

It's selling like hot cakes in Japan at the moment, and its retrospective styling is carefully executed; but is the Nissan Figaro a pretentious fake or a practical funster? Peter Nunn reports from Tokyo

ROGUE OR VOGUE?



You can't be neutral about the Figaro, Nissan's brand new, Micra-based 'retro' car that seeks to recreate classic Franco-Italian styling of the forties and fifties. You either love it or hate it.

For some, the Figaro is cute, a bit of innocent fun. Different too, and reminiscent, perhaps, of something by Pininfarina or, maybe, Chapron. And how clever of Nissan to come up with a car that looks old, but isn't – meaning it won't leak or break down as the originals often did.

On the other side of the fence, there are those who would cheerfully nuke Nissan Motor Co for having the temerity to produce something so contrived and pretentious as this bulbous two-plus-two – *and actually put it on sale*. Far away, that sound you hear is one of purists gnashing their teeth and wringing their hands in despair.

Figaro takes the stage as the latest of Nissan's funny yesterday cars, the line originating with the Be-1 in 1987, thereafter expanding to include the 2CV-inspired S-Cargo van and Pao 'jungle' car. Each one has been a limited edition niche special and, for better or worse, restricted to the Japanese market only.

Nissan's idea with Be-1 was to build a latter-day interpretation of the Mini. Why? Because the small, affordable Mini has always held a special appeal for the Japanese. Also, 'retro', recreating the past using modern hi-tech, is now a popular fascination in Japan.

Some say the real reason for the Be-1 and the cars that followed was to publicise the 'new' Nissan; this once stodgy company is changing – in Japan, that is. Figaro, first displayed as a prototype at the 1989 Tokyo Show, is your humble 1.0-litre Nissan Micra in disguise. But somehow, in the metal, it seems bigger than its modest 147.2in length and 64.2in width suggests. Height is an equally lowline 53.7in.

Dinky it might be, but the Figaro is heavy at 1782lb. To counteract that, Nissan has given the little dear the Japanese market 987cc MA10ET turbo engine, which pushes out 76bhp at 6000rpm and 78lb ft at 4400rpm. This four-cylinder sohc unit then drives the front wheels through a standard, three-speed automatic gearbox.

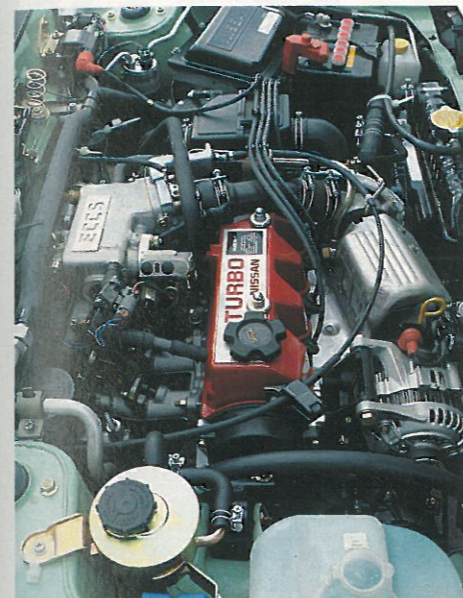
The whimsical two-door Figaro shape combines old with new in a way you hardly expect. Although supposedly at least 40-years old, in one respect the Figaro is one of the most advanced cars you can buy. That's on account of the front wings and lower apron being fashioned from recyclable plastic flex panels, whereas the rest of the body is steel.

If the exterior profile isn't enough to grab your attention, pull open the door and mull



Fabric roof folds away, manually, into a dickey-like hatch; front wings recyclable

YUCHIMORIYA



Nissan Micra 987cc engine sports turbo



'Period' interior hides a CD player



On the road Figaro feels taut, responsive



The Nissan Figaro is a hit with the Tokyo in-crowd despite MX-5-busting price; order book is five times over-subscribed

over the fully colour-coded, white leather 'period' interior, in which white-faced instruments and silver toggle switches feature on the carefully-crafted dashboard. Catch the radio, too: that's also purpose-designed to look old.

Behind the front seats there's a small bench but, due to the limitations of the short 90.6in Micra wheelbase, there's precious little leg-room. Rear headroom is tighter still. Unlike the '89 show car, the white fabric roof of the production Figaro is manual, not electric, folding down into what initially looks like a dickey seat.

Whatever your impressions so far, one thing's for sure. Foot down, the Figaro does go, to the point where its poky turbo engine almost has the power of a normal twin-cam 1600. There's some lag but, on full boost, the Figaro is surprisingly quick.

This is a close-fitting car, well finished and solidly built. With good stability and precision through bends, and a firm-ish ride, it could almost be a sports car.

The Figaro runs with normal Micra strut suspension front and rear, plus power-assisted rack and pinion steering which provides good, but not great, communication with what the front wheels are doing. There's slop in there you could do without.

No such problems with the brakes (vented discs/drums), strong and progressive. Inside, flicking the ornate dashboard switches up and down is fun – and so different from the norm. The 'valve' radio also houses a CD player, which works a treat.

For most Japanese buyers, the fact that the Figaro is quite taut and responsive will probably come as a pleasant surprise. Not that many are likely to buy it because of that, but on account of it being the newest, trendiest and – this week – most sought-after car on the block. Six months on it could be different. Right now, getting hold of a Figaro – and being seen in it – is what counts.

At the Tokyo show, Nissan says it received many flattering comments about the car, especially from young girls in their 20s and men aged over 40. The girls all thought it looked sweet, while the men said it reminded them of some classic car (sic).

For Nissan, that was the encouragement needed to push the button for production; these 'retro' cars have proven good news for profit and corporate PR. The Be-1 created global interest and did roaring trade, despite being limited to just 10,000 units. It's now regarded as a minor classic.

To some in Japan, a car like the Figaro will be an irresistible attraction, despite the fact that, at ¥1.87 million (say £7200), it costs more than a Maxda MX-5! So it's not a bargain.

Only 20,000 will be built (and sold by lottery) but, get this, one month after its February debut, Nissan's order book has already been filled to overflowing – almost five times over.

There are sound commercial reasons for producing the Figaro. Japan never produced a car like this in the past (although some feel the Subaru 360 is in the same ballpark) so, for some Japanese, the Figaro represents something new, hard though that may be for westerners to conceive.

A piece of harmless amusement or a deceitful, ostentatious fake? When it comes down to it, the Figaro is a bit of both.