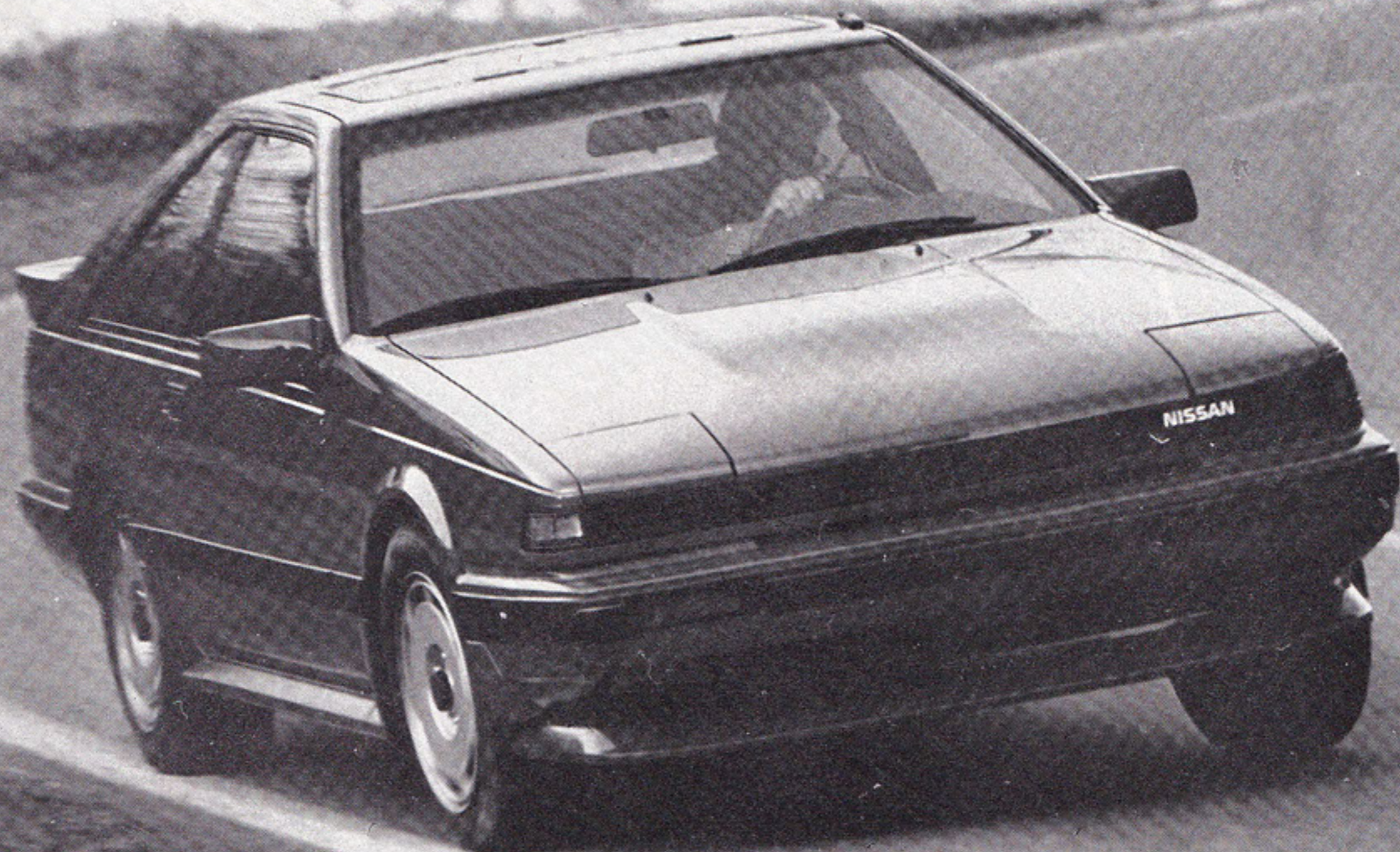


ROAD TEST



Nissan

200SX SE

A Big Mac from Tokyo

by Don Fuller

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM BROWN

If you have to read this report to understand the idea behind Nissan's 200SX SE, it's clear you don't know very much about cars. We may be telling you something about the SE you don't know, but it's doubtful we have anything to say that you won't understand.

