

KING OF THE MICROS

THE HONDA Z coupe is undisputed king of the micro-mini class.

It packs more punch, more space and more personality into a 360 cc powered box than one would imagine to be possible — and underneath its cheekily-styled exterior it is thoroughly practical and incredibly well engineered.

The Z is dismissed by many as a joke, yet it makes more sense in today's traffic conditions than the oversize, overweight common four-door family sedan.

It is a lesson just what can be achieved by an imaginative designer given a minimum of everything to work with.

The Z first hit the Australian scene in late 1971 and was immediately branded as a status symbol to be worn with style, flair and just a touch of exhibitionism — it was the ultimate in inverted snobbery.

Its shortcomings were really the basis of its appeal. It actually seemed, in a masochistic way, to enjoy being whipped along and owners took pride in cramming as many people as possible into its diminutive interior, then red-lining it through the traffic at 9000 rpm.

This year, believe it or not, Honda has given the little car even more zip through the gears by lowering the final drive ratio and hooking-up a twin-carb version of the water-cooled Life powerplant, producing 36 bhp at no less than 9000 rpm. That's an increase of 5 bhp over the original air-cooled Z, for a penalty of 500 extra rpm.

The body has been fiddled slightly at the rear, the spare being reached, for some inexplicable reason, through the lift-up rear window rather than the under-bumper hatch fitted to the previous car.

It's also classed this year a hardtop because the now pillarless and frameless side windows crank down out of sight to give a more airy, open feel.

There have been some cost-cutting moves, however, which keep the car fairly comfortably under the \$2000 mark. The previous model's carpets have gone and are replaced by thin, ill-fitting rubber mats, while the seat backrests are now non-adjustable.

You still get the line-up of instruments and the "sports" steering wheel which help

give the car its coupe image — in fact, the water-cooled engine has allowed Honda to fit a temperature gauge into the fascia.

A big improvement is the newly-located gearshift, which now sprouts from the floor, rather than from an oddly-situated bracket under the dashboard.

Of course the Z is really only a two-seater if you want your economy transport with a reasonable amount of comfort, but for short hops around the block it is possible to squeeze four adults in.

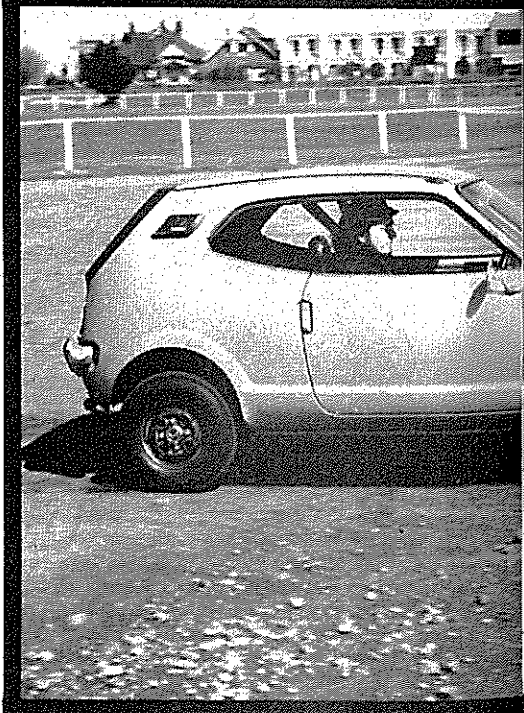
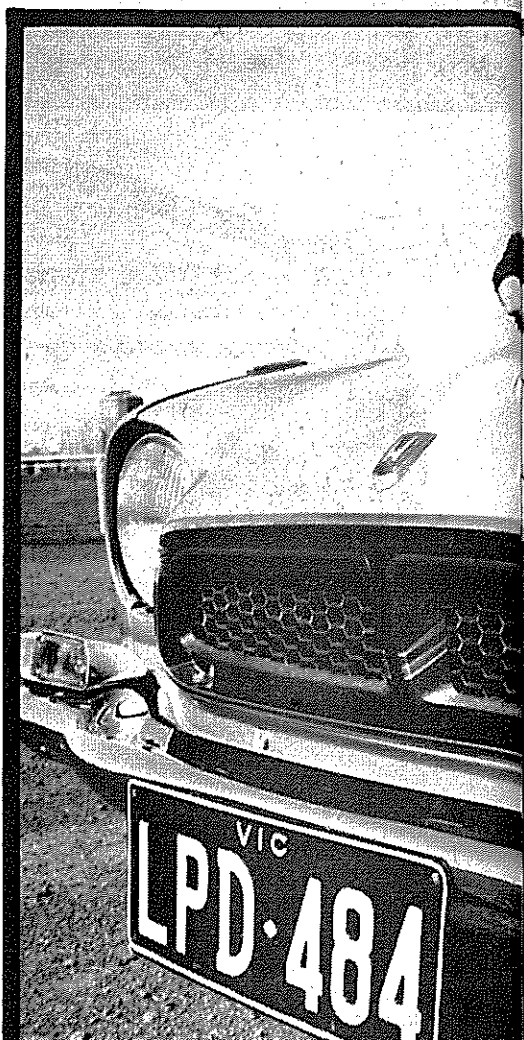
With only two in the car, there's more stretching space than you would imagine — more, in fact, than many bigger cars. Although the seats no longer have a reclining device, they are angled properly to give a comfortable, relaxing driving position. Padding and shaping isn't bad, either, which means the Z doesn't punish the posterior any more than it needs to when the going gets rough.

As before, the rear seat backrest folds down to convert the car into a sort of mini station wagon, capable of holding most of the gear that will ever be required by two passengers. A problem, though, is that now one must unload the luggage area to gain access to the spare tyre well.

