

PICKING THE

Coupes have to throw the right shapes. So we looked at the latest ones from Nissan, Fiat, Honda



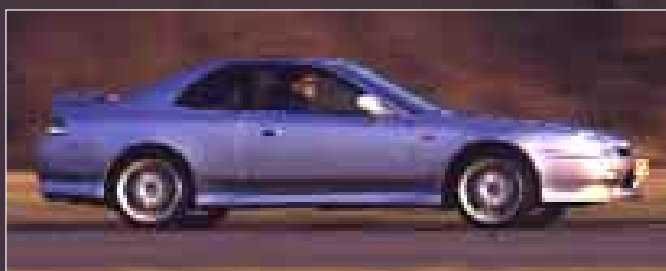
Photography: Philip Lee Harvey

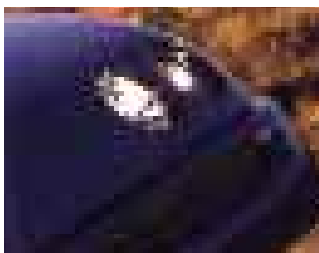


ontest

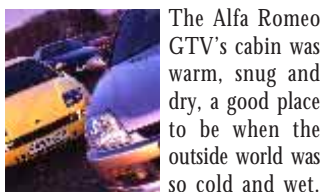
RIGHT LINES

and Alfa, tried them on the road, got Tiff to thrash them on the track and lined up a winner





On the road or track, the little Alfa has brilliant balance and great steering. It has some superb styling details too, but we don't like the wide rear light strip much



The Alfa Romeo GTV's cabin was warm, snug and dry, a good place to be when the outside world was so cold and wet. But despite the thick fog, spotting the car ahead was easy. With its bright yellow paintwork and wild styling, the Fiat Coupe shone like a beacon.

By complete contrast, the car behind, Honda's all-new £22,295 2.2 VTi Prelude, had almost vanished into the gloom. Maybe the fog was making an aesthetic point by cloaking the Honda, because it's no design classic.

Coupes are meant to make your jaw drop when you see them, but the Prelude's ultra-conservative styling and big ugly lights make you wrinkle your nose. The addition of a £2,995 body kit, comprising front and rear spoilers, sill extensions and wider wheels and tyres did little to alter our opinion.

The last car in our convoy, Nissan's £23,500 200SX Touring (also available

as a £21,000 base model), had all but disappeared. The occasional flash of headlights was all that was visible of the nose job it had last year. The front end is now much more aggressive-looking but, compared with the Italian machinery, there's something slightly contrived about the Nissan's nose. It's fairly sleek from the side, but the kicked up skirt is odd – it looks more like accident damage than design.

But let's get back to the front of our convoy, because the £21,249 Fiat Coupe and the £20,940 Alfa Romeo GTV are jaw-droppingly stunning. They have both been worked on by Pininfarina in Turin, but as to which stuns the most, well, that debate's still running. If we ever come to an agreement on which we like best, we'll let you know. But don't hold your breath.

PERFORMANCE

It's nice, then, to come to an area over which there can be no arguing. When it comes to performance, the Fiat Coupe is king. Its new two-litre five-

cylinder turbocharged engine is far and away the most powerful here. It turns out 220bhp and a massive 228lb ft of torque from as low as 2,500rpm, which all adds up to a cracking power to weight ratio of 170bhp/ton. Next up is the Nissan; it's a two-litre turbo too, but with four cylinders, not five. It packs a fairly healthy 197bhp, giving it a power to weight ratio of 156bhp/ton, with its maximum torque of 195lb ft coming in at 4,800rpm.

Despite having the largest capacity of the four, variable valve trickery and a new cylinder block made from fancy sounding fibre-reinforced aluminium alloy, Honda's four-cylinder 2.2-litre VTEC engine musters only 182bhp, giving it a power to weight ratio of 140bhp/ton. Its pulling power is weedy too, when compared with the Nissan and the Fiat, with just 152lb ft of torque at a high 5,300rpm. The poor little GTV has to do with just 150bhp from its normally aspirated two-litre, four-cylinder 16-valve engine and only 138lb ft of torque at 4,000rpm. It also



You could chop up a Fiat Coupe and fill an art gallery with the bits, but then you'd miss out on the brilliant engine. Shame it doesn't drive all four wheels, though



doesn't help its cause by being heaviest here at 1,370kg, resulting in a power to weight ratio of just 111bhp/ton.

At Millbrook Proving Ground, the Fiat dominated proceedings completely with a scorching 0-60mph time of just 6.1 seconds and it absolutely flew over the West Country roads. While you have to wait for the turbocharger to cut in before things really start to happen, there's still plenty of strong pulling power before that. When the turbo does come in at around 4,000rpm, it does so with a rather unsophisticated but glorious burst of power. The engine as a whole is great, and the five-cylinder burble a delight to listen to.

