

# AUTO CAR

**Road test:  
Vauxhall VX4/90**

**Datsun 240Z –  
Long-term test**

**How we choose  
our long-term  
test-cars**



## JAPANESE CARS NUMBER





## Brief Test

**HONDA**

Z

If you make a mini-sized car with some of the virtues that go with such devices — like good manoeuvrability, good roadholding, fair performance and great nimbleness in tight corners — then it seems sensible to capitalise on those advantages and turn out a sportingly bodied version which may appeal to the more enterprising young driver. Thanks to the enormous success of the Mini-Cooper and its derivatives in its time, BLMC never had to bother about any special-bodied Mini, though one feels that it might have been a good idea. Four years after the birth of their original "mini" (the N360), Honda produced the Z coupé at the 1970 Tokyo Show.

Various versions using the 354 c.c. engine are available in Japan, but the model imported here since May is the largest-engined, 599 c.c. one. As on the saloon the engine is an air-cooled vertical twin (74 x 69.6mm bore and stroke) with a chain-driven single overhead camshaft; it produces a claimed 32bhp (DIN) at 6,000 rpm with 32 lb ft maximum torque at 4,000 rpm. Set transversely across the front of the car, it drives the front wheels through a 4-speed dog-clutch (and therefore non-synchromesh) gearbox operated by a slightly curious swinging gearlever hung from the dashboard. Suspension is coil-spring MacPherson strut independent in front and leaf-spring dead axle at the back, with rack and pinion steering and servo-assisted disc-drum brakes. The car weighs 11½cwt at the kerb, with 65 per cent of that on the front wheels. You can buy one for £719 including purchase tax.

Following a long term test of an early N600 in 1969 (see *Autocar* of 31 July 1969) we became very familiar with the Honda mini breed. Tests of subsequent models showed

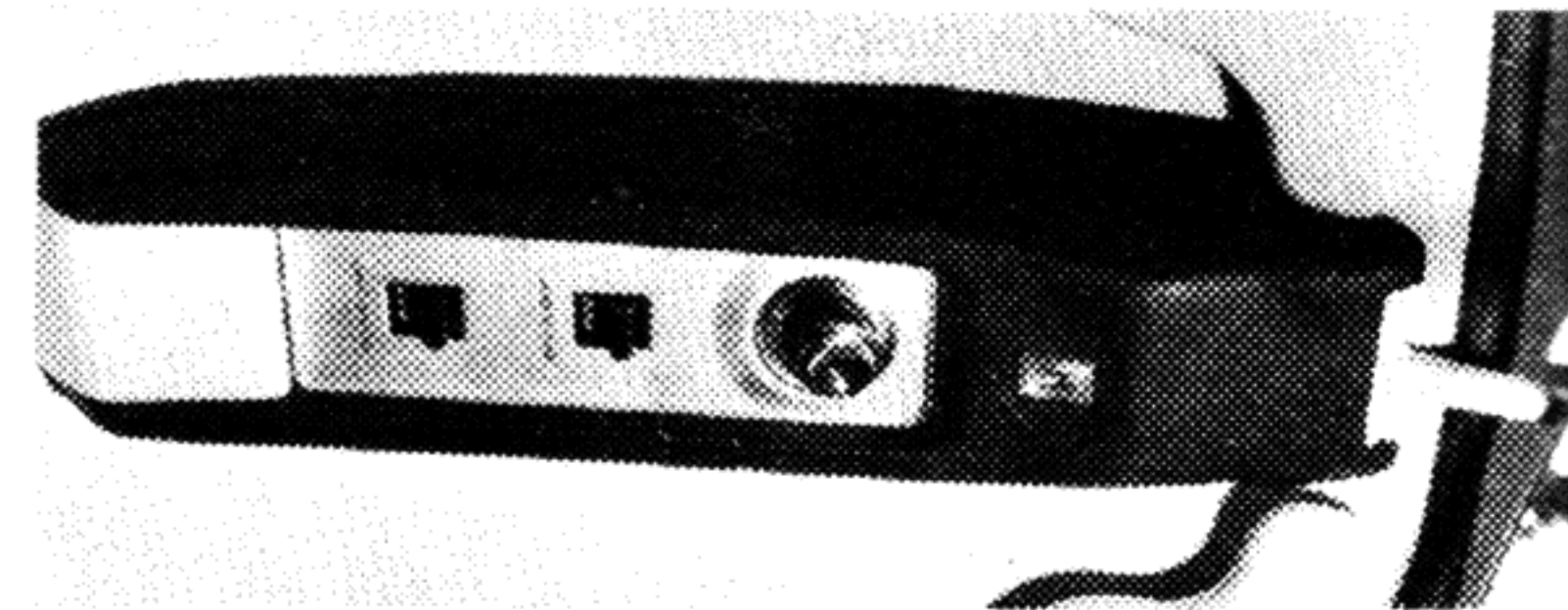
that Honda had done quite a lot of work on this highly unusual little machine, making it rather less noisy, appreciably better braked and equipping it somewhat more comprehensively. One piece of equipment we didn't have on our own N600 was a rev counter. One drove the car by ear and feel, changing gear when in a hurry a little time before the delivery of power fell off. As with that first car, driving the Honda Z the same way finds one happily revving to nearly 7,500 rpm. "Happily" is here a relative term. The engine is still pretty noisy by any standards, but it does not sound any more overworked at 7,500 rpm than it does at any speed above 2,500 rpm. The point is that Honda have for some time fitted a rev counter to these cars, and there is a red line at 6,000 rpm. In spite of earnest efforts in the interests of science to see if our first N600 would blow up by driving it near-continuously flat-out over several hundred miles of *autobahn*, the car merely went slightly faster over the subsequent 6,000 miles. Presumably this 6,000 limit is applied in the interests of long life; we assumed it to be a continuous speed limit, and for the performance tests revved the engine briefly to 7,400 rpm with no apparent ill effects. Changing gear at 6,000 rpm put nearly 5sec on the 0-60 time.

