

DRIVEN 1991 Nissan Figaro



The Figaro was only ever offered in four colours, although pink is a popular respray option with importers and UK fans.

RIGHT on time

Nissan went back to the future 25 years ago, serving up a tasty cocktail of 1950s charm and modern reliability that's still being copied today

WORDS: David Simister PHOTOGRAPHY: Richard Gunn

Whoever's presenting *Time Team* in a thousand years' time is going to have a field day if they unearth a Nissan Figaro from the long-buried remains of a 21st century car park.

The Nissan Figaro does have this wonderful potential to be the Pitdownton Man of motoring, utterly baffling experts of the future with its ability to moon at the conventions of automotive history. The pale colour shades and lashings of chrome suggest the period 1950s charm of a Morris Isis, but they're also fitted with one of those newfangled devices from the 1980s, capable of swallowing something called a CD and making music out of it. What will automotive archaeologists make of it?

There's definitely a feeling of temporal displacement when you first take the wheel of this diminutive two-door slice of Japanese retro styling. While the spindly three-spoke affair is made of plastic, you'd swear from its cream hue and smoothness that you were grasping a sliver of Bakelite.

The attention to detail is fantastic in here. Step into one from a Wolsley 15/50 and you aren't going to

be fooled – in particular, the plastic air vents give away its modernity – but you can't help admire the lengths Nissan's designers have gone to. The Roman fonts on the dials and the rings of chrome encircling them definitely have a hint of 1950s Austin about them, while the heater controls and the auxiliary controls are all chrome effect rather than black plastic.

Absolutely every surface you see and touch – from the supportive leather seats to the handbrake lever and the dashboard is colour-coordinated in the same shade of magnolia. Even that CD player, which could so easily have been a 1990s Blaupunkt cheaply grafted into the middle of this period dress party, is in a matching hue.

Yet while the cabin is all about making a statement, you get the feeling that the one-litre four is all about discretion. It doesn't so much rev as hum suggestively, with a lovely smooth delivery that doesn't offer any particularly memorable melodies but majors on being quiet and unobtrusive. It's a rev-happy little thing that delivers all it's got to give at 6000rpm, but as it involves cooing the three-speed auto into kickdown and trading in the polite murmur for a harsher note

you get the feeling it'd rather you didn't. It's much happier being allowed to just cruise around, teaming up with its best friend beneath the bonnet – Nissan's own FK10 turbocharger – to deliver a useful turn of speed at lower revs.

Nor is it the sort of car you can chuck childishly at a corner and expect magical things to happen. Give it a bend and it'll happily chomp at the asphalt right up to the point where it'll understeer gently and suggest you back off a bit, but the steering is too light and over-assisted to win over the press-on hedonists. Rightly so, because it does everything you ask of it but never pretends to be a sports coupé.

Instead your reward is a supple, smooth ride that soaks up the undulations of the road surface, the MacPherson struts and four-link front and rear coil springs doing a wonderful job of insulating you from all but the worst of the bumps. Combine that with an airy interior and the leather-lined seats and you end up with a very comfy driving environment.

It's only when you pull over and step out that you get to the Figaro's real party trick – the way it looks. It really is hard to believe that underneath this Nissan's

Emerald Green paintwork are the vital organs of that square-rigged supermarket chariot of the later 1980s, the K10-generation Micra. Its gentle curves, the chunky chrome effect door handles and those big, oval door mirrors could just as easily have come off a new Mini Cooper, which is where the Figaro really leaves its mark on history.

Despite bearing a passing resemblance to the Datsun Fairlady models of the early 1960s and being fitted with a radiator grille that could have been swiped straight off a Standard Ensign, the Figaro's blend of nostalgia, bombproof reliability and intuitively easy controls make it seem far younger than it is. It feels like it belongs outside the same gyms and coffee shops that the reinvented Fiat 500 frequents, yet it's 25 years old. The Figaro's success in Japan and the appetite we Brits had for importing it has helped spur other throwback offerings.

The Figaro marks the point where the modern car world woke up from a two-decade slumber of black plastic bumpers and straight lines, and remembered how wonderful cars used to be.

For that, you can't help but love it.

FIGGY BIRTHDAY The Figaro Owners Club is hoping to hold the largest ever gathering of Figaros at a special 25th anniversary party weekend at Wroxall Abbey in Warwickshire on 4-5 June. www.figaroownersclub.com

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SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|------------------|---------------------|
| ENGINE | 987cc/4-cyl/OHC |
| POWER | 76bhp@6000rpm |
| TORQUE | 78ft lb@4400rpm |
| MAXIMUM SPEED | 100mph |
| 0-60MPH | 10.7sec |
| FUEL CONSUMPTION | 50-55mpg |
| TRANSMISSION | FWD, three-spd auto |

OIL CAPACITY

| | |
|-----------|------------|
| ■ ENGINE | 5.3 pints |
| ■ GEARBOX | 11.4 pints |
| ■ AXLE | N/A |

OIL GRADE

| | |
|-----------|--------------------|
| ■ ENGINE | Castrol GTX 10w/40 |
| ■ GEARBOX | Castrol Dexron 11 |
| ■ AXLE | N/A |

WHAT TO PAY

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|------------|-------|
| ■ CONCOURS | £6250 |
| ■ NICE | £5000 |
| ■ USABLE | £2500 |
| ■ PROJECT | £1400 |

The Figaro's throwback styling was a huge hit with Japanese buyers, with 250,000 of them entering a lottery to be allocated one.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

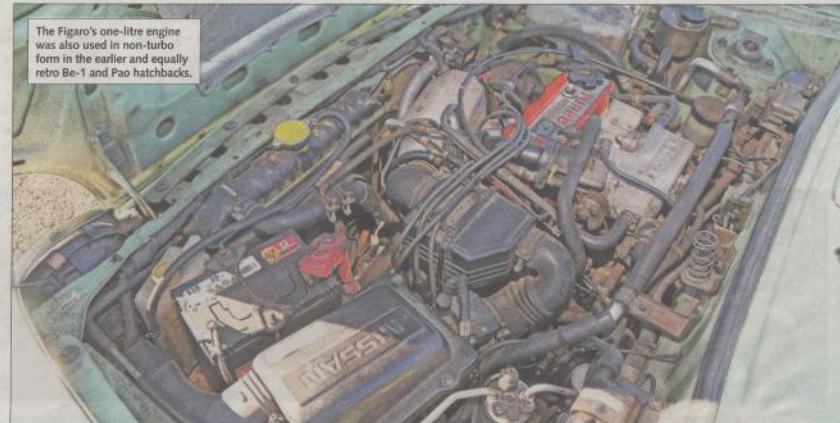
■ Find out whether it's had any sort of rustproofing since it was imported and look for signs of corrosion – particular grot spots to watch out for are the rear wheelarches, the areas around the headlight rings and around the drainholes.

■ Look for evidence that the cambelt has been changed if the car's covered more than 60,000 miles. Keep on eye on the exhaust smoke after start-up – if it's blue, chances are the turbocharger is on the way out.

■ An occasional problem experienced by Figaro owners is only being able to start their cars in Neutral, rather than Park. A poorly adjusted selector cable is normally to blame, but this is relatively easy for a specialist to remedy.

■ Check for knocking noises over uneven road surfaces, which usually point to worn balljoints or tired track rod ends.

■ Watch out for tatty, discoloured trim on the cheapest examples, as the cost of retrimming the leather seats can quickly mount up.



The Figaro's one-litre engine was also used in non-turbo form in the earlier and equally retro Be-1 and Pao hatchbacks.