

A close run

The Honda CR-V and the Mitsubishi Outlander come together for a vigorous test of performance, says **Ouseph Chacko**

HOT WHEELS

The Honda CR-V has dominated the niche small SUV segment but now Hindustan Motors (HM) with Mitsubishi wants to enter the fray with the Outlander as its ticket. With 2.4-litre petrol engines and almost-identical power outputs, four-wheel drive, five seats with high driving positions, lots of equipment and price-tags that are only Rs 1 lakh apart, a fight between these two was just waiting to happen.



STYLE FILE

While the Outlander follows a conventional SUV template, Honda has deliberately made the CR-V look more car-like, the intention being to state its on-road rather than off-road credentials. In fact, the CR-V doesn't really look like an SUV.

The Outlander is clearly the better looking of the two. The proportions are spot-on and there are lots of neat touches that make the Mitsubishi stand out.

Like the CR-V, the Outlander gets electronically-controlled real-time four-wheel drive. Both are built on car platforms and have fully independent suspensions. In the front, both use MacPherson struts but the Outlander has an added brace, proof that it's the more serious off-roader.

INSIDE STORY



While the CR-V's interiors are finished in beige and black, the Outlander is all black with a few splashes of silver thrown in (you can order the interiors in beige too). But the design itself is a bit bland and doesn't have the Honda CR-V's flair.

Climb into the Outlander's driver's seat straight after the CR-V and you'll notice the dashboard is much higher and though forward visibility is good, it isn't as good as the CR-V. The front seats, however, are really comfortable for big-built people. They're well bolstered and very comfortable, more so than in the CR-V.

In the rear, the CR-V triumphs. The seats are more supportive and the few extra inches of space make it feel that much more spacious. While both cabins provide a lot of utility, the CR-V makes more intelligent use of space.

UNDER THE HOOD

Both the Outlander and CR-V come with twin-cam 2.4-litre engines producing similar power and torque. However, the Mitsubishi's buzzy CVT transmission doesn't allow it to achieve its full potential. Keep your foot mashed on the throttle, and the electronics and the CVT will figure out how to get you to 100kph in the least time, which is 11.4 seconds.

The Outlander is more fun to drive in manual mode by simply tugging on those beautiful paddleshifts. What amazed us were the lightning-quick shifts both up and down through the range. However, the downside is that the engine sounds thrashy when you extend it and in terms of refinement, it's nowhere near as smooth as the CR-V's motor when you go past 4000rpm. The Outlander is a pretty good highway cruiser and canters effortlessly at high speed.

The CR-V's i-VTEC engine is every bit the Honda engine you expect it to be — smooth, refined and very rev-happy. The CR-V uses a five-speed conventional auto, but it's best to switch to manual mode when you want to make serious progress. 0-100kph comes up in 10.5 seconds and that's by manually shifting the stubby gear lever. The strong top end means that the CR-V is a great highway tool and the tall gearing allows you to cruise all day without any fuss.

DRIVER'S DEAL

Based on the current Lancer's chassis, one can expect the Outlander to have tidy dynamics. The steering is a delight, requiring little effort yet providing loads of feel and weighting up perfectly at speed with little body roll. This makes it easy to attack corners with enthusiasm. The ride is pretty good and quite pliant at low speeds and this works well on Mumbai's bad roads that are soaked up quite effortlessly. On the highway, the Outlander's ride doesn't deteriorate and gives a decent sense of security at three-digit speeds.

The CR-V is a brilliant handler in its own right. Though the steering feels like it lacks consistency and is not as evenly weighted as the Outlander, the low-slung mechanicals give it such a planted feel that it can overtake many saloons. When it comes to ride quality, the CR-V falls a bit short of the Outlander.

Large petrol engines mated to automatic gearboxes don't bode well for fuel economy and both the Outlander and CR-V are heavy drinkers. There's not much to choose between the two with the Outlander giving 7.2kpl in our city cycle to the CR-V's 7.1kpl. On the highway, using manual mode on both vehicles, the Outlander was more fuel-efficient returning 9.7 kpl to the CR-V's 9.4kpl.

FINAL VERDICT

Both these SUVs are so different, yet so evenly matched that it's hard to choose between them. The Outlander is a great package. It's got the looks, perfect road manners and the pedigree. It's marginally cheaper too. However, there are a few chinks in its armour. It doesn't feel as refined as the CR-V and the cabin quality isn't as good either.

The CR-V in comparison is an SUV that truly thinks it's a car, which is what most owners want. True, the styling is contentious and it is not as accomplished dynamically. However, the sweet engine, clever interiors and overall feel-good factor seal it for the CR-V, but only just.