

SPECIAL FEATURE

FAST TRAVEL

WITH THE NEW
HONDA CITY



We take the New Honda City on a 600km endurance run to find out how comfortable it is on long-distance journeys

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Long drives are a double-edged sword in India. On one side there's the allure of the destination and the sense of escape. But on the other hand, there's the terror from our abysmally-maintained highway and road networks where road quality is sometimes bad enough to shake the fillings out of your teeth... or worse, induce slipped disc. Consequently, no matter how much we desire a corner-hugging machine that's taut and sporty to drive, we're always set back by the fact that such a setup isn't really practical in our real world. The ideal situation therefore is a balanced car that treads the equilibrium between comfort and contoured driving - offering sportiness while dueling in its ability to tread over a variety of surfaces.

The new Honda City promises exactly that. In its fifth generation, Honda has made a slew of changes to the car's dynamics as well as interiors to make it more adaptable to our road conditions. To put this claim to test, we devised a road trip that would be the equivalent of a "real-world stress test" where we endure a 600 km, single-day round trip to see if the new City keeps us comfortable and stress-free on a long journey. We would encounter smooth stretches of roads where we can understand the car's high-speed stability, broken and patchy surfaces where the suspensions are pushed to their maximum capability and through heavy traffic to examine its ease of use as a daily driver. And at the end, update you on our overall stress and fatigue levels.

I set off extremely early from Pune to drive up to Nashik, a distance of 230 km, from where the highway would lead us into Mumbai, adding another 190kms to the triplog. After tackling the heavy Mumbai traffic, the final 185 km of the journey were spent completing the loop back to Pune. Needless to say that I got up at an ungodly hour to start off... 3:00 am to be exact, a time other's still consider night. Heading straight for the Pune-Nashik highway, I was enamoured by how much of an upgrade the new Honda City has received on the interior. The cockpit is now more lively, thanks to the dual tone scheme, where you'd find a mix of light, soft leatherette and dark materials all around. There's a large touchscreen infotainment system that sits in the centre of the dashboard above the redesigned climate controls, which are now highly-tactile knobs as opposed to the previous-generation car's touchscreen system. Not only do they feel better to the touch but are less distracting when operating while on the move. The instrumentation cluster also gets an update with a set of hybrid dials where the left dial is now all-digital and can be swapped for a G-Meter, tachometer or trip information as you prefer. The dials are bright and very easy to read both during the day as well as nighttime.

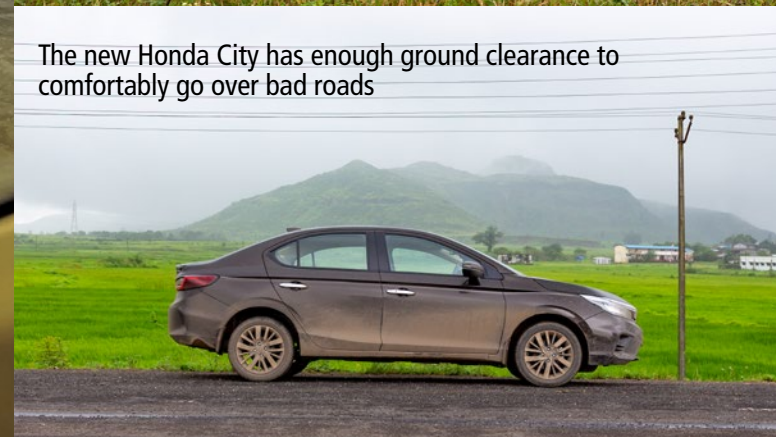
The Pune-Nashik highway offers a perfect mix to understand the driving behaviour of the new Honda City where some dual carriage sections



Nashik-Mumbai highway is best avoided for night driving, if not entirely.



From Pune to Nashik the highway is under construction with slow diversions and fast 4-lane stretches



The new Honda City has enough ground clearance to comfortably go over bad roads

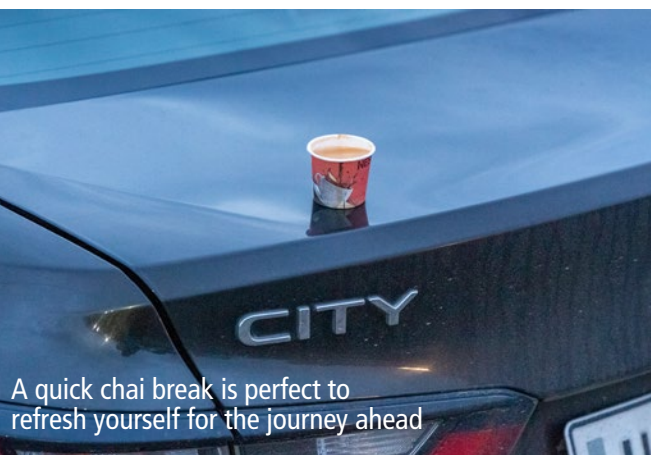
are still under construction while others are smooth 4-lane stretches. As a result, there's a constant need to slow down and tackle diversions before getting back on the throttle for the wider, faster sections. Not the ideal scenario for night-time driving, however the City's powerful LED headlights were very helpful in lighting up the road with their powerful throw and give great visibility so that I could judge the road ahead and adapt speeds accordingly. While switching between the slower sections and wider roads, it quickly became evident how refined the new 1.5-litre DOHC petrol i-VTEC engine was - it pulls clean and with reasonable urgency. Its linear power delivery meant that I wasn't being jolted around as it picked up speed and it stayed smooth and relatively silent that it's hard to judge the quickly-building speeds. 80 km/h comes up quite fast and the only way you'd know of the speed is through the speed warning beep. Keep your right foot planted and you'd effortlessly accelerate past 120, then 140... all the way up to 170 km/h before any kind of atmospheric resistance is felt. All this while the 7 speed transmission seamlessly shifts the



The Igatpuri stretch is littered with countless waterfalls during the monsoons



New LED headlights have a powerful throw for night-time driving



A quick chai break is perfect to refresh yourself for the journey ahead



Even after 11-years of operation the Bandra-Worli Sea Link inspires awe



No amount of distance can challenge the new Honda City's comfort levels

gears without any abrupt acceleration.

