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2010 Acura RDX Crossover utility with performance and handling.

Overview

The Acura RDX is a premium crossover SUV designed for sporty driving. It features a 240-horsepower, turbocharged four-cylinder engine, a five-speed automatic with paddle shifters, and a firm independent suspension made for winding roads.

The 2010 Acura RDX offers a choice of front-wheel drive or Acura's proven Super Handling All-Wheel Drive system, called SH-AWD. The all-wheel-drive system delivers a higher proportion of power to the outside rear wheel under hard cornering, thus keeping the car balanced and enhancing cornering performance. The front-wheel-drive version gets better fuel economy (by about 2 mpg) and lowers the purchase price \$2000.

RDX comes trimmed in leather, no cloth interior is available. Standard equipment includes a power moonroof and dual-zone climate control.

In short, the RDX is designed for drivers who do not want to compromise cornering for a comfortable ride (hence, the firm suspension), but want upscale accommodations.

The 2010 RDX features revised front and rear styling, cabin upgrades and additions. It's also a bit quieter. The addition of the front-drive model is the most substantial change since the launch of the RDX as a 2007 model.

Model Lineup

The Acura RDX (\$32,250) comes with leather upholstery, heated front seats, power moonroof, Bluetooth hands-free phone interface, USB input, XM satellite radio, 18-inch alloy wheels with all-season tires, xenon HID headlights with fog lamps, rear camera display in rearview mirror. The RDX SH-AWD model features the all-wheel-drive system (\$34,250).

The RDX with the Technology Package (\$35,620) upgrades with a 10-speaker, 410-watt sound system, navigation system with voice recognition, rearview camera, GPS-linked solar-sensing climate control and the AcuraLink satellite communication system with real-time traffic and weather. The Technology Package is the only available option and is also available on the SH-AWD model (\$37,620).

Safety features standard on all models include dual-stage frontal airbags, side airbags in front, side curtain airbags with rollover sensor, active front head restraints to help protect against whiplash, tire-pressure monitor, VSA electronic stability control, traction control, four-wheel anti-lock disc brakes with Electronic Brake Distribution and Brake Assist. All-wheel drive is optional.

Walkaround

The Acura RDX is about one inch longer in wheelbase than the Honda CR-V, and two inches longer overall. The appearance of the two cars is similar, even with the styling revisions for 2010.

RDX has wavy sculpting on the sides that mimics large-scale corrugation.

The nose of the RDX is its most distinctive feature. The grille is a wide shallow vee below an equal-depth bright trim panel, the Acura theme, with flush-mounted side grilles and fog lights, and a dark panel in the center that appears to offer lots of snow-bank clearance.

Behind the C-pillar there's a small window not easily discerned because the C-pillar is black and the window is tinted so darkly. From the inside, it affords good visibility, with no major blind spots when looking over your shoulder.

Between the redesigned taillights is a trim molding that almost combines Acura's bold grille and five-angle themes. The lower bumper area is blacked out and the tailpipes capped off with oval outlets.

Interior Features

The Acura RDX dashboard cascades with colors, textures and levels. The top is wide and flat black vinyl, there's a three-inch-tall strip of dark titanium plastic in the center, broken by the display screen and, at the bottom, it turns to smooth vinyl in light gray. The top and the plastic strip are grained with minutely raised crossed diagonal lines, a sort of diamond-like golf-ball effect.

On the top center of the dashboard, tucked under the windshield, is a narrow digital display that indicates time of day, radio station, the interior temperature setting on each side of the car, and where cabin airflow is directed. It sometimes washes out in sunlight or with polarized sunglasses.

The navigation system is controlled by a sizable knob in the middle of the center stack. It pushes in, up, down, left and right. Acura has an excellent reputation for its navigation systems and we've found them among the best and easiest to operate. For 2010 the system incorporates real-time weather, traffic and automatic re-routing.

We found the rearview monitor fuzzy. It is on the dark side at night (which might be from dim backup lights), often too dark to be useful at dusk or on overcast days. For RDX without the Technology Package a backup camera image is displayed in the center of the rear view mirror, far less useful due to its size. Looking backwards still works well, of course, but rearview monitors are an additional aid for the driver, helping him or her to spot small children, short metal poles, parked cars and other things you don't want to hit. They can also speed the parking process. So we recommend the Technology Package.

