

As fashion statements go, few cars yell as loud as the Nissan Figaro. But is the chic café cruiser as rugged and reliable as its Micra-based running gear would suggest? Ian Cushway finds out.

The Figaro was developed from a concept that appeared at the 1989 Tokyo Motor Show and was made for just one year (1991) to a limited run of just 20,000 units. It's based on Micra running gear but uses a Japanese-only turbocharged version of its K10 engine (the MA10); the bodywork was manufactured by Takada Kogyo, a 'mini-lot' producer in Yokohama.

A few Figaros trickled over as personal imports during the late 1990s, with more appearing after 2001. By then, being 10 years old, they were no longer required to pass the more stringent Single Vehicle Approval (SVA) test, just the standard UK MoT. With the floodgates opened, the cute retro open-top has rocketed in popularity, particularly in flamboyant urban areas such as Brighton.

And that's where we met Figaro expert Ross Davidson from AutoSupplyUK. Ross reckons he's sold over 300 Figaros in the last four years, and puts the current influx down to the snowball effect of their increased presence on our roads and the growing financial burden of owning older cars in Japan. However, he's some useful advice and a caution or two for prospective buyers: "The car represents a purchase of the heart not the head for many people, and they tend to forget that it's 16 years old – that means they have to be more realistic about their expectations."

Ross reckons that the best way to end up with a decent Figaro is to start with a decent Figaro, adding: "There's a big variation in the quality of cars available; there's lots of neglected ones around which haven't been regularly maintained, or have been crash damaged. At the same time genuine, looked-after examples are becoming more difficult to source in Japan, so potential buyers need to know what they are looking at and find a car with evidence that it has been properly serviced."

Finally, a word about parts. Incredibly, most items – including switchgear, hoods and panels – are still available from Nissan. If the parts aren't in stock in the UK or Nissan's European warehouse in Amsterdam, they can be imported direct from Japan. When it comes to regular service items like



filters, plugs and brake sundries, owners can shop around the many factors to get the best deals, although we would always recommend OE quality instead of pattern. It's also worth checking out the specialist Japanese car part suppliers such as Japarts and ADL Blue Print. (Blue Print products are distributed to garages and the public via regional distributors). What's more, being a niche model, there are lots of specialists able to help sourcing Figaro parts and accessories, and there's even a Figaro specific forum (on AutoSupplyUK's website) offering tips and advice. With all this in mind, we investigated some of the more common Figaro afflictions and cures.

ENGINES

Probably the biggest and potentially most ruinous Figaro failure will involve the turbocharged 987cc powerplant. Driving habits are different in Japan: they tend to do more city-centre pootling, so once cars



hit our shores, they come in for quite a shock – especially if subjected to prolonged, high-speed motorway journeys. What's more, it's a myth that Japanese cars are better maintained. Lots aren't, and this can also cause problems as soon as they arrive here.

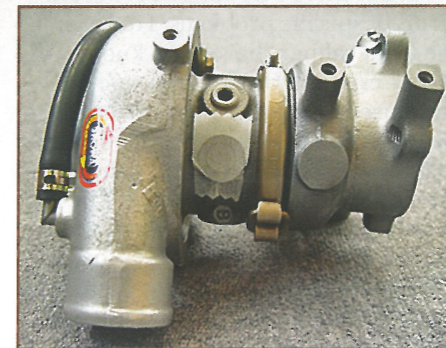
Interestingly, specialist GJ Northall, who hold a vast stock of new Figaro parts, told us that very low-mileage cars are worst, simply because they won't have had the same level of attention.

The root of the problems varies, but the end result is usually the same – a blown engine. An engine rebuild is usually the best solution, and AutoSupplyUK offer an engine-in engine-out service from around £1,600. While a K10 Micra engine will fit, the crankshaft, pistons, valves and cylinder heads are different, so don't even contemplate using it instead.

The most common cause of engine failure is overheating with hose leaks, seepage from the water pump seal, electric fan failure, and leaks from the radiator cap being the most frequent culprits. As always, keeping a close eye on the temperature gauge and coolant bottle level will help prevent problems.

An often talked about complaint with the engine is the rocker shaft bolts, which are prone to coming loose and can result in the shaft snapping or damaging the threads in the alloy head (in which case re-threading is the only answer). As a precaution, it is worth checking that they are tight (13mm) and fitting new lockwashers, using Loctite to secure them.

The original Hitachi turbo became obsolete 10 years ago and cars that have sat on the dockside, have been used very little or which have missed regular maintenance can suffer problems, with failures resulting in white smoke on the over-run. Needless to say, regular oil changes are crucial, so to preserve its lifespan, carry out a filter change and add fresh 10W40



semi-synthetic every 3,000 miles. It takes 2.9 litres, but check the dipstick to get the level spot on. Allowing the engine to idle for a few minutes after a long, fast run will also help keep it in good health.

Many specialists offer a turbo reconditioning service, while a replacement unit from Nissan is £870. Far better is the custom-built Garrett hybrid (using a Garrett unit and parts from the original) from Turbo

Technics, which they sell for £581.63. Fuel pumps are in short supply and cost £360 from Nissan, but GJ Northall have a stock of them at a far more realistic £120.

Finally, because cars arriving here often have little by way of history, it's wise to carry out a cambelt change as a matter

PARTS CHECK:

Oil Filter:

Main dealer £6.45; Figaro Cars £5; Japarts £2.05, Blue Print £2.24

Engine Rebuild:

AutoSupplyUK £1,600; Figaro Cars recon short engine £495, recon cylinder head £395; GJ Northall £1,200

Cambelt:

Main dealer £23.64; Japarts £20.65

Water Pump:

Main dealer £35.49; Japarts £38.27; Figaro Cars £26

Turbo:

Main dealer £869.23; Figaro Cars £600 (recon); Turbo Technics £581.63; GJ Northall £690

Service Kit:

Figaro Cars £25

of course. The recommended Nissan interval is 60,000 miles. The expert advice here is to replace the tensioner and the water pump at the same time.

GEARBOXES

The Figaro employs a three-speed auto gearbox, which has proved reasonably reliable. However, the small plastic gear selector bush can wear over time, making selecting gears problematic – especially getting it into park. The bush is only £1.28 from Nissan. If the 'box does fail, Figaro Cars can supply a reconditioned unit for £400.



PARTS CHECK:

Reconditioned auto gearbox:
Figaro Cars £400;
GJ Northall £800

SUSPENSION/STEERING

Almost without exception, Figaros arriving here will still have their original rear shock absorbers and this can make the ride very stodgy. New items are £69.68 each from Nissan, but being interchangeable with the Micra, there's scope to get them much cheaper from factors.

The power steering rack has also been known to leak, and there's a seal kit offered by many specialists for around £30. Alternatively, Figaro Cars offer a reconditioned rack from £220 (compared to the Nissan price of near £1,000), but can also carry out repairs *in situ*.

PARTS CHECK:

Rear Shock Absorbers:
Main dealer £69.68 ea;
Figaro Cars £25 ea

Track Rod End:

Main dealer £36.99; Japarts £18.42;
AutoSupplyUK £14.38,
Blue Print £30.19

ELECTRICS

Generally, Figaro electrics are pretty bombproof, although you might be unlucky enough to experience the occasional glitch with a switch (most of which are still available). Some relays and solenoids are obsolete, but if you get stuck, GJ Northall have a good

