

Last Hero Action



Hailed by luminaries such as car design guru Gordon Murray for its ride, handling and everyday practicality, the Honda NSX set new standards in supercar design. Two decades on from its original launch, not much has changed...

Perception and reality are often diametrically opposed points of view – and nowhere is that more so than in automotive design. On the face of it, it sounds like the perfect job for a car nut with a penchant for tee-squares, drawing boards and Luxo L-1 flexi-arm lamps. In reality, most car designers spend months sketching and refining mundane bits, tweaking them using CAD and only emerging victorious from the office when designs are officially signed off after the umpteenth revision.

Imagine then the wave of excitement that must have rippled through the Honda design department when news broke that they'd be turning their hand to supercar design in the late 1980s. Honda actually got the ball rolling when it commissioned Pininfarina to design the mid-engined HP-X concept car as early as 1984 but it wasn't until 1989 that the NSX made its public debut in Chicago (March) and Tokyo (October). Slated for release in 1990, the car bore little resemblance to the Pininfarina concept apart from the position of the engine.

Ultra rigid construction thanks to the innovative use of aluminium in the chassis and body panels handed the car a superb base from which to hang its race derived double wishbone suspension and tuck its high-revving naturally aspirated 3.0-litre V6. Handling was refined by three top-line drivers: Japanese Formula 1 driver Satoru Nakajima, American IndyCar pilot Bobby Rahal, and Brazilian F1 superstar Ayrton Senna. All three had used Honda engines at the top levels in their respective sports (Rahal's team used Honda engines, as did Senna's McLaren F1 team, while Nakajima was supported by Honda at Tyrell and Lotus. His son Kazuki currently races in F1 for Williams. It was Nakajima who had the greatest input in to the car. Ride and handling was developed by Nakajima at the Suzuka race circuit in Japan, while Rahal's testing and fine tuning



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■ BOTTOM LINE

Model Honda NSX supercar **Price** from £15,000
Engine 2977cc horizontally arranged mid-mounted V6
Transmission Five-speed manual only, rear-wheel drive
Power/torque 270bhp @ 7300rpm/210lb.ft @ 6500rpm
Performance 0-62mph 5.7s; 168mph **Available** Now

took place at Laguna Seca in California under strict Honda test sessions.

The car was a hit for many reasons. It was the world's first all-aluminium and aluminium monocoque chassis production car, while its heady revvy engine redlined at 8000rpm – a figure possible thanks to the engine's titanium conrods and forged pistons, a direct influence from its racing involvement.

It was the first all aluminium supercar and paved the way, in handling terms, for cars like the McLaren F1

Despite the car's hard edged bloodline, the NSX was also touted as an everyday supercar – a phrase which suddenly passed in to everyday use without a tinge of irony or the faint whiff of oxymoronic tendencies. The car was easy to use, had a sizeable boot that swallowed lots of shopping, and was a comfortable, reliable two seat supercar. Think we're joking? Honda's reputation was built on the sort of reliability that would see the V6 complete over 100,000 miles without skipping a beat, something that couldn't be said for its contemporaries without expensive servicing or repair bills.

The NSX may have a butt the size of a jet boat, and at some certain angles resembles the second generation Toyota MR2, but there's no questioning the car's enduring potency as a handy performance car. Its sleek lines, low bonnet angle and steeply raked windscreen give the car a supremely efficient aerodynamic shape, while the sculpted sides scoop air in to the engine and channel cooling air to the rear suspension and brake components. The rear wing is integral to the boot and helps keep the rear end planted

at high speed. It's not adjustable, but that's not something we mere mortals need concern ourselves with under normal driving conditions.