That's because this car's obvious message is as well-known a line as the yellow stripes down the middle of a highway. You take the biggest engine the corporation makes—or close to it—and bolt it into a medium-size car with a sporty shape. What you end up with looks neat and goes fast.

And that's the 200SX SE, the familiar 200SE with the 3-liter 300ZX V-6 bolted under the hood. Nissan

planners figured the 200SX fastback a basically sassy enough shape, but in its most potent form—the Turbo—it was all gooped up under too many bulges, spoilers, and scoops, like a high school sophomore who just discovered makeup. And there was a little problem with motive force; it was powered either by an anemic four or an anemic four with a turbocharger. This was a car with potential, but it needed to be scrubbed clean on the outside and given some horsepower on the inside. It's a formula that's worked before.

In America, these kinds of cars are called Mustangs, Camaros, GTOs. So all you have to understand is that the 200SX SE is a Japanese muscle car in

the American tradition, sort of like buying a Big Mac in Tokyo.

One funny thing is that a number of muscle-car personality characteristics made the transition across the broad Pacific. But since one of Nissan's goals was to give it a torque curve as broad as the Pacific (or as close as was possible), the ensuing trait transmittal shouldn't be surprising.

The big news is the availability of the V-6. Wimps, misdirected Yuppies, and the socially responsible can still opt for the normally aspirated 4-cylinder XE. The Turbo is dead. Those who prefer the peace of mind of a rapidly advancing speedometer needle will choose the V-6. ▽

This car would make a terrific 18th birthday present

This sweet-running 60° electronically injected unit is installed in the 200SX SE unchanged in output from its 300ZX iteration; 160 hp at 5200 rpm sends plenty of encouragement to the rear wheels; 40 hp more encouragement, in fact, than the Turbo, and 61 more than the normal four. Our test version had the 5-speed manual gearbox, which has the same ratios as the 300ZX. A 4-speed automatic is available for those who miss the point of this car entirely.

The Nissan chassis beavers have given the car other—but, as we shall see, not enough—worthwhile changes underneath. Both the ventilated front and solid rear brake discs are considerably larger for increased stopping power to go with the pumped-up going power. The 4- and 6-cylinder models both have 15x6.0-in. wheels, but the V-6 alloy wheels are a five-bolt pattern of a unique design. The tire size is also up, from 195/60R15 to 205/60R15. However, according to our information from Nissan, springs, anti-roll bars, and shocks remain unchanged.

The exterior scrubbing away of excess makeup has similarly helped. Gone is the hood bulge of the Turbo and some other fussy over-detailing. The bumpers, front spoiler, and rocker panels are new, and the paint scheme is body color. Done in the bright red of our test car, it looked clean, purposeful, and fast. This car would make a terrific 18th birthday present.

In keeping with this purposeful theme, the interior is also cleaner. Analog speedometer and tachometer dials replace the digital, Ginza-district-meets-Las Vegas approach of the Turbo dash. Upholstery patterns

are simpler. The steering wheel has three spokes, and all in the right places. And all the controls are generally of the logical, switch-on/turn-off push-pull variety. Unlike too many other “modern” cars, you could hand the SE keys to your mother-in-law and she could probably figure it out well enough to get to the corner store and back, proving that “sporty” can also be practical.

