

*Comparison: Battle of the Low-Buck Sport-Utilities!*

# AUTOMOBILE

FEBRUARY 1991

*Callaway Corvette Speedster, Chevrolet Lumina Z34; GMC Syclone, Chevrolet 454 SS monster trucks; Toyota Tercel Deluxe, VW Vanagon GL*

## **NISSAN** **300ZX TURBO**

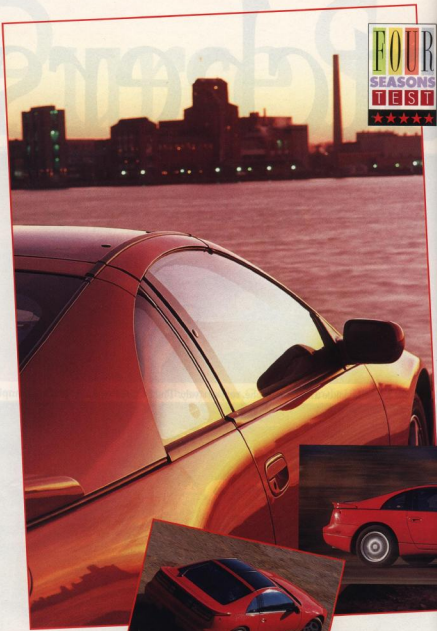
*One year behind the wheel of a mighty nice,  
mighty fast supercoupe*



U.S.A. \$2.95  
CANADA \$3.50  
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**FOUR**  
**SEASONS**  
**TEST**  
★★★★★



# NISSAN 300ZX TURBO

*Twelve months: Despite twenty-seven days out of service, we loved our Z-car enough to award it five stars.*

Ann Arbor—

**Y**ou can see the marked impact our 300ZX Four Seasons car had on its various drivers by looking at the logbook. The earnest stream of scrawled ball-point observations overflows the original spiral-bound notebook, ending as a trickle of postscripts in a second book.

The workshop record, in contrast, details relatively few repairs. Apart from unavoidably frequent visits to the shop for lube services (every 3000 miles in a turbocharged car) and for brake pads and tires, plus two trips to Ross-Beakes Collision Services for paint touch-ups, the problems can be summarized in a few words: underhood squeal, a detached T-top latch, and a dead pedal that came unglued.

Of the scheduled service costs, the largest chunk was made up of tire replacement expenses. A full \$753.84 out of the \$940.00 parts price is due to the new rubber; but, because the car had one or two stints on the racetrack under its belt, we can forgive the 300ZX its profligate appetite for tires. As for the

nonwarranty repairs, all but \$8.54 (the cost of the T-top knob) went for the paint work. The first visit, a job that amounted to \$140, was to repair the scratches caused by eggs flung on Devil's Night. The second was to touch up high-speed stone chips, and cost \$454.

The vast majority of warranty expenses were incurred (by Nissan Motor Corporation in U.S.A.) during the dealer's attempts to cure the engine squeal, which failed. Overall, that's not much to whine about in a 300-bhp sports car with technical complexities such as four-wheel steering, twin turbochargers, adjustable shock absorbers, electronically variable power steering, automatic climate control, cruise control, and a theft alarm.

In fact, the biggest beef we had with the car was with the service we received from the local dealer, Rampy Chevrolet-Nissan, where nine of thirteen service visits accounted for twenty-three of the twenty-seven days spent off the road. Most of this was due to parts unavailability. Evidently anticipating the car's stovebolt reliability, the service department decided not to stock many 300ZX bits, not even parts—such as brake pads—that one might reasonably expect it to have on hand.

What's more, Rampy also failed to follow up on parts it had ostensibly ordered some time before. Or it would order the wrong parts, causing us to wait for brake pads and the plastic T-top latch knob for unnecessary lengths of time. The same happy crew conducted a four-day search for the cause of the embarrassing squeal that followed start-up, and then announced that a new crank sensor was needed. Which they did not have in stock.