The 200SX also feels fairly rapid and makes short work of long dual carriageways. Its turbo delivery is smoother than the Fiat's but, overall, the engine is less refined and more thrashy at speed.

Honda's VTEC unit is quicker revving than either the Fiat or the Nissan. The flat metallic wail it makes at around 5,000rpm, when the VTEC system comes into play, is great. It's

smooth, too, and feels unburstable. But the Honda engine does need revving a lot, especially low down, and can't match the Fiat or the Nissan.

Despite its lack of power, the Alfa is still good fun. On tight, twisty roads it feels fast, but you do miss the power of the other three. Like the Honda, it's a quick revver, pulling cleanly round to 7,000rpm, and it sounds fantastic.

The 'big banger' power of the Fiat is not without its problems, though. Even with Fiat's Viscodrive torque transfer system there's still plenty of wheelspin, in the wet or dry. There's no traction control on the 200SX, apart from a limited slip diff, and it's a fantastically tail-happy machine. But the balanced chassis makes sideways behaviour easy to correct. The Prelude has no traction control and spins its front wheels easily on wet roads. But the GTV's power disadvantage is an advantage in the wet, for you can nail the throttle, knowing that it won't lose traction.

All four cars are equipped with vented discs at the front, solid discs at

the rear and ABS. Both the Japanese cars have firm-feeling pedals, with the Alfa's softer and the Fiat's having the longest travel of all. Few people like the feel of the Fiat's drilled brake pedal, or the fact that it can be awkward to use without brushing the accelerator.

All four cars have good gearboxes, with the Japanese units feeling slickest. The Honda's is marginally better than the Nissan's, which occasionally feels notchy. The Italian gearshifts give no cause for complaint and we like the Alfa's pistol-grip gearlever.

H A N D L I N G

You can read in detail about how the cars handled when Tiff pushed them to the limit around Thruxton (see panel). But on the road, the Alfa is sharp, on the ball and very involving to drive. Like all the cars here it uses power steering, in this case with just 2.1 turns lock to lock, but it feels more direct and more instant than the others. Turn the wheel and the Alfa responds instantly, giving good feedback. The



Ah yes, the Honda's styling... (ahem) well the wheels are OK, but the rest isn't. The interior looks like an Accord's and Tiff didn't much like the handling on the track



Nissan's steering is sharp and direct, too, but doesn't have quite the feel of the Alfa's. The Fiat's steering is nicely weighted, but not quite as direct and accurate as the 200SX or GTV. The Honda has the least inspiring steering; it lacks little in directness or accuracy, but it could do with a touch more feel.

Technically, the Honda leads the way with double wishbone suspension and electronic four-wheel steering. At low speeds the rear wheels turn in the opposite direction to the front, while at higher speeds they turn in the same direction. The Alfa also has a small degree of rear-wheel steering built into its multi-link rear suspension. Both Italian cars use MacPherson strut front suspension, as does the Nissan. The Fiat has rear trailing arms and the 200SX a multi-link set-up.

During parking and low-speed tight corners you can feel the Honda's rear steering working but we couldn't feel much of a difference at high speed on the road. While the Honda can be hustled through bends quite rapidly, it

gives in to understeer too easily, especially in the wet. Fiat's Coupe understeers when pushed hard, but it can corner very rapidly and often the understeer is produced because it loses traction, not grip. The clean-handling Nissan feels neutral and well balanced, provided you don't go provoking the tail out. When pushed really hard, the GTV will succumb and run its nose wide, but it holds on longer than the Fiat and Honda. Easing off the throttle brings it back into line, though.

None of the cars has a particularly brilliant ride, although the two Japanese generally felt more composed than the more crashy Italian cars. The Alfa's rear suspension was constantly making weird clonking noises and bouncy roads upset it more than the others. Despite a firm ride, the Fiat coped well enough with the bumps.

ACCOMMODATION

Functionally, the interior of the 200SX and the Prelude are fine, but they're just criminally dull. There's nothing

special about them, nothing to make you feel like you're sitting in a sports car. To be fair, though, at least they can't be faulted on build quality, something which can't be said about the Fiat and Alfa, neither of which feel quite so convincingly constructed.

Inside, the Alfa feels small, but not uncomfortable. You sit low and peer through a small windscreen, surrounded by instruments angled towards you, all set in their own individual cylindrical binnacles. It's all very retro, all very sportscar-ish - and all very black. Like the 200SX, the GTV's interior is almost completely devoid of any other colour. Black leather seats, standard in the Nissan and optional in the Alfa, only made the problem worse.