With its upgraded, water-cooled powerplant, the Z hurries around with a new-found sense of urgency, the 10,000 rpm tachometer revealing that Honda has a lot of faith in the technological expertise of its design engineers.

Because its 36 bhp is developed at 9000 rpm, and maximum torque (23 ft/lbs) doesn't come in until 7000 rpm, the diminutive powerplant must be held between those two figures to give its best. Hit a moderately steep hill with less than 6000 rpm on the tachometer and the car will lose speed as if there was no engine there at all. With higher revs, it will bravely hold on, provided there's no headwind to contend with.

The name of the game with the Z (as indeed it was with all Hondas before the Civic came along) is astronomical revs all the way. Push the little car as hard as the tachometer invites you to, and you can extract performance that is pace-keeping, if not neck-breaking.





On the open highway, you can have 8000 rpm on the clock and still be within the 70 mph speed limit. The 9000 rpm red-line, which the handbook says must be strictly observed, comes up easily in top gear, giving the car a maximum speed of 71 mph. For prolonged cruising, the engine is happiest at around 7000 rpm, at which speed it develops an angry, wasp-like buzz and gives a road speed of 55 mph.

The amazing thing about all this is that one can flog the little car all day without any suggestion of misbehavior from the engine; it always drops back to a smooth idle (Honda's special balancing system works so well that the little two-cylinder idles like a one-litre four) and the temperature gauge never wavers past the "normal" mark.

One surprise with the Z is that despite the compatibility between size and performance, it does tend to be under-tyred.

Hustling the car along on normal tyre pressures, it responds more slowly to the steering and understeers more markedly than one would expect of a microsize lightweight. It's certainly not twitchy, but there is a definite tendency to run wide, with tyres protesting, if one oversteps the limits.

Boosting the tyres to bone-jarring pressures does help the handling, but produces protests from the typically noisy Japanese shock absorbers. We feel that a nice set of little radials would enhance the Z's character greatly.

Its road manners are otherwise a lot better than one has a right to expect.

The all-drum brakes seem to have no difficulty keeping the car in hand and the general standard of ride comfort is certainly a lot better than, for instance, Honda's Civic models.

If you can take your mind briefly off the amazing rpm feats being performed by the engine, you realize that there is no noticeable wind-noise, and that road rumble only becomes intrusive on the coarser all-weather surfaces.

All the while, you're cruising past most service stations at the rate of 43 mpg, thinking that perhaps this is what motoring should be all about.



MOTOR MANUAL

TEST DATA

MAKE: Honda
MODEL: Z Hardtop
FROM: Honda Australia, McIntosh St.,
 Airport West.
PRICE AS TESTED: \$1829.
OPTIONS FITTED: None.
MILEAGE
 Before 25
 After 520

WARRANTY:
 Period 12 months
 Mileage 12,000 miles

INSURANCE:
 For comprehensive insurance purposes with AAMI Ltd., this vehicle is listed in category 1. The premium for a fully owned vehicle carrying a 60 per cent. no-claim discount and an excess-free policy would be \$66.30.

ENGINE:
 Location Front
 No. of cylinders Two
 Configuration Transverse OHC
 Carburation 2 side-draft Keihin
 Capacity 356 cc.
 Comp. Ratio 9.0:1
 Bore and stroke 2.64 in. x 1.99 in.
 Power 36 bhp at 9000 rpm
 Torque 23 ft./lb. at 7000 rpm

TRANSMISSION:
 Type Manual
 Control location Floor
 Ratios:
 1st 4.700
 2nd 2.846
 3rd 1.833
 4th 1.272
 Final drive 5.429

BODY/CHASSIS:

Wheelbase 81.89 in.
 Length 123.8 in.
 Width 51 in.
 Height 50.6 in.
 Track, F 44.1 in.
 Track, R 43.9 in.
 Clearance (minimum) 7.1 in.
 Weight 1241 lb.
 Fuel capacity 6.9 gal.

SUSPENSION:

Front: Struts, coil springs, anti-roll bar.
 Rear: Beam axle, semi elliptic springs.

BRAKES:

Type of system: unassisted.
 Front: drums.
 Rear: drums

STEERING:

Type: Rack and pinion
 Ratio: .056
 Turns lock to lock: 3.2
 Turning circle: 28.9 ft.

WHEELS:

Type: Pressed steel, ventilated.
 Diameter: 10 in.
 Rim width: 3½ in.

TYRES:

Make: Bridgestone
 Type: Radial
 Dimensions: 5.20 x 10
 Speedrating: (L)

* Australian Associated Motor Insurers, 365 Little Collins Street, Melbourne. Tel. 60 0751.

PERFORMANCE:

Test conditions: cool, light breeze.
 Speedometer error:
 Indicated 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
 30 39 48 57 66 NA NA NA

Actual
 Acceleration:
 Zero to:
 30 mph 7.3 secs.
 40 mph 11.3 secs
 50 mph 16.4 secs
 60 mph 25.0 secs
 70 mph NA
 80 mph NA
 90 mph NA
 100 mph NA
 20-40 mph 7.5 secs
 30-50 mph 10.4 secs
 40-60 mph 17.4 secs
 50-70 mph NA
 60-80 mph NA
 70-90 mph NA
 Standing ¼ mile:
 Elapsed time: 22.9
 Terminal speed: 59 mph
 Maximum speeds in gears at 9000 rpm
 1st 18
 2nd 32
 3rd 48
 4th 68

Braking:

70-0 mph: 160 ft
 Fuel consumption on test: 43 mpg on super fuel
 Fuel consumption expected: 43-49 mpg
 Cruising range approx.: 310 miles