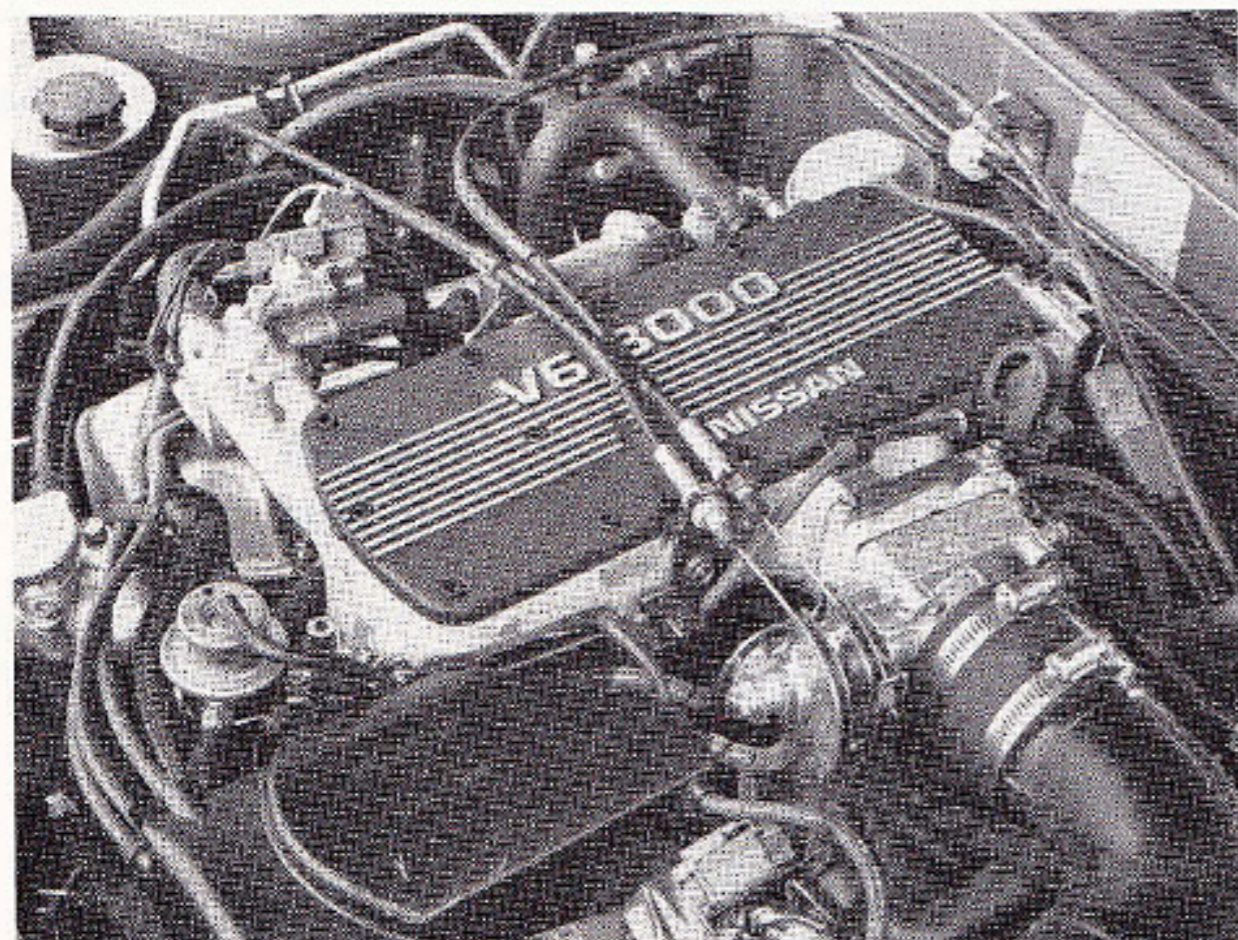
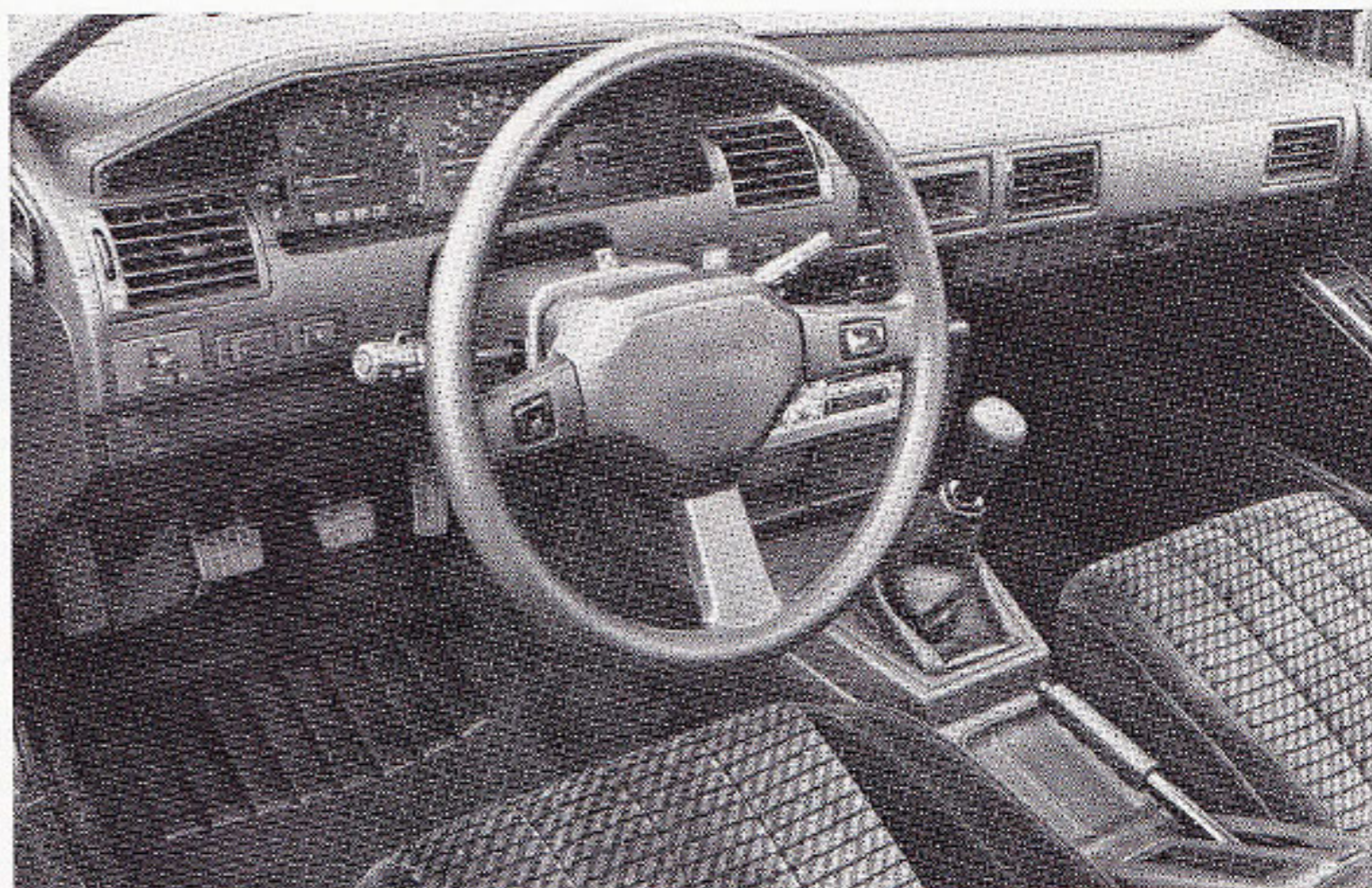
For its suggested retail price of \$15,444, the SE also includes one of those typically lengthy standard lists: Electric mirrors, power windows/rack-and-pinion steering/brakes/door locks, cut-pile carpeting, security system, AM/FM/cassette stereo, six-speaker sound system—all those goodies that have kept the Japanese from being driven back into the Pacif-

