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- [Honda](#)
- [Element](#)
- [2003](#)

- [Acura](#)
- [Aston Martin](#)
- [Audi](#)
- [Bentley](#)
- [BMW](#)
- [Bugatti](#)
- [Buick](#)
- [Cadillac](#)

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- [Chrysler](#)
- [Dodge](#)
- [Ferrari](#)
- [Ford](#)
- [GMC](#)
- [Honda](#)
- [HUMMER](#)

- [Hyundai](#)
- [Infiniti](#)
- [Isuzu](#)
- [Jaguar](#)
- [Jeep](#)
- [Kia](#)
- [Lamborghini](#)
- [Land Rover](#)

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- [Lincoln](#)
- [Lotus](#)
- [Maserati](#)
- [Maybach](#)
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- [Mercedes-Benz](#)
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- [Nissan](#)
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- [Saturn](#)

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- [smart](#)
- [Subaru](#)
- [Suzuki](#)
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- [Toyota](#)
- [Volkswagen](#)
- [Volvo](#)

- [Accord](#)
- [CR-V](#)
- [Civic](#)
- [Element](#)
- [FCX](#)

- [Fit](#)
- [Odyssey](#)
- [Pilot](#)
- [Ridgeline](#)
- [S2000](#)

- [Stream](#)

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- [2008](#)
- **USED**
- [2007](#)
- [2006](#)
- [2005](#)
- [2004](#)
- [2003](#)



2003 Honda Element Road Test Review

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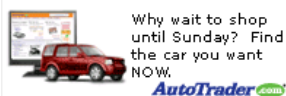
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- [Resale Values](#)
- [True Cost to Own](#)

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- [Available Features](#)
- [Standard Warranty](#)
- [Safety](#)
- [Colors](#)
- [Specs](#)

Multimedia

- [Photos](#)
- [360° View](#)
- [Photo Archive](#)

Ratings & Reviews

- [Model Review](#)
- [Road Test Ratings](#)
- [Road Test Reviews](#)
- [Consumer Reviews](#)
- [Awards History](#)
- [Reliability](#)

First Drive: 2003 Honda Element

Dude, Here's Your Car

By [John DiPietro](#)

Date posted: 08-30-2002

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You've gotta like Honda. Here is a company that does its homework and usually doesn't bring a product to market until it's fully developed and ready to make a serious dent. Honda's latest attack into a new segment (tall wagonlike mutations such as the Toyota Matrix and retro-themed Chrysler PT Cruiser) proves this point. Geared towards young and very active Generation Y types who want an affordable vehicle with flexible cargo-hauling ability along with a sporty persona, the Element is chock full of features that make it easy to take the mountain bikes to the trailhead, the surfboard to the waves or the 27-inch TV from Best Buy to the dorm or apartment.

Testing the market waters with the Model X concept (that debuted at the 2001 NAIAS in Detroit), Honda's team of engineers and designers took the vehicle to various university campuses as well as outdoor hot spots where snowboarders and mountain bikers get their

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adrenaline rushes. Lots of valuable feedback was gained in this fashion, and the Honda folks even went so far as camping at a surfing beach in California, observing how the diehard surfers would sleep in their pickups and vans overnight so they could catch the gnarly waves early the next morning.

Honda was overwhelmed with favorable public reaction to the boxy, two-tone wagonlike vehicle with barn-door-style doors that opened up like those on a 1966 Lincoln Continental. Apart from minor details such as larger side-view mirrors and small differences in the front and rear fascias, the production Element is nearly a dead ringer for the concept vehicle.

Though it may look as if the front and rear fenders missed the paint booth as the Element rolled down the assembly line, those rugged composite panels allow things like bikes and snowboards to be leaned against the vehicle without worrying about scratching the body up.