A compass, automatic headlights and ambient footwell lighting have been added for 2010. The ventilation controls, said to be more intuitive, always gave us the climate desired.

We found the perforated leather seats comfortable, and the driver can perch up high to see over the short nose of the car. The driver's seat has eight-way power with power lumbar support, and the passenger's seat has four-way power adjustment. Both front seats have high and low heat settings.

The gauges are nicely lit at night, in blue and white. The tachometer is at left, with redline at 6800 rpm, and an insert that shows turbocharger boost. A big speedometer is in the center with an information display inside it, and on the right is a spot of similar size which contains a gear-selection indicator and a fuel-level gauge. It would be nice if there was a temperature gauge because, as it is, you can find the engine's temperature only by using the information display inside the speedometer, and scrolling through other information to find it. That makes it tough to see an overheating problem developing.

The information display can also show which wheels are getting the power with the SH-AWD, or Super Handling All-Wheel Drive. This system sends more power to the outside rear wheel when the car is cornering aggressively, which keeps it on line (though that's exactly the time you'd not want to look down to check the display). There's also an instantaneous fuel mileage display, consisting of a bar ranging from 0 to 50 mpg, but we did not find it to be easily readable.

The leather-wrapped, tilt-and-telescoping steering wheel feels nice in your hands, if busy, with 15 buttons and switches, including paddles for upshifting and downshifting the transmission. It has three spokes, at

3, 9 and 6 o'clock, and they're trimmed in aluminum-look plastic, with a design that makes the wheel look like a scale model of a space station.

There are terrific grab handles for closing the front and rear doors, something we wish all cars had.

There are nice little storage compartments, and a very deep center console compartment, with trays at the bottom that lift out to reveal a hidden spot that's another couple inches deep. It's 16.9 inches from front to back, 12.2 inches deep and 5.5 inches wide, big enough for a laptop, briefcase or champagne bottles you're bringing to a party, and it's lockable.

The parking brake pedal seems too low, as it can interfere with moving your left foot from the rest position to the brake pedal, for those who choose to brake with the left foot. We would sometimes catch the toe of our left shoe on the parking brake when moving our foot into position to use the brake.

There seems to be decent knee room in the rear seat; we had a tall passenger back there who said she had enough room. The specification of 37.7 inches is about par for a mid-sized sedan, though you sit more upright in a small SUV like this. The rear passengers have cupholders in the folding armrest, door pockets and map pockets in the front seatbacks, and the 60/40 rear seatbacks will fold flat, after the seat cushions are flipped up against the front seatbacks.

Cargo space behind the rear seat is about par for the class, with 27.8 cubic feet; with the rear seats lowered, there's 60.6 cubic feet.

Driving Impressions

The most fun you can have with an Acura RDX is when driving it like you would a sports car. Not exactly like a sports car because it's too tall and automated for that, but it's far more a driver's car than the average upper-level cute ute.

This is the first turbocharged car Acura has ever made. Honda has been a leader with small engines and this 2.3-liter turbo is no different. The turbocharger broadens the power delivery quite a lot from the high-revving Acura TSX four-cylinder, although it doesn't smooth out the engine. It is slightly quieter than earlier models and takes more effort to hear the turbo whooshing.

It has no turbo lag and develops 260 pound-feet of torque, though at a relatively high 4500 rpm. However, a sensitive throttle and fast-responding turbo conspire to keep the transmission busy with upshifts and downshifts on uphill grades, even when driving casually. Put another way, if your right foot asks for a moderate increase in power and the boost gauge is down low, a gearshift will probably ensue. Simply selecting S for Sport mode smoothes everything, just remember to shift back into the normal mode so the transmission will use top gear on the highway.

In the Sport mode, the transmission obeys your manual-shift commands except when you downshift at an engine speed the system thinks is too high, or upshift at one it thinks is too low. Then at least it tells you that it's rejected your input with a flashing light. You can manually upshift and downshift in Drive as well, and after a few seconds of no manual input the car will revert to full automatic.