Several days later, at the occasion of the car's 30,000-mile service, they replaced all three timing-belt pulleys but were unable to do a tuneup at the same time because they had no spark plugs that would fit the Z-car. The reason, they said, was because the car was *too new*. As you might have expected, the squeal is still there. The moral of the story seems to be that you can buy a car as bulletproof as the clever Nissan designers and engineers can make it, but you still have to entrust it to the local dealer.

The service the car itself rendered was of the most silvery sterling. It seduced all of its suspicious detractors. It rewarded the early infatuations of its first admirers with unrelenting goodness, convincing them that their initial impressions had been shrewdly accurate. And the quality of its performance,

## THE MANUFACTURER

### Nissan Motor Corporation in U.S.A.

P.O. Box 191

Gardena, California 90248-0191

President and CEO: Thomas Wignarrell

Consumer contact: Jim Thomas, national manager of consumer affairs

● Customer assistance: 800-647-7261

● Plant where built: Nissan Shofu in Hiratsuka

● Our car's number off the line: 500

● Projected sales for the 1991 calendar year: 5000

● Genealogy: The Z-car appeared in 1969 as a Datsun Fairlady Z in Japan, badged as the 240Z in export form. Powered by a 2.4-liter SOHC straight-six and equipped with a four-speed manual gearbox, the car sold almost 10,000 units in 1970. That went up to 52,500 by 1973. In 1974, the engine was 2.6 liters, the badge 260Z. Within a year, fuel injection and a 2753-cc engine changed the name to 280Z. A redesign in late 1978 made the 280ZX larger, heavier, and less nimble—even with the new three-liter V-6 engine it got in '84. That engine powered another new body in 1985, and—with four cams and revisions—the latest 300ZX cars.

BY BARRY WINFIELD

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIM WREN

**W**e'd be  
happy to do  
another Four Seasons  
test of a twin-turbo  
Nissan 300ZX.  
Starting right now.  
With the same car.  
It's that good.

ride, and control sensibility was undiminished and unimpaired by the attentions of its various drivers. The car drove as well, as fast, as stably at 30,000 miles as it ever had.

As dependable as it was, the 300ZX was no blandly servile robot. It had its quirks. One of them was a theft alarm that lay in wait for drivers with a fast key hand. Those who deftly twisted the key in the driver's door lock and then whipped the door open would most likely trigger the alarm. Then they'd have to relock the car and start over—this time slowly. The climate control had a mind of its own, too, resetting to automatic and blowing vigorously only a few seconds after you'd start the car. In fact, it is probably the one feature most of us would have traded for a good old-fashioned do-it-yourself ventilation system.

That's all we'd trade, and we'd happily tolerate that for the steady thrust of jetlike propulsion one experiences when the twin turbos are up and shrilling their reedy battle cry. Now that the car is at the end of its time, we'll miss the instant pivoting response to the wheel, the rock-steady set in corners, and the forgiving handling out at the edge. We'll miss the go anywhere, any time ease of operation and the mule-headed stubbornness of the cruise control—a device that was tenacious in its determination to hold a preset velocity, yet surprisingly gentle in transition.

For a car so loaded with high-tech equipment, the 300ZX had a remarkably uncluttered interior and was extremely simple to operate. In addition to the list

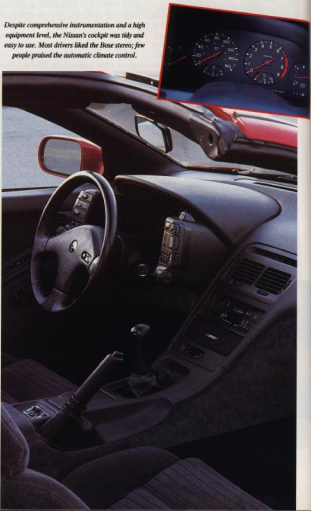
of gizmos already mentioned, the car featured optional power mirrors with heater elements for defogging, power-adjustable seats, and illuminated entry with courtesy-light fade-out. (These are standard on 1991 models.) There was not a lot it didn't have, yet the impression was of a fairly simple cockpit, with ergonomics that usually led the driver to the control he or she wanted.