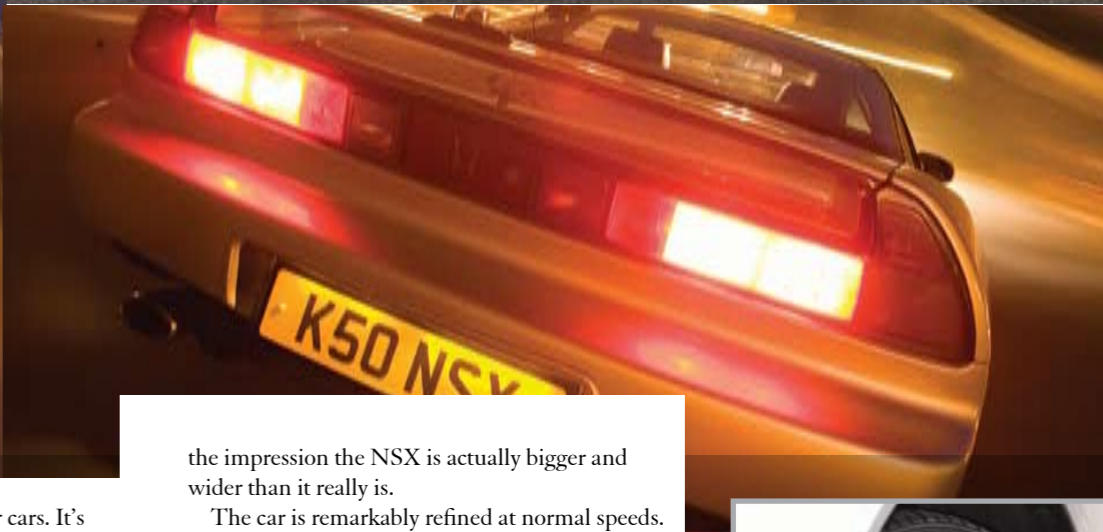
With an all-up weight of 1320kgs, the NSX is lighter than most current hot hatches which goes some way towards explaining just how nimble and sprightly it feels under acceleration. With a 0-62mph sprint of 5.7s and a standing quarter time of around 14s, it's no slouch given the car's dual role as a supermarket supercar.

Even today, the NSX feels lively. Sure, there are more exciting cars out there, cars with more power, more driven wheels and headier revving motors that'll scare livestock as you roar in to view as the engine bounces off the rev-limiter – but there are very few that will deliver the same level of refinement and handling you get from the NSX as you stir the gear lever and prod the loud pedal. Porsche drivers understand that dry weather driving on the throttle is a joy: the car's rear weight bias means you get loads of grip, so you can exploit this by stomping on the throttle

Exhaust note is suppressed below 4000rpm. Above that, all hell breaks loose



Super rigid construction handed the NSX a superb chassis and terrific handling



a lot earlier than you can in other cars. It's something you can do in the NSX as well, though with a little extra care because the engine's mass isn't directly over the rear wheels.

Without a hulking great engine to peer over, the car's sloping front end offers an unimpaired view of the road ahead while the low-slung seats and angled interior force you in to a sporty driving position. You get some hint of the car's nature as you plop in to the cockpit: the seats seem to be mounted millimetres from the road surface and the sills are wide enough to rest a cup of tea on with the doors open. You sit so low that truck tyres loom huge and ominously close in slow moving traffic – a phenomena exacerbated at motorway speeds as your passenger makes a note of every lorry hub odometer which passes by at eye level. The low position and limited rear view gives

the impression the NSX is actually bigger and wider than it really is.

The car is remarkably refined at normal speeds. An exceptionally long first gear and well spaced second means you'll hit 60mph with just one shift – and the V6 sounds gorgeous as you wind it past 5000rpm. There's a subtle rasp as the car passes 4500rpm, developing in to a full bark and roar by 7000rpm. Third and fourth gears are spaced for sublime acceleration, while fifth makes motorway cruising bearable.

The NSX may look a little dated now, but the car's performance potential is remarkable given its age and current market value. You can pick up automatics for between £10-15,000 now, but for the pure, unadulterated sporty drive, you're best to search out one with a manual gearbox and fastidious service history for around £25-30,000. You won't be disappointed.

