

Cars for Dogs: 2009 Honda Element

Editor of Auto Restorer magazine gives the scoop on the best new cars for dog owners.

By Ted Kade

You know there's a good trend brewing in the automotive business when a major player like Honda builds a dog-friendly prototype of its already practical Element crossover. Among the canine components likely to be included in the production model are a cushioned pet bed in the cargo area; pet restraint systems; a cargo-area ramp that stores under the pet bed; a rear ventilation fan; rubber floor mats with a bone pattern; a spill-resistant water bowl; and exterior emblems that identify it as a dog-friendly vehicle.

Even without the addition of these special Fido features, however, the Element deserves to be on a dog owner's short list. For starters, the 2009 Element has a new grille, front bumper, and hood, restyled front fenders with metal in place of composite material, and new headlight and taillight configurations.

The Element's squared-off design translates into nearly 75 cubic feet of cargo volume with the rear seats removed, comparable to a mid-size SUV. Other practical considerations: The LX and EX models come with moisture-resistant seat fabric and a liquid-resistant utility floor designed for quick wipe downs, both of which can come in handy when transporting four-legged friends.

Then there's the side entrance configuration: The Element's side doors are a "clamshell" design — the rear door opens backward with no center post — so entering the vehicle is easier, whether going in on two or four feet. A mild warning: You have to open the front door before you can open the rear door, and that tends to annoy some people.

Before you head over to your Honda dealer for a test drive, here are a few other things to keep in mind: Cargo area: In addition to 75 cubic feet of space, there's a cargo-area light, four tie-down anchors, two hooks, and a rear 12-volt power outlet on the EX and SC models.

Safety: The Element received the top-level five-star rating for front and side impact protection from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, but a three-star rating for rollover protection. There are front and side airbags for the front seats and side airbags for the second row.

The basics: Power comes from a 4-cylinder 166 horsepower engine. Five-speed manual and automatic transmissions are available, and stopping power comes from ventilated front and solid rear disc brakes. Four-wheel-drive is available, and towing capacity is 1,500 pounds.

Pricing starts at \$20,175.

Ted Kade is the editor of Auto Restorer magazine.