Despite the 300 bhp, the Nissan is not an intimidating car. Just about anybody can drive it. And although it isn't as chatty as, say, a Porsche 944S2 in the

way it relays messages back to the driver, it is far from being bland or numb. The gearshift certainly requires a little concentration, and you have to be able to modulate the throttle in first gear to moderate turbo boost if you don't want to spend your morning commute in a series of high-g swoops through traffic.

The character of the car is benign enough to let the memory of just how fast it is dwindle away during predominantly suburban use, so that when you swing the low nose back out onto an open road and let the reins out, there's a

*Despite comprehensive instrumentation and a high equipment level, the Nissan's cockpit was tidy and easy to use. Most drivers liked the Bose stereo; few people praised the automatic climate control.*



fresh surprise in its reminder. This is a seriously quick car, with passing power that catapults you past slower vehicles. Interstate travel should be done under the supervision of cruise control, because speeds in the 90-mph area feel calmly normal. At those velocities, the bright red flying saucer is a sore thumb looking for police attention.

Naturally, no car is ever perfect, and there was some mild criticism threaded among the strings of praise. Toward the end of its tenure, the car produced occasional mild crunches during the fourth-to-fifth gearshift. This is more likely a need for clutch adjustment than it is synchronizer wear. Most people found the sport damper position too aggressive for all but racetrack use, indicating it as a marketing gimmick more than a serious

option. Also, brake pedal feel was considered too vague by a couple of pilots.

Problems with rear-three-quarter visibility were commonly acknowledged, although drivers admitted they did not have much difficulty in traffic. There was an occasional buffeting resonance from the rear, which might have been a suspension noise transmitting into the structure, or perhaps an exhaust boom. Whatever, it certainly did not happen often. Most people didn't notice it. One driver complained that there was rear suspension tramp during hard acceleration, but nobody else complained, so perhaps that was wheelspin, Michael.

In the picky-picky category, someone said the plush carpeting on the dash and the doors was a mite cheap. Someone else said he wished Dr. Bose would al-

low him to balance the speakers for himself. Sorry, but that's not the Bose philosophy. In Michigan, the Nissan's biggest flaw was its lack of winter traction, but we confess to never having tried dedicated snow tires on the ZX, and a slight chance exists that they might have ameliorated the condition. Finally, a couple of people noticed that if you kicked the clutch in when the cruise control was engaged, it would confuse the electronics somewhat, and the cruise would sulk for a while and not reengage.

These observations do little to undermine the 300ZX's good standing, in our opinion, and we'd be happy to do another Four Seasons test of a twin-turbo Nissan 300ZX. Starting right now. With the same car. It's that good. ●

## REACTIONS

### One quibble short of a quorum.

**T**he Nissan 300ZX Turbo is that good. It's good enough to pit against a Porsche 944. It's good enough to consider one over a Corvette. It's so good that an Acura NSX isn't a ridiculous comparison car.

What a comeback from the dead for Nissan. How sad it was to see the lithe and lovely 240Z evolve into the overblown lounge-lizard cruiser it became with the 1983 300ZX. But then, Nissan's entire product line had taken a turn for the boring. Yet back they came, one car after another, until Nissan now boasts one of the most exciting full-car product lines in the marketplace. From trucks to sport-utes to economy cars to this gorgeous-sport coupe.

This past fall, we invited a group of friends in the industry on a drive through the Michigan countryside in ten interesting cars. We borrowed cars from various manufacturers and drove a couple hundred miles, swapping cars every twenty or so miles. We didn't point out until the end of the day that the 300ZX Turbo in the group was our Four Seasons test car with more than 25,000 miles on the odometer. No one noticed that it wasn't brand-new. It is that good.

The 300ZX Turbo has everything I want in a car. It is fast in a way that satisfies every facet of speed I enjoy. It is comfortable without compromise over long hauls and holds a ton of gear behind the seats. The 300ZX Turbo sounds great, looks great, and performs without reservation. It has my unqualified vote for Best in Class. It is that good.