That the makers must have wondered about longevity is further suggested by the claimed power output, which is 10 bhp less than the original. Latter-day N600s are better equipped and correspondingly heavier; the Z is nearly 1cwt stouter than the Road Test N600, so that performance is not so good. It is nevertheless more than adequate for most traffic situations, accelerating from a standing start (Road Test N600 figures in brackets) to



Top: In spite of its high-feeling build, cornering is one of the Z coupé's strong points

Above: Distinctive shape; the small side windows, diminishing glass towards the rear and the heavy quarter panel limit side vision



Above, detail: One excellent feature is the roof console of interior and map lamp switches

Left: The heavily bordered rear window lifts to give access to a useful amount of station-wagon style space



50mph in 15.9sec (13.0), 60 in 24.8 (18.3) and 70 in 55.7 (28.8).

The engine is surprisingly flexible for such a small unit. Provided that one is gentle with the throttle, one can accelerate away from 1,000 rpm in top (theoretically 12.9 mph) through a patch of juddering at 1,200 which ceases at 1,300; occasionally the engine is afflicted with a noticeable animal cough in its carburettor from low rpm, especially if one flattens the pedal too early. Chirruping along in town in a high gear, it proceeds with a quite subdued voice, and pulling nicely. Out of town you can cruise tolerably comfortably at up to 3,800 rpm on the flat — 75 mph in top — though about 65 to 70 is more reasonable. The engine is certainly the noisiest thing about the car, though it is not unbearable; from 4,000 rpm onwards you are aware that a small pair of pistons are having to work for their living. However, only at 7,000 rpm does a new, hard note creep in, suggesting hard but still satisfactory work.

One gets used to the gearchange. Only with very exceptional care, an untimely wait and a bit of luck will you avoid a grunt as you put it into gear from rest. You must wait too in order to make a quiet clean upward change; the revs fall quite slowly so one may as well use the time up by double de-clutching. This is good practice, and ensures a nice change. A driver who has never been taught to double de-clutch will be able to manage a sort of change down, but it is infinitely better to change down properly, not at all difficult, and for the conscientious driver very enjoyable.

