



***By Steve Schaefer***

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Honda's pickup truck has a great name. Ridgeline conjures up images of the open country, a dirt road and a rugged outdoor lifestyle. From a company that hasn't sold a truck in the U.S. before, the Ridgeline is a little different.

The Ridgeline holds five people easily — and they will be comfortable. That's because, unlike your typical pickup, the Ridgeline is built as a unit body, rather than a body on a separate frame. It also has four-wheel independent suspension and front and rear stabilizer bars, which contribute to a smooth and comfortable ride.

You can tell there's something different when you look at the Ridgeline and see no division between the four-door cab and the five-foot bed. It's all integrated into one chunky piece. It may be all macho and blunt up front, but the sides taper back more gracefully than those on your regular truck, too.

The truck bed, protected by a steel-reinforced composite liner, offers a two-way tailgate that drops down or swings to the side — something from the old Ford station wagons. And even more exciting — there's a lockable 8.5-cubic-foot trunk built right into the bed — so you can stash things safely away from prying eyes. That's always been the downside of a pickup — no significant hidden storage space.

Honda gives the Ridgeline a strong 3.5-liter V6 that puts out 250 horsepower and 247 lb.-ft. of torque through a five-speed automatic transmission. I did not get to haul anything in the bed, so I can't vouch for how that affects performance, but the V6 seemed to move the 4,500-pound vehicle down the road with alacrity if not exactly daintiness. Honda claims 1,100 pounds of payload and towing ability comparable to the pickup market leaders.

## Ridgeline Stands as One Single Solid Unit

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The EPA's fuel economy numbers are 15 City, 21 Highway and 17 Average. I accumulated 16.1 mpg during my time with the truck, about right figuring on a lot of in-town (not dirt road) motoring. The EPA Green Vehicle Guide numbers are 6 for Air Pollution — pretty good — and 2 for Greenhouse Gas — dismal. This vehicle is not the poster child for Honda's Blue Skies for our Children initiative, that's for sure.



Inside, the rugged, no-nonsense mood of a truck prevails, but it features bold squared-ring door pulls with a grippy inside surface. There's a satisfying rectangular feel overall, with nicely bull-nosed edges. The center console offers loads of space and hidden storage, and slides forward to create more.

The "above it all" feeling of driving a pickup is part of the Ridgeline experience, as it should be. The truck stands less than two inches short of six feet — tall for a vehicle — but it's not hard to step in and out.

The rear seat lower cushion folds up, so you can carry a substantial amount inside the truck, for example, your mountain bike (with the front tire removed). The back window slides open with the push of a button.

You can buy the Ridgeline in four levels: RT, Sport, RTS and RTL. The equipment levels move up as you might expect, with, for example, a move from steel to alloy wheels between the RT and RTS and leather seating in the top-level RTL (and numerous other upgrades). The Sport is a new model this year. My Crystal Black Pearl Sport tester showed this off, with black 18" alloy wheels, black honeycomb grille with black surround and black headlight and taillight housings. Detect a theme here? While this truck, with its all-wheel drive, would gladly drive on a mountain road, you may not want to get the black paint too dusty.

Prices start at \$30,180 for the RT and top out at \$38,110 for the RTL with navigation system. My Sport came to \$30,925 (all prices include shipping).

So, who's choosing the Ridgeline over the perennially top-selling Ford F-150, Chevy Silverado or Ram 1500? It turns out that despite its obviously Japanese company name, the Ridgeline is substantially American, assembled in Lincoln, Alabama. It contains 70 percent North American parts, including the engine and transmission. Most Civics and Accords for American consumption are built in the U.S. these days as well; Honda opened the first U.S. plant owned by a Japanese manufacturer 30 years ago in Marysville, Ohio.

But despite the Ridgeline's virtues and suitability to the task, are pickup buyers still wedded to owning one of the American big three? How is this truck playing in the American heartland and rural areas of the U.S.? Satisfied Civic owners may step up to an Accord — or an Acura — but it seems that Ridgeline buyers will likely come from people who test drive the truck and appreciate its comfort and features — and don't care what the neighbors think.