

BUYER'S GUIDE

NISSAN FIGARO Express:

Freakish faux classic or serious retro runabout? **IAN SEABROOK** samples Nissan's take on the classic car

For some, the debate is still raging about whether a modern interpretation of a classic can be a classic in its own right. However, in this case that debate has been overtaken by events somewhat. After all, it was 1989 when the Figaro was unveiled to the world, and all 20,000 built were constructed in 1991 – that's fully 18 years ago now.

While age alone doesn't generate classic status – witness the (lack of) desirability for a 1991 Toyota Corolla by way of example – the Figaro was always a bit different. The looks were based on nothing in particular (though Ford seemed to copy it with their late-Nineties Thunderbird) but it was retro all the way, with simple hub caps, a chrome grille and a

clever folding roof allowing for regular sun worship.

Inside, there was a slim-spoked steering wheel and Fifties-inspired controls. Running gear was a different matter however, being largely based on the K10 Nissan Micra (that's the boxy 1984-91 one) and featuring a turbocharged, one-litre engine allied to a compulsory 3-speed automatic gearbox.

A few years ago, people were going crazy for Figaros, but to a certain extent, the bubble does seem to have burst. A raft of retro-inspired modern cars, such as the MINI and Fiat 500, can share some of the blame but the biggest problem facing the Figaro is that it's a bit fashionable – and fashions change.

The speedometer reads in kilometres as standard – stickers are the simplest way of converting to MPH.

Stereos are an issue too, as the Japanese have a much narrower FM band, so you may miss out on your favourite tunes. They can be converted, but it's a costly business. Some importers do this to all the cars they bring in, so if the work has already been done, it's a major sales point.

Air conditioning is fitted – make sure it works. It may just need a re-gas if it doesn't, but there's always that nagging feeling that it could be something more sinister. There are many warning beeps – handbooks are essential to decode them all.

comes to something pleasantly different that can handle the daily commute, the Figaro is a worthy option with more ability than you may expect, and a surprising dose of charm.

The parts situation

Despite not being a UK car, parts are no issue with several Japanese part specialists able to supply most items, and even Nissan themselves able to find parts for these cars. Some items, such as shock absorbers, can be replaced with standard Micra items.

What's out there?

The Figaro was never officially sold in the UK, but as the Japanese tax and test systems discourage retention of older cars, many have found their way to our shores, where they've been enthusiastically snapped up by admiring owners. They're still coming over now, though demand has dropped considerably compared to a couple of years ago.

That leaves a real mix of Figaros in the UK, with some very recent imports, and some cars that have been over here for a while now. Some will have passed through several owners, as for some, the novelty is quick to wear off, whereas others have been cherished since they arrived on British soil. One has even appeared in Doctor Who.

What to look for?

BODYWORK: Rust is the big problem, especially for longer term UK residents. Japan doesn't believe in crudely lobbing rust-promoting, verge-killing salt all over the roads when it gets a bit chilly, so fresh imports tend to be pretty good. However, even a fresh import won't last long if not well protected on arrival. Standard rust-proofing just isn't up to a British winter.

A quick glance will tell you if the rear wheelarches are rotting but rather more serious is rot spreading into the sills and seatbelt mounting points. Check also under the roof cover (the uppermost lid) and check that the roof itself has not begun to shrink. It's also worth checking the lower boot floor.

Be wary of accident damage – the bumpers are much more about looks than protection. The front wings and apron are actually constructed from a plasticky resin which should offer more flexibility when given a light knock.

Keeping a Figaro in top order may sadly be more effort than some owners can be bothered with. Like any classic, regular TLC is needed to keep them at their best.

ENGINE AND GEARBOX: The good news is that the mechanicals are Micra-based. The bad news is that we never got a turbocharged Micra on our shores, so parts can be a little trickier, though sourcing them from Japan is not too difficult with the myriad of specialists who deal in such matters. Regular servicing is the key to happiness and with a turbocharger in place, you can't abuse one like an ordinary slab of J-tin. Watch out for blue smoke signalling a turbo or more serious engine problem. Noisy tappets can be another issue. Service history can be challenging and here, a longer term UK

resident could actually prove better, as you'll at least be able to understand the service history. Regular cambelt changes are essential, and it makes sense to replace the water pump at the same time.

The gearbox tends to be reliable and there's little you can do to check it other than making sure it changes smoothly and that the fluid, when dipped, doesn't smell burnt.

STEERING, SUSPENSION AND BRAKES: Power steering was standard fitment, so make sure it isn't leaking anywhere. Otherwise it should be tight and free of play. As with any classic, very occasional use can cause discs to rust and calipers to seize.

Suspension is MacPherson strut front and a four-link coil spring set up at the rear – all as per the Micra. Some items are Figaro-specific but in the main, Micra items are fine and there's little other than general wear and tear to watch for.

INTERIOR AND ELECTRICS: It's quite an interior, yet there's real leather, which rarely gets the attention and feeding that it needs. Replacements are not that cheap and it's a hassle you may prefer to do without. Watch for the roof lining too. This can break down into a goopy mess which isn't averse to 'catching' human hair.

What should I pay?

Expect to pay as much as £9,000 for a fresh import from a dealer with low mileage, a converted radio, speedometer a full service and (hopefully) a dose of anti-rust wax. Exceptionally low mileage examples can fetch more, but we'd rather have one with some miles under its belt.

However, there are plenty in the £4000-£7000 bracket, though obviously, you can expect one or two faults at this money – just make sure any faults are minor rather than major and don't be afraid to let the first one you see go. They aren't that rare. In fact, we suspect that there are currently rather more Figaros than buyers at the moment, so don't be afraid to haggle.

Should I buy one?

All we can say is try it. You might like it. You may run away screaming at the top of your lungs that anything that's based on a boring Nissan Micra can't possibly be a classic but we reckon that like the Bond Bug in our festive issue, the Figaro is a love/hate car.

The Figaro Register proves that interest is still out there in Nissan's unusual retro-classic and when it

Contacts

Clubs

■ Figaro Owners Register www.fig08.com

Specialists

- Jap Cars and Parts, Newcastle Upon Tyne, Tel: 0191 263 2020
- Figaro Man, sales, parts and service, North Yorks, Tel: 01423 325800