Another example of "form follows function" is the door design. By having no B-pillar and allowing the doors to swing open wide (fronts open up 78 degrees and the rears pivot a full 90 degrees), a 55.5 inch-wide portal allows bulky items to be loaded with ease. The typical problem with this sort of design is that it usually makes for a weaker body structure, but Honda says it more than compensated for the lack of a traditional B-pillar by, in essence, hiding one in each rear door as a reinforced vertical brace. The bottom of the rear doors has a stout tab that fits tightly into the sill when closed, adding to structural rigidity. In addition to that feature, a reinforced roof, side sills and cross members give Honda the confidence to anticipate a five-star rating (the highest possible) for the government's side-impact crash testing. Even the two-piece rear tailgate was thoughtfully engineered; the flipped-down bottom portion can seat two 220-pound people and the larger, upper section that flips up provides protection from the elements, whether sitting by the campfire or moving furniture on a crummy day.

Riding a wheelbase of just 101.4 inches and measuring only 166.5 inches in overall length, the Element is compact, yet the space inside makes it hard to believe that the Element is actually eight inches *shorter* than a Civic coupe. The secret is in having a tall body (at 74 inches, eight inches taller than a CR-V) which allows the seats to be higher, providing plenty of legroom for legs to drape over the seat rather than being splayed out. Headroom is so generous that one could probably wear a 10-gallon Stetson cowboy hat, though we can't imagine the target demographic having anything other than a baseball cap (turned backwards, of course) on their heads. A removable rear sunroof is available, which, along with the rear privacy glass, allows one to stand up inside the vehicle (with one's head poking up through the roof) to change into or out of a wet suit or ski suit without fear of being arrested for indecent exposure. That sunroof also makes it possible for campers to stargaze as they use their Element for their night's lodging — more on that later.

Although the Element, at 71.5 inches, is some three inches wider than a CR-V it is configured to seat four, not five. With stadium-style seating for the rear passengers, those riding in back will enjoy plenty of room and high visibility. Whether driving or riding, the Element's seats proved comfortable and supportive throughout a full day of meandering along the coastline.

When it's time to load up the mountain bikes, one or both of those second-row seats can fold up to the sides of the interior, making for a large cargo bay in which bikes can be stowed standing up. Honda says even a 10-foot surfboard can be carried inside the Element. If, after a day of getting pummeled by the trails or waves, you need to catch a few z's, all the seats fold down flat, making a bed. Of course, this feature makes the Element a great vehicle for campers, as well. Whether or not this attribute came about via the Concept X's tour of fraternity houses is open to speculation.

Continuing its minimalist, functional design dictum, the Element's cabin is devoid of gimmicks and boasts plenty of storage. The simple instrument panel has three large pods for the gauges, simple climate controls and the gearshift handily mounted at the bottom of the center stack, much like the Civic Si. Above the glovebox is a segmented tray perfect for holding things like munchies, the obligatory cell phone and a garage door opener. Deep pockets in the doors and rear side panels allow secure stowage of other items as well. The EX model even has an overhead compartment sized to hold a small CD wallet, as well as bungee cords on the backs of the seats that are ideal for holding cycling helmets. Five cupholders are provided, in case one passenger is a two-fisted java drinker. The Element's flat floor may seem naked without carpeting, but it's actually made of a tough, scratch-resistant material called Thermoplastic Olefin that can be swept with a broom and/or wiped with a wet cloth. Even the seats were designed with messy sports in mind as they are also water-repellent.

Behind the Element's bulldoglike snout is the same 2.4-liter inline four introduced on the current CR-V. Boasting Honda's latest i-VTEC variable valve timing and lift technology, output is rated at 160 horsepower and 161 pound-feet of torque. During our drive loop along the scenic Pacific Coast Highway, we noted that there is enough power on tap to make the 3,400-pound Element feel peppy at low to medium speeds. Thanks to the constant valve timing and lift adjustments, the power band is broad; the net effect is that it feels more like a healthy V6 rather than a four. Of course the performance drops off at higher speeds, where the vehicle's weight and bricklike aerodynamics come into play, but even then, the engine maintains its polished demeanor, never getting thrashy or feeling labored no matter how lead-footed the driver.

Standard four-wheel disc brakes provide confident braking through an easily modulated and progressive pedal. The EX versions get ABS as well as EBD (Electronic Brake force Distribution). Although ABS has been around for over a decade, the latter technology is fairly new and optimizes braking by automatically adjusting the braking power to the front and rear wheels, taking into account vehicle load and weight transfer under hard deceleration.