—Jean Lindamood

**F**or many years we heard that the Japanese were capable of exploiting product categories—like economy sedans—that were relatively simple and had been pioneered by others, my dear, but that they'd never really become innovators, that they'd never break new ground in the more demanding leagues like luxury and high-performance cars. Well, before everybody forgets all that smug whistling-past-the-graveyard from Detroit and Europe, we should reflect for a moment on the exquisite irony of the Nissan 300ZX Turbo. Exquisite in the sense that our Four Seasons 300ZX Turbo turned out to be just about as good a high-performance coupe as any company has ever built in any country at any price. Ironic in the sense that we're already in danger of taking that great Nissan achievement for granted, as Japan floods the market with ever more sophisticated luxury and high-performance cars.

My first ride in a 300ZX Turbo was at Nissan's Tochigi test track. The car was a developmental mule, and it was everything I could have hoped for in a state-of-the-art GT coupe. Nissan had stirred a lot of interest with a mid-engined show car called the MID4, and subsequently broke some enthusiast hearts with the news that the MID4 wouldn't be built. One afternoon spent rocketing around that road circuit, and the mid-engined dream car never again crossed my mind. The 300ZX Turbo combines supercar performance with the utility and convenience of a front-engine layout. I only wish we could have another year with ours.

—David E. Davis, Jr.

**I** have no bone to pick with Mr. Winfield's summation of our year with the Nissan 300ZX Turbo. The car is nearly flawless, but for me, the interior and the driving experience are bland and uninspiring. Blasphemous, you say? I can't help it. The very first time I climbed into our Four Seasons 300ZX, I expected to be transported to some special, secret automotive place where I'd feel like a million bucks in my new \$33,000 automobile. Didn't happen. I've driven this car a lot over the past year, and I've tried hard to like it. My husband salivates when I bring it home, my stepdaughters invite their friends over to see it and go for rides, and my brother-in-law begs me to let him drive it around the block or just up and down the driveway. And I obligingly accommodate them all, but I'm not convinced.

I'll tell you one thing: It is a gorgeous-looking car. I was driving near one on the way to the airport recently, catching front, rear, and side views as we picked our way through heavy traffic. Its beauty made it stand out from all angles.

In truth, I have only one quantifiable complaint about the 300ZX, and that is its optional automatic climate control system. It is truly automatic, to the point that you can't direct the airflow at the windshield or at your feet or face as you prefer. At all times, the system does it for you, automatically. Grr. It is the worst automatic system I've ever experienced. But the good news for '91 is: It's gone! You can again have whatever airflow or fan speed you desire, or you can leave it on automatic. —Patricia Eldridge Maki

# 1990 NISSAN 300ZX TURBO



## IN SUMMARY

- Safe, usable performance
- Bold styling
- Reliability
- Frequency of lube services
- Automatic climate control
- Dubious dealer backup
- Loud squeal at startup



### GENERAL:

Front-engine, rear-wheel-drive coupe  
2-passenger, 2-door steel body  
Base price \$33,000/price as tested \$33,275

### MAJOR EQUIPMENT:

Standard air conditioning, cruise control, restraint system (3-point passive belts), AM/FM/cassette, T-top, optional leather interior \$1000

### ENGINE:

Two-turbocharged and intercooled 24-valve DOHC  
V-6, iron block, aluminum heads  
Bore x stroke 3.43 x 3.27 in (87.1 x 83.1 mm)  
Displacement 181 cu in (2960 cc)  
Compression ratio 8.5:1  
Fuel system electronic multipoint injection  
Turbochargers Garrett AiResearch T25  
Maximum boost pressure 9.0 psi  
Power SAE net 300 bhp @ 6400 rpm  
Torque SAE net 283 lb-ft @ 3600 rpm  
Redline 7000 rpm

### DRIVETRAIN:

5-speed manual transmission  
Gear ratios (I) 3.21 (II) 1.93 (III) 1.30 (IV) 1.00 (V) 0.75  
Final-drive ratio 3.69:1

### MEASUREMENTS:

Wheelbase 96.5 in  
Track front/rear 58.9/61.2 in  
Length x width x height 169.5 x 70.5 x 49.2 in  
Curb weight 3474 lb  
Weight distribution front/rear 55/45%  
Ground clearance 5.1 in  
Coefficient of drag 0.32  
Fuel capacity 18.7 gal  
Cargo capacity 23.7 cu ft