ic. The only options are air conditioning, fog lights, the aforementioned automatic shifter, two-tone paint (why would anyone . . . ?), and a Sport/Convenience Package.

Now right about here, we get a little inkling of exactly how “sporty” the 200SX SE truly is. The “Sport/Convenience Package” consists of, you see, cruise control and a pop-up glass sunroof. Pretty razzle-dazzle, huh?

Probably, it’s just the continuing dilemma of being out of touch with today’s somewhat revisionist dictionaries. We keep thinking of sport as things like anti-roll bars of significant diameters and shock absorbers with assertive rebound control. They think it means cruise control and sunroofs.

For those who measure their sport by acceleration, though, the 200SX SE has plenty going for it. In the first

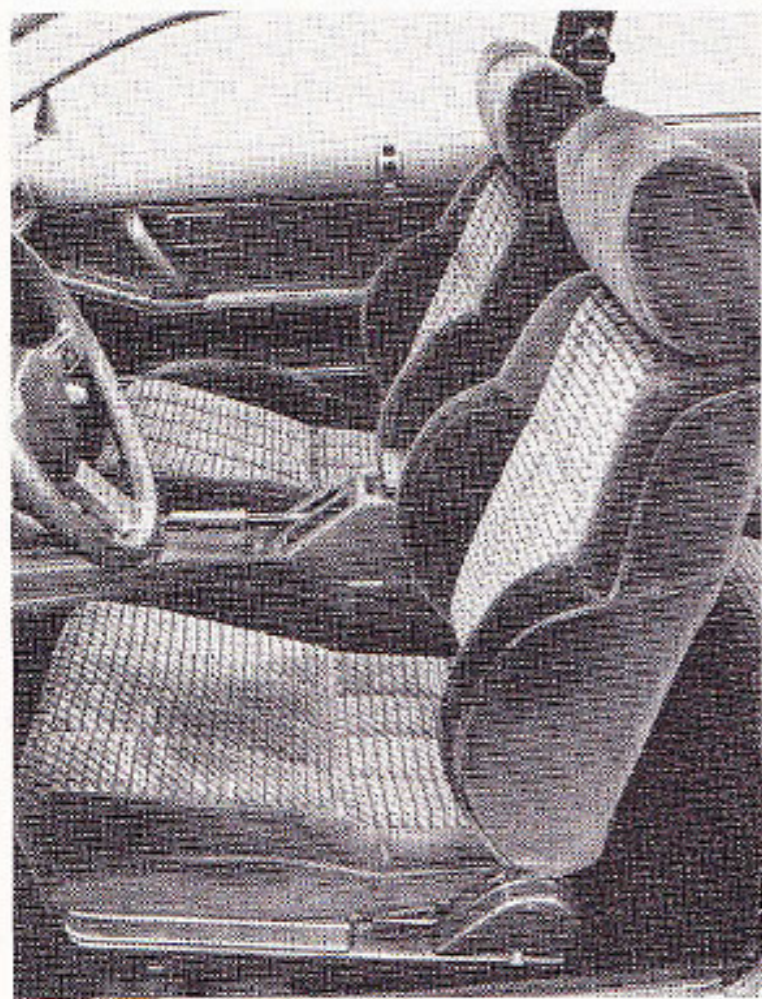


Look familiar? This is the same V-6 found in Nissan's 300ZX; 160 hp at 5200 rpm gives it 40 hp more than last year's turbo, 61 hp more than the normal four.



place, perceived acceleration, thanks to sharp throttle response, has been delivered as promised. This engine has always been the nicest part of the 300ZX, and it's also done nice things for the Maxima. In the 200SX SE, it seems like a natural, just like a 5-liter V-8 in a Mustang. There's no waiting for things to get gathered up; step on that pedal over there on the right and more miles per hour are but a grin away. It breathes free and runs with long legs right up to the 6000-rpm redline, and seems willing to keep on pulling like a championship tug-of-war team way on past that apparently arbitrarily determined limitation.

As you would expect, this results in a respectable speed-gathering rate. Our intrepid test driver pounded it through the gears for a 0-60-mph time of 9.82 sec, with the quarter mile in 17.20 sec at 81.8 mph. Re-



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Models shown: "Speciale Limited," in Gun Meta; "Comfort" in Pearl White.
Also available: "Speciale Limited" in Super White; "Comfort" in Silver; "Speciale" in Silver and White.