Fuel economy is more than usually dependent on the man on top of the accelerator. Hard use will drop the figure to somewhere around our overall one of 32.9

mpg (during performance testing at MIRA we recorded only 25 mpg, but this is not typical). A mixture of gentle commuting and open road driving returned over 44 mpg, and with appropriate techniques even better figures are possible.

The coupé steers well, though we have reservations about its straight-line stability which is not what one expects from a front-wheel-drive car, and its straight-running under heavy braking; even though the brakes are pulling up evenly, the car tends to wander indeterminately, probably due to altered castor effects. It takes a little while to screw oneself up to any really fast cornering, as the somewhat high and narrow build makes it feel a bit topplish. In fact, even on the Japanese made Firestone Champion radial-ply tyres fitted to the test car, roadholding is remarkably good; some European tyres would certainly improve the car's good grip still further. Both initially and ultimately it understeers notably of course, and will tuck in somewhat when you lift off. Sidewind stability is poor and the combination of a short wheelbase, MacPherson strut front suspension and a beam back axle sitting on leaf springs of marked curvature which are front-pivoted (with shackles at the back) — thereby inducing slight roll oversteer — makes the car pretty lively on a bumpy road. One must be careful if using the quite useful load space at the back to any great extent; a big rear load such as a couple of suitcases can produce a noticeable swing on corners. Ride is bouncy and pretty firm. The brakes work very well and are a notable improvement on the first N600.

Driving position and seats are generally very good for such a little car, although a six-foot driver usually finds that he has to lean his

knee hard on the gearlever when starting to de-clutch for a change down out of top. One could also do with some decent space for one's clutch foot, though after a while one becomes used to wriggling it under the pedal when at rest. Naturally, the peculiar shape of the body imposes severe penalties on quarter-rear vision, which after the excellent thin-pillared "greenhouse" of the N600 saloon seems sadly retrograde. One notices this handicap all the more in traffic; the Z coupé is wonderfully nimble in town, by virtue of its size and the ease with which one can poke it into gaps with confidence. The last thing one therefore wants in such a car is poor all-round visibility.

Ventilation with windows wound shut is just adequate, but judging by the extra amount of air that comes in through the central vents when you open a side window at the back, extraction is not as good as it might be. The weather was too warm for us to try the heater at all thoroughly; from past experience we would guess it to be adequate. Lifting up what looks like a 30 in. television screen at the back gives good access to the very useful rear luggage space, which can be increased even more handily by folding the rear seat forwards.

It cannot be said that this Honda does anything better than what four-wheeled competitors it has, but the sort of person who may buy it is probably not interested in mundane comparisons. He (or she) will be attracted by the arresting shape and colour — you can only have a Honda Z in a sort of orange with that big stripe — and may rest assured that it is surprisingly good fun, competent enough as a car, and like all Honda minis, never ever dull. □



Above: Good driving position and a comfortable reclining seat, though a little more legroom is needed by tall drivers

Right: Cupped shape of the back seats makes the best of limited rear room

Far right: A quite impressive sight under the bonnet, with accessibility much better than it looks to the uninitiated



## PERFORMANCE CHECK

### Maximum speeds

Gear	mph	kph	rpm
Top (mean)	74	119	5,750
(best)	78	127	6,050
3rd	56	90	6,000
2nd	35	56	6,000
1st	22	35	6,000

Standing  $\frac{1}{4}$ -mile 22.3 sec 57 mph

Standing kilometre R/T: 43.3 sec 67 mph

Acceleration, R/T: Staff:

Time in seconds 0 6.0 9.8 15.9 24.8 55.7

True speed mph 30 40 50 60 70

Indicated speed MPH 32 42 52 63 74

### Speed range, Gear Ratios and Time in seconds

Mph	Top	3rd	2nd
10-30	—	12.2	6.5
20-40	18.8	10.8	7.0
30-50	19.3	12.1	—
40-60	25.3	15.9	—
50-70	47.8	—	—

### Fuel Consumption

Overall mpg 32.9 mpg (8.6 litres/100km)