### SUSPENSION:

Independent front, with lower A-arm, dual upper links, coil springs, electronically controlled dampers, anti-roll bar  
Independent rear, with upper and lower control arms, trailing link, coil springs, electronically controlled dampers, anti-roll bar

### STEERING:

Rock-and-iron, variable-power-assisted  
Turns lock to lock 2.4  
Turning circle 34.1 ft  
Four-wheel system

### BRAKES:

Vented discs front and rear  
Anti-lock system

### WHEELS AND TIRES:

16 x 7.5-in front, 16 x 8.5-in rear cast aluminum wheels  
225/50ZR-16 front, 245/45ZR-16 rear Dunlop D40 M2 tires

### PERFORMANCE (manufacturer's data):

0-60 mph in 5.5 sec  
Top speed 155 mph  
Pounds per bhp 11.6  
EPA city driving 18 mpg  
Observed fuel economy 19.1 mpg

### MAINTENANCE AND REPAIR COSTS:

Headlamp unit \$144.98  
Front quarter-panel \$262.16  
Brake pads front wheels \$61.83  
Filters air \$9.64/oil \$7.31  
Warranty bumper to bumper 3 yr/36,000 mi

### REVIEW PERIOD:

29,784 miles  
Previous articles 3/89, 11/89, 1/90, 8/90, 11/90, 1/91

### SCHEDULED MAINTENANCE:

Parts \$940.82  
Labor \$336.38  
Fluids \$61.29

### WARRANTY REPAIRS:

Parts \$273.89  
Labor \$314.30 (calculated at \$45 per hour)

### NONWARRANTY REPAIRS:

Parts \$466.34  
Labor \$137.04



	★	★	★	★	★
	EXCELLENT				
	GOOD				
	FAIR				
	POOR				
<b>ENGINE</b>					
power					●
response					●
smoothness					●
<b>DRIVETRAIN</b>					
shift action					●
power delivery					●
<b>STEERING</b>					
effort					●
response					●
feel					●
<b>RIDE</b>					
general comfort					●
roll control					●
pitch control					●
<b>HANDLING</b>					
directional stability					●
predictability					●
maneuverability					●
<b>BRAKES</b>					
response					●
modulation					●
effectiveness					●
<b>GENERAL</b>					
ergonomics					●
instrumentation					●
roominess					●
seating comfort					●
fit and finish					●
storage space					●
<b>OVERALL</b>					
dollar value					●
fun-to-drive					●

## RUNNING CHANGES

The 1991 300ZX Turbo is essentially identical to our '90 model. Four Seasons example, but there have been a few minor revisions. The corporate nose badge used for European models now appears, and the front bumper script is deleted. The Bose sound system has been revised, getting a new head unit fascia and losing the center speaker. A

driver's-side air bag is offered, and the power seats are now only available with the leather upholstery option. Defrosting outside mirrors, an interior courtesy light fade-out, seatback storage pockets, and a new cargo area cover become standard, as does a temperature-control system that is adjustable to fully automatic or fully manual, unlike last year's *all* automatic.



## WEAR AND TEAR

### PROBLEM AREAS:

- All four tires replaced at 26,378 miles
- Front brake pads replaced at 18,906 miles
- Two point touch-ups, one from incident involving Devil's Night egg, a second from stone chip damage. Total cost \$594.84

### HADA USED CAR PRICE

- Average trade-in value \$24,925
  - Average retail price \$28,025
  - Retained value 82%
- Eastern region**  
Average trade-in value \$24,950  
Average retail price \$28,050
- Pacific Southwest region**  
Average trade-in value \$25,050  
Average retail price \$28,150

## COMPETITORS



### 1991 Chevrolet Corvette L98

Base price \$32,455  
OHV V-8, 350 cu in (5735 cc)  
Power SAE net 245 bhp @ 4000 rpm  
Torque SAE net 340 lb-ft @ 3200 rpm  
0-60 mph in 5.8 sec