The Fiat is brilliant inside. It's such a simple idea, fitting strips of body-coloured plastic to the interior with holes cut in them for the instruments, but it works so well. And the Fiat scores on sheer practicality with big, easy-to-use switchgear, a good driving position and plenty of room up front.



Nissan gives instant sideways effect; just squeeze the throttle and let the rear end do the walking. It's a brilliant driver's car, but has had a style bypass inside and out



It's got the most room in the back, too, is the easiest for rear passengers to get in and out of and has the the best boot.

The Prelude doesn't have enough headroom - not if you're tall and like to sit close to the wheel. We don't like the look of the cloth-trimmed seats much - although they offer the most side support - and the corner of the transmission tunnel digs into the driver's left leg. But it is second best to the Fiat in the back, although more difficult to get in and out of. There's plenty of room in the boot and the internal release for the boot and fuel flap can be locked with a key.

The Nissan is roomy in the front, but the rear is more cramped than either the Fiat or the Honda. The boot isn't the biggest, but it will still easily hold enough weekend luggage for two. The Alfa has a tiny boot and much of its capacity is taken up by a space-saver spare. It also has the least room in the back - adults certainly won't want to travel far in the rear. The cabin is roomy enough in the front, even if the

driving position is slightly splay-legged.

All of the cars have stereos - and they are all absolute rubbish. We're not talking sound quality, but ease of use. All are hopelessly fiddly, unclear and difficult to use. The Alfa is the worst offender as its stereo is also badly positioned, right down by the gear lever.

VERDICT

With the new Prelude, Honda has built a very competent car, but it has not, sadly, built a great coupe. It has a good engine, but it takes more than that to make a great sports car. You need the looks both inside and out and you need something that feels alive in your hands - something that feels special. The Honda scores zero on all these counts and so comes last.

Perhaps it was a little unfair putting the underpowered Alfa Romeo in this test. It is that lack of power, combined with limited rear space, that leaves it in third place. But it's still well worth considering all the same. It has the looks, both on the inside and out, and

is terrific fun to drive. If you can live with its limitations, go for it, you'll have a real head-turner.

The sideways 200SX is an absolute gas to drive, but as an overall package it falls slightly short of the mark. It just doesn't have the looks, outside or in, to warrant first place here, nor does it have the rear space. But if you've got a big tyre budget and like your motoring sideways, there's nothing quite like it.

The Fiat will probably get through tyres every bit as quickly as the Nissan, but it will be its front wheels that are doing the damage, not the rears. Ultimately, because it's those front wheels which do the driving and not the rears, it isn't quite as much fun as the Nissan, nor is it quite such a tidy handler. But it's still a terrific machine. Not only is the performance fabulous, but so is the engine. Then there are the looks - both exterior and interior - and the high dose of practicality. With all this and the second lowest price tag here, there really can be no other place for the Fiat Coupe but first. >



The long, undulating curves of the Thruxton circuit are the fastest in the country. It's an ideal track to allow a coupe to stretch its legs and demonstrate its handling.

Weighing 1,370kgs and with 150bhp, the Alfa is the heaviest and least powerful, so it was always going to be the slowest, setting a lap time of one minute 41.3 seconds at an average of 83.72mph. It was almost flat in fourth from the exit of the complex right round to the chicane, which it approached at 114mph, and was a delight to handle. Good feedback through well-weighted steering instilled instant confidence and the chassis balance is surprisingly neutral for a front-wheel-drive car. With easily controlled lift-off oversteer mid-corner, allowing the back to swing out in the complex and the slide instantly checked by re-application of the throttle, the Alfa was fun – with a capital F! By contrast, the Honda was something of a mystery as its hi-tech rear-wheel steering sometimes seems to be working against you rather than for you. We discovered that turning into a tight corner very quickly and then lifting off sharply caused a big oversteer that would spin the car if correction wasn't applied rapidly. This is a front-wheel-drive car – with rear-wheel-drive looks and rear-wheel-drive handling. The body control is very good and the suspension well-balanced but I always felt the car was driving me, not vice versa – I never felt involved enough. The lap time was respectable at one minute 38.1 seconds for the impressive 182bhp VTEC-powered machine. The Fiat, with 220bhp, you'd expect to be fast, and it stormed to a