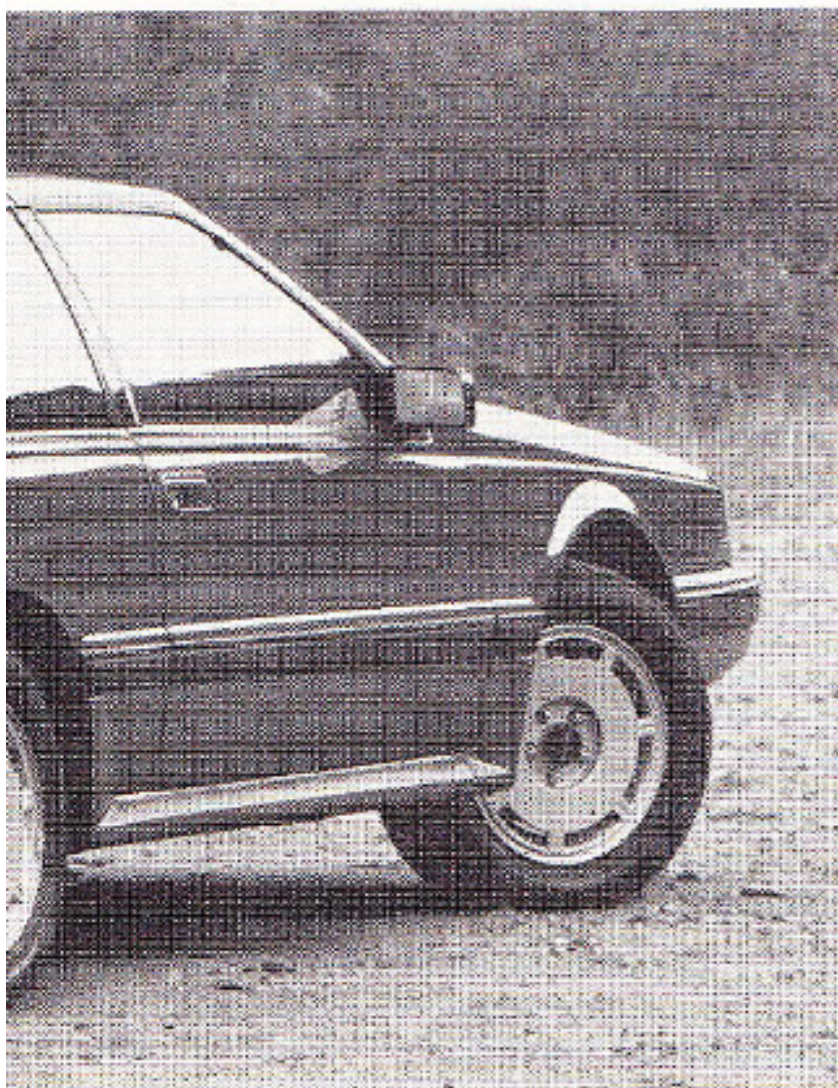
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Step on that pedal over there on the right and more miles per hour are but a grin away

spectable, but not necessarily as eye-opening or neck-snapping as you might expect, because, while the V-6 engine adds 40 hp, it also brings along a weight penalty of more than 200 lb. Looked at another way, part of the SE's definition of "muscle car" is that it might as well be carrying around an NFL linebacker in the passenger seat.

The engine, for its part, makes a wonderful cruiser. Once up to highway speeds, even the giddy heights of the soon-to-be 65-mph limit (wonder if it'll make our noses bleed?), 5th gear is all that's needed for most trips that might stretch all the way to Kalamazoo; most passes can be made without having to touch the lever.

The interior environment contributes to the easy cruisin' feel. With adjustable lumbar supports and reclining backrests, the bucket seats can be tuned to accommodate most humanoids, and the fore-and-aft range leaves room for all but the tallest. We would recommend careful consideration of the sunroof option (oops, the Sport/Convenience Package), because it cuts some head room, but, otherwise, all is peachy-keen for the long haul.