### 1991 Dodge Stealth R/T/Mitsubishi 3000GT YR-4

Base price \$29,267  
Twin-turbocharged and intercooled 24-valve DOHC  
V-6, 181 cu in (2972 cc)  
Power SAE net 300 bhp @ 4000 rpm  
Torque SAE net 307 lb-ft @ 2500 rpm  
0-60 mph in 5.4 sec



### 1991 Toyota Supra Turbo

Base price \$27,290  
Turbocharged and intercooled 24-valve DOHC  
6-in-line, 180 cu in (2954 cc)  
Power SAE net 232 bhp @ 5800 rpm  
Torque SAE net 254 lb-ft @ 3200 rpm  
0-60 mph in 6.8 sec

## WE NEED YOUR HELP

If you own a 1990 Infiniti Q45 or Subaru Legacy wagon, or a 1991 Ford Explorer Eddie Bauer, Toyota Previa LE, or Toyota MR2 Turbo, we'd like to hear from you.

What we need to know is your name, what you do for a living, how old you are, your car's make and model, how much you paid for it, whether there was a rebate on that amount, the cost of your insurance on this car for one year, whether you have experienced any serious mechanical problems, and what you like most and least about your car. Please give us a daytime phone number in case we need to clarify any information. We'll send you a copy of the 1990 Automobile Magazine Subject Index for your trouble.

If your entry is published as part of our Four Seasons report, we'll send you one of our T-shirts, too (so send us your size and color preference—black or white). Send your responses to: Four Seasons Tests, Automobile Magazine, 120 East Liberty Street, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104.

## REAL-WORLD REACTIONS

**Ralph Mayfield, 47**  
Houston, Texas  
Engineer

Price as delivered \$35,000  
Months owned 9  
Insurance for one year \$1200

**Likes:** This car has outstanding acceleration and amazingly forgiving handling that has gotten me out of some hairy situations that I wasn't sure would be recoverable. I've owned a Z-car since 1970—a 240Z, a 260Z, a 280Z, and a 300ZX. I considered handling to be the greatest asset on all of them, but this 300ZX Turbo is by far the best-handling. As complicated as it is, I can drive it to work every day and everywhere else, and the car doesn't miss a beat. Yes, it's a lot of money, but it's worth it if you are a true enthusiast and can appreciate what a value it is among its performance-car peers.

**Dislikes:** The car needs more instrumentation, or at least different instrumentation. Maybe an ammeter and an oil temperature gauge. You can't quickly read the turbo boost gauge when you're accelerating rapidly. I think repositioning the gauge would probably help avoid overrevving the engine. My biggest com-

plaint, though, is wheel hop. It doesn't do it every time, but when it does, the car seems to be tearing itself apart. I'd like to see a real boulevard suspension setting, one that would enable me and my wife to roll around town with a really soft suspension. I should add that if I had to give up some performance to cure any of these shortcomings, I wouldn't touch a thing.

**Ivan Colon, 26**  
Hackensack, New Jersey  
Machine operator

Price as delivered \$35,705  
Months owned 6  
Insurance for one year \$3500

**Likes:** I love the styling. That's the main reason I bought the car—it is beautiful inside and out. I like the way the interior is shaped and contoured. The whole car has a really together look to it. I also like the way the steering and handling feel.

**Dislikes:** I've had some problems with the brakes. I went to the dealership three times before they finally replaced the front brake pads and the rotors. The service manager told me I was driving the

car too hard, and that made me mad. Smoke shouldn't have been coming out of the front wheel wells when I was stopping. If I wanted to drive 60 mph, I'd have bought a Hyundai.

**Charles Sakamoto, 28**  
Gardena, California  
Auto mechanic

Price as delivered \$34,200  
Months owned 3  
Insurance for one year \$1400

**Likes:** I love the way this car drives, the way it looks and feels. It's a little bit too bumpy a ride, but the cornering is so great that it makes up for it. The other thing I really like is that I get a lot of compliments on my car. Everyone is always very impressed with it. They end up wanting one themselves.

**Dislikes:** There is nothing about this car that I don't like. I have had only one problem—one of the speakers was making a crackling noise. I took it to the dealer, and it was replaced. The only thing I would wish for would be more leather in the cockpit where there is cloth upholstery now.