registered 125mph on the straight – but it was only 0.6 seconds quicker over the lap. It handled like a hyperactive pogo stick on steroids, though. On the slower corners, the Fiat simply understeered in great chunks but at high speed it leapt from bump to bump, with the dampers unable to keep control. And this was on a relatively smooth race track. The Nissan is, of course, rear-wheel drive and has to be the driver's favourite – you steer with the front and power with the back. To the new generations brought up in the hot-hatch era, such cars feel nervous mid-corner as the back threatens to break away. But rear-wheel drive is still the way to go if you want to lap fast. With just 193bhp, the 200SX stopped the clock a full two seconds faster than the Fiat, averaging nearly 89mph and approaching the chicane nudging 130mph. I was now driving the car rather than vice versa. With balanced power slides in the slow stuff and a well-sorted chassis at high speed giving me mild understeer on the way in and neutral on the way out, there's no sudden nastiness here. It's a shame that Nissan doesn't provide a traction control button because I feel sure this would encourage some of the more timid drivers to branch out and leave the boredom of their understeering front-wheel-drive world and try a car that really handles. And if you want a car that handles, the 200SX is it *Tiff Needell*



KEEPING IN LINE					
	PERFORMANCE	HANDLING	ACCOMMODATION	EQUIPMENT	STYLING
Alfa Romeo GTV	●●	●●●●	●●●	●●●	●●●●●
Fiat Coupe	●●●●●	●●●	●●●●●	●●●	●●●●●
Honda Prelude	●●●	●●	●●●●●	●●●●●	●
Nissan 200SX	●●●●	●●●●●	●●●	●●●●●	●●

LINING THEM UP				
	Alfa	Fiat	Honda	Nissan
Performance				
0-30mph	2.8	2.5	3.1	2.5
0-40mph (secs)	4.3	3.3	4.3	3.6
0-50mph (secs)	6.2	4.9	5.7	5.2
0-60mph (secs)	8.1	6.1	7.3	6.8
0-70mph (secs)	11.2	8.5	9.5	8.9
0-80mph (secs)	14.3	10.2	12.1	11.3
0-90mph (secs)	18.0	12.2	14.9	14.0
0-100mph (secs)	23.7	14.7	19.1	17.5
0-110mph (secs)	31.3	18.8	23.9	22.1
0-120mph (secs)	–	22.7	31.1	27.5
0-130mph (secs)	–	27.6	–	–
Max speed, mph	130	152.1	137.6	143.3
Standing qtr mile	16.4	14.7	15.8	15.2
Term'1 speed (mph)	85.9	99.3	92.9	93.9
30-50mph in 3rd	5.4	3.6	4.8	5.1
50-70mph in 5th	11.0	6.8	8.8	9.3
30-70mph thro' grs	8.4	6.0	6.4	6.4
70-0mph (m/ft)	46.4/152.1	50.9/166.9	50.3/165.1	50.3/165
Costs				
On the road price	£20,940	£21,249	£22,295	£23,500
Emmox costs, p/mile	49.55	57.32	55.18	53.31
Test mpg	25.6	22.2	23.7	28.4
Euromix mpg	33.9	26.9	31.3	26.4
Insurance group	16	18	TBA	17
Service interval	24,000m	9,000m	6,000m	18,000m
Warranty	3yrs/60,000m	1yr/unlimited	2yrs/unlimited	3yrs/60,000
Equipment				
Twin airbags	yes/	yes	yes	yes
Alarm/immobiliser	yes/yes	yes/yes	no/yes	yes/yes
Alloy wheels	yes	yes	yes	yes
Anti-lock brakes	yes	yes	yes	yes
C/locking/remote	yes/yes	yes/yes	yes/yes	yes/yes
Electric windows	yes	yes	yes	yes
Power steering	yes	yes	yes	yes
Radio cassette/cd	yes/no	yes/no	yes/no	yes/yes
Air conditioning	option	option	yes	yes
Leather	option	option	no	yes
Technical				
Engine	4cyl 16v	5cyl 20v turbo	4cyl 16v VTEC	4cyl 16v turbo
Capacity (cc)	1970	1998	2157	1998
Max power/rpm	150/6,200	220/5,750	182/7,000	197/5,600
Max torque/rpm	138/4,000	228/2,500	152/5,300	195/4,800
Transmission	5sp man, fwd	5sp man, fwd	5sp man, fwd	5sp man, rwd
Front brakes	vented discs, ABS	vented discs, ABS	vented discs, ABS	vented discs, ABS
Rear brakes	solid discs, ABS	solid discs, ABS	solid discs, ABS	solid discs, ABS
Front suspension	MacP strut	MacP strut	double wishbone	MacP strut
Rear suspension	multi link	trailing arm	double wishbone	multi link
Wheels	6.5 x16J	7 x 16J	6.5 x 16J	6.5 x 16J
Tyres	205/50 16	205/50 16	205/50 16	205/55 16
Dimensions (mm)	L:4,285; W:1,780	L:4,250; W:1,768	L:4,545; W:1,750	L:4,560; W:1,730

