

NISSAN

## Figaro

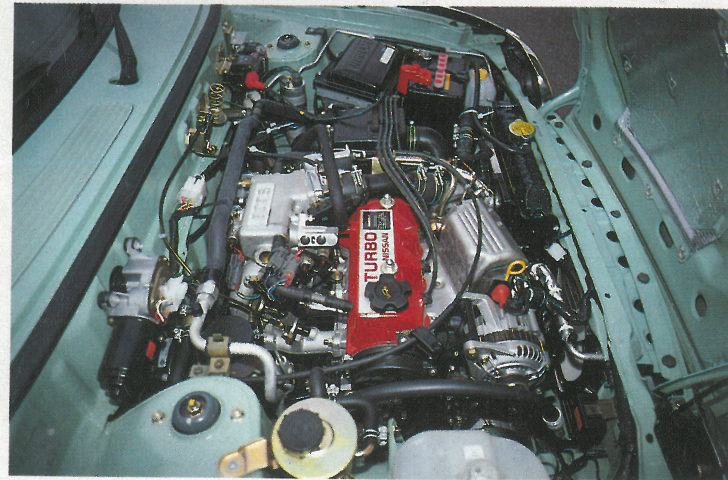
*Nissan claims the Figaro makes no money but is good for its designers. Buyers in Japan are queuing*

THE FIGARO'S STYLING DOESN'T simply eschew contemporary schools, it raises double digits to them. Aerodynamics? Flush surfaces? Wedge profiles? This little aberration knows none of those.

This is not the first time Nissan has startled us with an off-beat, light-hearted design. Its first whimsy was the Be-1, which was, unexpectedly, a huge success with a Japanese public eager for novelty. It spawned a number of other similarly off-beat projects, including the Pao and the S-Cargo of three years ago, and now the Figaro, the third generation of these so-called 'Pike cars'.

The Figaro is an almost comic-opera miniature coupé, a cross between a Peugeot 403 Coupé and a Goggomobil. Under the skin the Figaro has Nissan Micra suspension and power, albeit with turbocharging and 75bhp. The all-alloy sohc eight-valve engine displaces 987cc and generates peak power at 6000rpm, with a maximum of 78lb ft of torque at 4400rpm. These are reasonable figures, but not good enough to give the 1787lb car anything more than a mediocre power-to-weight ratio. Bear in mind that the only transmission available is a three-speed automatic, and, clearly, the Figaro is not going to have anyone shouting about its performance.

Sure enough, despite the turbocharging, the Figaro feels even less lively than the (slightly lighter) Pao that preceded it in this series; overtaking demands considerable forethought. On the credit side, the turbo softens the engine's rough edges, giving reasonable refinement when driving gently. The structure of the body is similarly refined. The twists and creaks of the Be-1 and Pao are history, despite a roof panel that folds from the windscreen header rail to the base of the rear screen. Good body stiffness does not mean a good ride or handling,



even the most uninformed consumer that this is not just another small car. It is something different in an age of conformity.

Another approach to the same defiant ends is to opt for older cars. The difference is that the Figaro lets its drivers have their cake and eat it, too. They get all the anti-conventional style they

though - the Figaro bounces along like a music-hall sing-along.

In fact, its dynamic shortcomings are such that, judged against other small cars, the Figaro barely makes the grade. And judged against other cars that cost as much as its £7500 base price, it fares deplorably. But to evaluate the Figaro in this way is to miss the point. To the tens of thousands of would-be buyers who have entered the lottery from which 20,000 customers will be drawn, the Figaro's appeal lies in what it isn't, rather than in what it is. One look at the white leather interior and the lavish use of chrome on switches, instrument surrounds, steering wheel hub, bumpers and door handles, tells



crave, together with a brand-new and guaranteed drivetrain, plus such mod-cons as electric windows, power steering, optional air-conditioning, and an optional compact-disc stereo that's designed to look as old-fashioned as the rest of the car.

Nissan has said repeatedly that it will not export the Figaro or others in the 'Pike Car' series. Nissan's president Yutaka Kume admits, 'We make no money on these cars. They are intended only to stimulate our designers, and our customers, so we are happy if we only just break even on them.' In any other corporate culture a guaranteed non-profit car would have been squashed long ago. But Nissan knows the benefits of the renewed vitality it has enjoyed by allowing its designers free rein occasionally to turn their cigarette pack doodlings into a reality. And its customers, too, now recognise Nissan as the most free-spirited company in Japan.

by Kevin Radley



Styling is clearly the main talking point. Powertrain is turbocharged Micra eight-valve (centre) with auto transmission. Figaro's interior is very well appointed

Design theme is a throwback, as is the peel-back canvas roof. Nissan plans to build 20,000 examples, but claims to have many more potential buyers