

1988 Honda Prelude 4WS SI

by Nathan Dana

I first noticed that the third generation Prelude was an extremely common sight in NZ when it made the news as the only real evidence in a murder investigation in Christchurch. The police wanted everyone with a white Prelude to come in for questioning. Thing is, in NZ, that's like saying we found a red hair and could all redheads provide a hair sample.

But let's throw its common place amongst New Zealand's Japanese imports aside for a short period and get down to what kind of car it really is.

The third generation Prelude was made from 1986 to 1990, and was truly Honda's tour de force for the era. In 1986 it was the most powerful car in Honda's line up with a 2L DOHC 16V fuel injected engine and 135hp along with a solid wallop of torque.

Low profile (for the era) 195/60/14 tires were wrapped around 14" alloys. Our tester had some rather cheap looking aftermarket wheels and a motley crew of varying tires, admittedly not optimal for testing.

The interior is straight forward, and quite driver oriented, although sitting a bit closer to the ground would have been welcomed. The seats are quite adjustable with both a lumbar support and a unique pump that inflates the side bolsters, making them quite adaptable. On long drives they proved comfortable, and have held up well to 18 years of service.

But enough about the specs and details of how it all works, how does it drive? Glad you asked. This particular example has certainly seen better days, with the first clue being that the steering wheel has an odd detachment on center, it wobbles about a centimeter in either direction as if its not connected at all, we believe this to be down to the 4 wheel steering system. The power steering is on the over assisted side, again owing to the 4WS that has to send power to a rear rack to turn the rears a few degrees.

The 4WS does assist in high speed maneuvering, and adds the ability

to tighten the turning radius at low speeds (you can even see it at work from the outside). Ultimately though we feel the system is more trouble than its worth, really an experimental gimmick of the era. All major Japanese manufacturers came out with a similar system in the 80s. It does little more than add weight and decrease steering feel. Thankfully Honda did make an SI without 4WS, which would be what we would track down.

The suspension is clearly in good order and provides a very acceptable ride along with sporty handling. Up to about six tenths it is well sorted and encouraging, with little body roll, perfectly suited to spirited driving on open highways. After that it starts to go downhill, although this in truth has to be largely blamed on the mediocre tires, which provide little grip when really pushing. With some higher performance rubber and updated shocks the SI would be much more encouraging near the limit, although even 4WS can't fight the fact that its a front engine, front wheel driver, so ultimate attitude is always going to be plowing nose first into the bushes.

The engine is a bit of an odd one as well. With more recent performance Hondas, we have come to expect a manic high revving delivery thanks to VTEC, but this Prelude does without such technology, just using 16 valves and electronic fuel injection to produce a very smooth power curve. Decent poke is available at surprisingly low revs, able to pull 50km/hr through flat towns in 5th gear and accelerate without real fuss to open road speeds (and well beyond).

When you open her up, there is no real drama, although considerably stronger acceleration is experienced. With a 0-100 time of just over 8 seconds, the SI was a seriously quick sports coupe in its day, and can more than keep up with today's traffic. The power band though is dominated by its smooth delivery, providing a sort of anticlimax to putting your foot to the floor. There is never a real peak to the output, making it better suited to touring than real **Enthusiast** style driving.

There are plenty of decent third generation Preludes out there, so the pickings are good. Base models are equipped with a 2L, but in SOHC form producing 110hp. They are still decently quick, although most are equipped with automatics, something we never encourage. The SI is available for very little extra cash and is definitely the pick of the lot, with much improved braking (discs all around) and a much tighter suspension.

Rust is rarely an issue, and reliability is typical Honda, meaning very good. Unlike the Civic and Integra, the Prelude has less aftermarket support, especially in the engine compartment. This in turn reduces interest among the standard import car nut, reducing purchase costs (always a good thing).

A clean non-4WS SI with under 150,000kms on it should be going for around \$2k, a right bargain so long as you can deal with the common place image, and are looking for a solid compromise between a fun driving experience, a reasonably practical and reliable car and a good long distance runner. 🇯🇵



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Drivetrain	
Engine	inline 4, DOHC, 16v
Layout	front engine, front drive
Capacity	1.958 litres
Bore/Stroke	81.0mm/95.0mm
Compression	10.5:1
Power	111kw @ 6000 rpm
Torque	180nm @ 5500 rpm
Redline/Cut	6500rpm
Transmission	5 speed manual
Gear Ratios	3.16/1.86/1.26/0.94/0.79
Diff Ratio	4.06



Chassis	
L/W/H	4460/1695/1295mm
Wheelbase	2562mm
Front/rear track	1480/1470mm
Weight	1175kg
Suspension	Independent with double wishbone, coil spring and stabilizer
Brakes	Discs
Tyres	195/60 VR 14
Wheels	14x6

Speed	
Power to Weight	10.6kg per kw
Acceleration	0-50km/h: 3.2sec
	0-100km/h: 8.2sec
	1/4 mile: 16.2sec @ 165km/h
Top Speed	211km/h
Verdict	🇯🇵🇯🇵🇯🇵🇯🇵
The Good	Comfortable Daily Driver, Torquey Motor
The Bad	Commonplace, doesn't encourage studying limits.

