

The big fight

Honda CR-V and Mitsubishi Outlander are so different, yet so evenly matched that it's hard to choose between them, says Ouseph Chacko

The traditional SUV has a strong road presence, loads of space and a diesel engine. However, there is a niche market for smaller petrol-engined SUVs whose easy-to-drive nature and car-like feel is what attracts buyers.

The Honda CR-V has dominated this niche segment but now Hindustan Motors (HM) along with Mitsubishi plans to enter the fray and the Outlander is its ticket. A look at the spec sheet reveals that the Outlander and CR-V have a lot in common. Petrol engines (2.4 litre) with 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 competition between two was inevitable.



Design and engineering

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 look much of an SUV. The tailgate is not side-hinged and opens upwards like a hatchback. The spare wheel too sits under the body. The curved D-pillar is meant to give the CR-V a coupé-like look to complement its relatively low-slung stance.



The Outlander is clearly the better looking of the two. Though it could do with more visual drama, the proportions are spot-on and there are lots of neat touches that make the Mitsubishi stand out. The Outlander's nose has appealing elements. The two-part grille, the shapely headlamps, and big silver skid plate give it an impressive presence in other cars' rearview mirrors. The LED lights at the rear are stunning and grab your attention. Like the CR-V, the Outlander gets electronically-controlled real-time four-wheel drive. In addition, it has a lockable centre differential (that ensures a 50:50 power split between the front and rear axles). There's a two-wheel-drive only mode you can opt for if you want fuel economy.



The CR-V has a full-time four-wheel-drive system, but no lockable differentials, which limits its off-road ability.

Both these SUVs have fully independent suspensions. In the front, both use McPherson struts but the Outlander has an added brace, further proof that the Outlander is the more serious off-roader. At the rear, the CR-V uses a double wishbone arrangement while the Outlander has a multi-link set up.

Interiors



The interiors are quite different too. 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 though). The dials are sporty, the three-spoke steering is nice to hold, and the red-lit displays look good. However, the design itself is a bit bland and doesn't have the flair of the CR-V's dash. The quality is pretty good with excellent fit and finish and the switches and controls feel nice and solid. But for a Rs 20 lakh-plus vehicle, the plastics don't feel rich and should have had a softer touch.

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 comfortable for people with a large build. They are well bolstered and comfortable, more so than the CR-V.

In the rear, the CR-V trumps. The seats are more supportive and the few extra inches of space make it feel that much more spacious. Both cars are pretty well-equipped — the Outlander's nine-speaker Rockford Fosgate system is a cut above the CR-V's simpler unit. The Outlander has a keyless system but misses out on dual-zone climate control.

The luggage area in both cars is good and the rear seats flip and fold to liberate more space. The CR-V has a hard parcel shelf in the boot while the Outlander makes do with a foldable soft luggage cover. The Outlander's split tailgate is useful and one of the most practical bits of the car.

Engine and performance



Both the Outlander and CR-V come with twin-cam 2.4-litre engines producing similar power and torque. Mitsubishi's MIVEC (Mitsubishi Innovative Valve-timing Electronic Control) engine is an all-alloy unit and a good performer by itself but the buzzy CVT transmission doesn't allow it to achieve its full potential. To get the best out of the Outlander, you have to leave it in 'D' and keep your foot mashed on the throttle. The electronics and the CVT will figure out how to get you to 100kph in the least time, which is 11.4 seconds. Still, the CR-V, despite its 7bhp disadvantage, beats it to the 100kph mark.

The Outlander is more fun to drive in manual mode by simply tugging on those beautiful paddle shifts. Though a CVT has no fixed gear ratios, the six 'gears' are great to play around with. What amazed us were the lightning-quick shifts both up and down through the range. The downside is that the engine sounds trashy 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 CR-V's i-VTEC engine is every bit the Honda engine you expect it to be. Smooth, refined and rev-happy. It lacks the responsiveness of the Outlander's MIVEC at low speeds and this can be a bit frustrating but once you cross 4000rpm the engine doesn't want to stop. It's best to switch to manual mode when you want to make serious progress though, with 0-100kph coming up in 10.5 seconds.

Ride and handling

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. The ride is pretty good and quite pliant at low speeds and this works well on Mumbai's bad roads which 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. The steering feel lacks consistency and is not as evenly weighted as the Outlander but the low-slung mechanicals give it such a planted feel that makes it outcorner many saloons. The manner in which the CR-V digs in and goes around corners is breathtaking. Seeing how tall it is, it's not supposed to be so corner-happy but it is. When it comes to ride quality, the CR-V falls a bit short of the Outlander.

The Honda's suspension has a harder edge at low speed and sharper vertical movements that make you aware of the surface below. However, with speed, the ride quality dramatically improves and very few bumps throw it off-line.

Fuel economy

Large petrol engines mated to automatic gearboxes doesn'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. Given the weight and size of these cars, we didn't expect better figures. So be prepared for some high fuel bills.

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.