We're starting to get to something here. The long-haul engine and long-haul interior are matched by a comfy long-haul ride. Just aim it for Phoenix and watch the scenery roll by. Good engine, good seats, good cruise control, good sound system (once you work around the awkwardly positioned controls); settle in and roll down the interstate.

What we're starting to get to is that transmittal of an earlier trait of

muscle cars, because this is one major league pretender that can't handle the curve ball. Throw a corner at the SE's suspension and you might as well be sending an invitation to a frat party to the local chapter of the WCTU, for all the good it will do. We managed to force a skidpad best of 0.80 g, which sounds good by itself, but force was definitely the operative term. In so doing, the SE was about as


cooperative as a rodeo bull on steroids.

With the throttle on, massive understeer is the only thing this car knows. At the limit, it chatters the outside front tire so badly you can walk back where you just drove and see the black sine wave of rubber dust that's been ground into the pavement. Or get it up near the limit and lift, and a trailing throttle oversteer-induced spin is yours for the thrill of it. All this wringing around by the neck, stomping, scratching, crying, and otherwise cantankerous activity is about as much fun as an ill-behaved child in a grocery store check-out line.

What happened? How can such a nice cruiser be such a fistful in the corners? Muscle-car-itis. The medium-sized, sporty shape with the big engine is a good idea so far as it goes. It worked well 15 years ago, it still works well today. But, in the meantime, we discovered corners. That makes the 200SX SE a nice-looking car with a fine engine but seriously in need of some suspension work if the results are to match the image. Right off the bat, it needs shock absorbers. And while it's up on the hoist and taken apart, might as well redistribute the roll rates. And, since the toolbox is out anyway, the semi-trailing arm rear suspension could be given a right and proper burial.

Even the steering needs help. In quick transitions—admittedly, pretty quick transitions—the power assist lagged behind what the driver wanted to do.

Or maybe we just complain too much. Looking at it from the viewpoint of 1986 and over the hood of last year's Turbo, the SE represents a far better car by every criteria. The engine is more responsive, more powerful, certainly more reliable in the long term, and probably more economical. The car is absolutely easier to drive, because it goes when you step on the gas, not at some undetermined time in the future. It looks nicer, and by a lot, with its cleaned up nose and leaned down form. The interior beats the prior Turbo's by miles, and we are thankful to see someone at Nissan had the good sense to pull the plug on all the electronic gizmos that had taken control of the instrument panel. All these things make the V-6 SE a far better way to get to work, or to the movies, or Phoenix, or Kalamazoo.

Probably, every single buyer who drives home in a 200SX SE will think it's just fine. But in today's tough market, we wonder if "just fine" is really good enough. 

TECH DATA

Nissan 200SX SE

POWERTRAIN

Vehicle configuration.....Front engine, rear drive
 Engine configuration.....V-6, OHC, 2 valves/cylinder
 Displacement.....2960 cc (181 cu in.)
 Max. power (SAE net).....160 hp @ 5200 rpm
 Max. torque (SAE net).....174 lb-ft @ 3200 rpm
 Transmission.....5-sp. man.
 Final drive ratio.....3.90:1

CHASSIS

Suspension, f/r.....Independent/independent
 Brakes, f/r.....Disc/disc
 Steering.....Rack and pinion, power assist
 Wheels.....15 x 6.0 in., alloy
 Tires.....205/60R15

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase.....2425 mm (95.5 in.)
 Overall length.....4460 mm (175.6 in.)
 Curb weight.....1350 kg (2976 lb)
 Fuel capacity.....53 L (14.0 gal)

PERFORMANCE

Acceleration, 0-60.....9.82 sec
 Standing quarter mile.....17.20 sec/81.8 mph
 Braking, 60-0.....137 ft
 Lateral acceleration.....0.80 g

BASE PRICE.....\$15,444
 PRICE AS TESTED.....\$16,839