As with the CR-V, the Element is available in both front-wheel drive and all-wheel drive configurations, with either a five-speed manual or four-speed automatic sending the power to the wheels. To maximize fuel efficiency and performance, Honda's Real Time 4WD system operates in a front-drive mode until slippage is detected, at which point up to 70 percent of



(Enlarge photo)
(Photo courtesy of American Honda Motor Company, Inc.)

VEHICLE TESTED

2003 Honda Element DX Fwd 4dr SUV (2.4L 4cyl 5M)
(vehicle detail)

First Impression: Honda hits another nail squarely on the head. The Element is affordable, fun to drive and extremely capable at transporting anything from a long surfboard to a couple of mountain bikes inside its spacious cabin.

Base MSRP of Test Vehicle: \$0

MSRP of Test Vehicle: \$0

Price Paid: \$0

PICTURES



(Enlarge photo)
No, it's not sleek, but the Element's targeted buyers probably care more about functionality than fashion. (Photo courtesy of American Honda Motor Company, Inc.)



(Enlarge photo)
If you can't fit it in here, maybe you don't need it. (Photo courtesy of American Honda Motor Company, Inc.)

the torque can be sent to the rear wheels. The system is completely automatic, coming into play only when needed such as when driving in nasty weather or negotiating sand- and dirt-strewn roads.

We first drove a manual and it felt like a typical Honda, a light, progressive clutch matched to a precise gearshift. The shifter's location might look odd at first but it works great, with short throws and a lever that is right at hand. We then sampled an AWD automatic and were impressed by the sensation that its performance didn't seem to suffer for the automatic tranny; it felt nearly as sprightly as the manual version. The Element should be frugal with fuel compared to a thirsty SUV, as mileage ratings range from 20 mpg city/23 mpg highway for an AWD with manual to 21 city/25 highway for a FWD with the automatic. Initially, the AWD Elements will only be available with the automatic, with the manual coming on-line in mid-2003.

Holding up the Element are MacPherson struts in front with a double wishbone setup at the rear. Goodyear Wrangler 215/70R16 HPs are fitted to the Element, and with firmer suspension calibrations and a wider track than the CR-V, the Element has sportier handling than its brother — pretty impressive when one considers that the CR-V is certainly no slouch in that department.

Zippering through a variety of tight turns, we were amazed by the lack of body roll exhibited by such a tall vehicle. Adding to the driving enjoyment is a steering system endowed with a meaty feel to the wheel and quick response. At one point, we had to turn around, expecting to perform a three-point turn, but thanks to the Element's tight turning radius, all we had to do was pull a U-ee. Heading down to the beach, we subjected the Element to severely broken pavement which was absorbed without so much as a shudder from the Honda nor gritted teeth from the passengers.

Adhering to Honda's "keep it simple" (hey, wasn't that its tagline in the 1970s?) philosophy, the Element will be available in just two trim levels, base DX and loaded EX. The DX is indeed pretty basic. Although things like power windows and door locks and height adjustment for the driver seat are standard; air conditioning and a stereo are not. Go with an EX and not only are air conditioning and a stereo standard (a thumpin' 270-watt AM/FM/CD system with a subwoofer and MP3 player input jack), but cruise control, alloy wheels, power mirrors, the aforementioned ABS and seatback bungee cords are also thrown in. Side airbags are optional on the EX. Not surprisingly, Honda expects no less than 80 percent of Elements sold to be the EX versions. Pricing will be friendly toward the youngsters that the Element is aimed at, ranging from around \$16,000 for a strippo DX to around \$22,000 for a loaded EX.

Following hot on the heels of its redesigned CR-V and new class-leading Pilot SUV, Honda's new Element, with its combination of fun, frugality and functionality, should give the company yet another vehicle that will shred in its segment.

See all the Ratings: [2003 Honda Element DX Fwd 4dr SUV \(2.4L 4cyl 5M\) Road Test Scoreboard](#)



[\(Enlarge photo\)](#)

Color-keyed to the exterior, the dash offers nothing extraneous, just simple, easy-to-use controls and gauges. (Photo courtesy of American Honda Motor Company, Inc.)

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