This stretch of highway also showcased yet another quality of the new Honda City - It's superbly balanced suspension setup. They are not too stiff to throw you off when going over potholes and cracked road surfaces while not being overly soft where it maintains a solid hold over roads while doing high speeds. It's a major upgrade from the previous-gen City where the earlier car felt bouncy at high speed. On the contrary, the new City feels rock solid while pacing through fast sections of highway, even offering confidence when approaching sweeping bends.

At our quick breakfast stop in Nashik, we made an astute observation - the crowds here were much more sensible than the ones we left behind in Pune. Not only is the helmet adoption high amongst Nashik residents, but they are also better-mannered when driving on highway and city roads. I believe it has something to do with consultation sessions that are offered by the local traffic police when someone is spotted riding without a helmet. People here prefer to keep their lids on rather than sit through 3 hours of moral lecturing. Whatever it is, it works and I wish for this to be done in Pune too. Here's hoping.

Breakfast break over, it was time to head towards India's financial capital. This wouldn't be as straightforward as expected though, as the 190 km highway between Nashik and Mumbai is notorious for its crater-sized potholes that can easily destroy suspension and tyres if one's not careful. With every kilometer that Nashik was left behind, the highway progressively worsened. There's a little respite near Igatpuri where you slow down to take in the monsoon-soaked hills on the right and a vast, never-ending lake on the left. This place feels magical, if the Western Ghats reveal their highest peaks. If it wasn't for this test run, I'd certainly want to tread deeper into the Sahyadri ranges and stay longer in its natural beauty... at least for a couple of days if not blocking an entire week to unwind. Igatpuri is beautiful during monsoons, a must visit for anyone nearby, or even afar.

Time was ticking and we had to press on. Mumbai was just the second leg of our endurance run, with Pune being the end point to the excursion. While the thought of torturous roads ahead dissuaded me to carry on, Kasara Ghat was a refreshing preface to keep going. It's a beautiful little mountain section where the Honda City's handling became evident. Between the dense tree covered mountains and a black ribbon of tarmac snaking between waterfalls, the Honda City's steering felt precise, albeit less weighted. Not only does it manage to keep its composure and when given some aggressive thrashing, I wasn't able to induce any significant understeer. The fun was over quickly and we were now heading towards the dreaded piece of road.

The Mumbai-Agra highway was one of the challenging bits of tarmac during our journey. At

places, this stretch of highway is a true torture test for both man and machine. Here you'll find potholes of every size with some large enough to cause permanent damage to your car's underbelly and suspension. While navigating carefully around the bigger potholes, I wasn't too stressed by the (relatively) smaller ones and the gaping cracks on the road surface. The City's suspension soaked in most undulations with ease to a point where I had enough confidence to completely ignore most of them and push ahead flat out! This resulted in higher average speeds than what other vehicles around me could manage, as I noticed other sedans, even some crossovers struggling to maintain momentum over these roads. The ease-in-driving was only complimented by the City's accommodating ground clearance which ensured that neither the nose nor the underbelly touched any piece of grit throughout this section. Without the previously-anticipated drama, I was back in the clear only to head towards the next challenge - Mumbai traffic.

Mumbai - The city of dreams. Also a sprawl of never-ending traffic jams. Despite the heavy evening traffic the seamless CVT gearbox that responds quickly to throttle inputs meant that the City could squeeze through small gaps in traffic. It's light steering ensured easy maneuverability making direction changes effortless with a light flick. In fact, it gave me the courage to take a slight diversion off our planned route and drive deeper into Mumbai traffic, gunning towards its centrepiece - the Bandra-Worli Sea Link. A quick encounter with this modern architectural masterpiece, yet still high on energy, it was time to get back on track and find our way out of this crowded megapolis on to the final leg of our journey - back home to Pune.

By 6:00 pm, after more than 15-hours of driving, I was more sleepy than tired. Usually Mumbai-Pune-Mumbai is strenuous enough to get irked by the sight of more traffic, but at this point, after almost 500km of driving, I was still surprisingly upbeat. The only annoyance here was the endless waiting to pass the Mumbai - Pune Expressway toll booth. The Honda City, it had coped up rather well even surpassing expectations at some places. To me it was the combination of a well-executed suspension setup combined with the soft seat cushions that had kept me this fresh. No back pain and no sore calf muscles, despite the non-stop driving.

A couple of hours later, after dropping the filming crew to their homes, I was knocking at my own doorstep, fresh and looking forward to dinner. I had just completed a massive 3-city round trip over some of the most tremulous road surfaces I've experienced in a single day. And yet, here I was surprisingly upright and looking forward to dinner with the family as they shared their plans for the 3-hour movie night. Now that part actually wanted me to fall asleep harder than the rest of the day's driving ever did!