fashion, the engine is sensationally responsive and beautifully smooth, even at 8400rpm. It helps that the six-speed gearbox has one of the fastest, sweetest and most precise shifts around, and you soon find yourself wringing the CTR's neck at every opportunity. Hearing that engine note harden and feeling the acceleration intensify is an addiction you'll want to feed.

According to reports in Japan, the CTR is capable of 150mph and will hit 60mph in less than 6sec. It certainly feels rapid when fully lit. Perhaps more impressive is that in back-to-back tests it lapped the Tsukuba race track 1sec quicker than the DC5

'You find yourself wringing the CTR's neck at every opportunity, hearing the engine note harden and feeling the acceleration intensify'



Left: Japanese-market Civic is a big, boxy four-door, but Honda has been meticulous about keeping the weight down. Engine (right) is development of familiar i-VTEC 2-litre, tuned to give a very healthy 222bhp at a typically high 8000rpm



CIVIC MEETS INTEGRA

We love the original Integra Type-R. That's why we proclaimed it the greatest front-drive performance car of all time, and why we couldn't resist getting one along to meet the newest Honda to wear the Type-R badge.

The first thing you notice is how small, low and sleek the DC2 Integra is. Compared with the bulky-looking four-door it's almost dainty. You sit low and enjoy a real sense of intimacy after the cave-like space in the saloon. You also sit close to the screen, the lack of depth to the dashboard and the relative thinness of the door panels betraying the Integra's age, while the Recaros hold you in place brilliantly.

The dash is simple and conventional with none of the Civic's sci-fi styling and advanced ergonomics. Old-fashioned it may be, but there's little to touch the Integra's cluster of analogue dials for clarity. Look in the rear-view mirror and the views are the same, a big flat slice of wing cutting through your field of vision.

Though it's obvious a decade of development stands between the two Type-Rs, dynamic similarities abound. There's that same slight numbness to the first few degrees of steering input, and the same flaccid calm before the VTEC storm. Allow yourself to get becalmed in the wrong gear at the wrong revs and you almost feel like drumming your fingers impatiently on the steering wheel, such is the time it takes for the 1.8-litre engine to start simmering. Of course once the VTEC does its magic at 6000rpm or so the engine erupts, but if there's one area where you can feel the progress it's in the new

car's ability to muster more useful low and mid-range response.

Chassis-wise, the Integra is softer than the Civic, though not by much. The benefit is that it manages to settle more willingly at low speed and seems to flow more when you're making brisk rather than flat-out progress, although it can't quite summon the sheer grip or speed of response of the new car.

What continues to impress is the Integra's tenacity. Though admittedly there's not much in the way of torque to deal with, the Integra always feels as though it's putting every crumb of power into the tarmac, and it allows you to carry as much of that hard-won momentum as possible through every corner, thanks to a remarkably elastic yet forgiving and exploitable limit. The CTR carries more speed but its limits are more sharply defined, and though we'll have to wait for a longer drive to confirm it, it's unlikely to share the Integra's uniquely satisfying fluidity.

So the oldie remains a goodie, but having criticised Honda for selling the original Civic Type-R and its recent hatchback successor's soul to the marketing devil, it's reassuring to see that Honda's men in white coats (as opposed to those in fancy suits) haven't sold out. The inspirational qualities that led us to love the original Integra are still there to be enjoyed in the exceptional four-door Civic Type-R.



Added practicality of four doors and a decent boot is just a bonus – the JDM Civic is a true Type-R

Specification

Engine	In-line four-cyl, 1998cc, 16v
Max power	222bhp @ 8000rpm
Max torque	158lb ft @ 6100rpm
Top speed	150mph (claimed)
0-62mph	sub-6.0sec (claimed)
Basic price	£22,995
On sale	Now (www.litchfieldimports.co.uk)

evo RATING



- ◆ Screaming engine, razor-sharp chassis
- ◆ Demands commitment, import only

Integra, while at the longer Suzuka circuit it pulled a massive 4sec gap. It'll be fascinating to find out what it'll do at Bedford.

Litchfield is selling the four-door CTR for £22,995 on the road, which includes all import costs, a Thatcham Cat 1 alarm, 12 months' tax, number plates and a full three-year warranty. That's around £5000 more than the UK Civic Type-R, but such is the gulf between the watered-down experience offered by the hatchback and the full-strength fury of the saloon there's little sense in making a direct comparison. Perhaps you'd be better looking upon this import-only Civic as a four-door NSX-R, for it possesses much of the supercar's spirit.

Richard Meaden >>>