In heavy stop-and-go freeway traffic, we found it difficult to accelerate smoothly. It has a drive-by-wire throttle. We have found many cars with this type of electronic system to have sensitive throttles, and adding a turbocharger seems to magnify the sensitivity. You can manage the stop-and-go in an RDX smoothly, but it requires more concentration.

Brakes are solid and offer good feel and progressive retardation, perhaps indicative of the system upgrades for 2010.

A bigger flaw than a quick throttle or unsettled transmission might be the ride. A front-seat passenger said she could feel every bump, especially on the freeway. We could feel them too. It was like a jolt over the freeway ridges or sharp speed bumps.

Of course, this firmness in the suspension enables the RDX to perform like a sports car around the corners. Acura boasts that it will out-corner a BMW X3, which was developed on the Nurburgring circuit in Germany and has a ride similarly biased to performance. Potential buyers should include road surfaces reflective of their usual travel before deciding how much sport, or comfort, they want.

We drove one RDX in California then spent a week in another in the Northwest, just in time for snow and ice. We tested the ABS by slamming on the brakes going down a steep hill with hard-packed snow at 20 miles per hour. The response was beautiful; it took a long time to get stopped, but we were able to steer anywhere we wanted, without sliding, while our foot was mashed to the pedal. (In deep snow or dirt or gravel, you can actually stop quicker by locking the brakes, building up little dams in front of the tires, so ABS is not always a great feature in the snow.) We should point out that the P235/55R18 Michelin Pilot tires are considered high-performance all-season, meaning they weren't made for this sort of thing; all-season means three seasons, winter not being one of them.

Then we went to a slushy parking lot, and tried to cut doughnuts at hard throttle, to test the VSA electronic stability control. The RDX just turned in tight circles, without much sliding; it was quite amazing.

A couple days later the slush froze into sheer, lumpy ice and we returned to the bottom of our steep hill. We charged uphill, and it was fascinating to feel the all-wheel-drive work, and watch the readout on the instrument panel indicate with bars which of the four tires was getting the torque, based on how slippery it was under each tire at any moment. The all-wheel-drive system, which can send 70 percent of its torque to the rear wheels, struggled for grip, its computer sensors playing the throttle and brakes on and off at four separate wheels at lightning speed, and we made it to the top. This was very impressive, especially with those high-performance all-season tires that were never intended for dealing with such severe conditions. With real snow tires, the RDX would be unstoppable in the winter, and we recommend a set for winter climates.

In winter conditions, it's hard to beat a relatively light high-tech vehicle, with all-wheel drive, anti-lock brakes, electronic stability control, six airbags and xenon headlights, not to mention heated seats and heated mirrors. Dedicated winter tires should keep you running with the plows.

The EPA-rated mileage is 17/22 mpg City/Highway for the RDX SH-AWD. We got 17.6 miles per gallon on premium fuel at an average of 34 mph running stop-and-go on the freeway and 80 mph when the traffic was less crowded, very unfavorable conditions for fuel economy. We found the fuel mileage similar during around-town driving. Fuel economy will likely be closer to that 22 mpg EPA Highway rating when cruising constantly at 55 mph.

The new front-wheel-drive model doesn't handle quite the same around corners where you have your foot on the gas, such as mountain passes and many on-ramp clover-leaves, because it carries a higher percentage of its weight on the front wheels and has no rear drive. On the plus side it is lighter and rates 2 mpg higher in all conditions. The top two gears are taller, meaning lower engine speeds for the same road speed and quieter cruising. While you may coax mid 20s out of it on the highway, fuel economy has never been the RDX's forte.

Our choice is for the SH-AWD model with its superb all-wheel-drive system. If it's economy you're mainly after, we'd recommend looking elsewhere.

Summary

The Acura RDX is a compact crossover sport-utility built more for sporty performance than comfortable cruising, so it appeals to buyers whose driving style is on the enthusiastic side. The 2.3-liter four-cylinder engine is turbocharged to produce 240 horsepower, and it isn't tame. The firm suspension is aimed at cornering, and doesn't make many compromises. The RDX has many desirable touches inside the cabin, a full set of features, and quality engineering.

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