

by JAMES GENT

PHOTOGRAPHY by ARUN.M.NAIR

DADDY'S HOME



After more than a decade, the NSX name returns to the motoring world this month. So what better time to dust off the 1990s original legend for a spin?



'DESPITE THE NSX NOW BEING INTO ITS 26TH YEAR, THE BODY LINES ARE STILL A THING OF BEAUTY'

I CAN FEEL THE GREEN-EYED monster of several thousand JDM fans moving in my direction even as I write this, but I was never a huge fan of the Honda NSX.

I know, I know, but as a teenager, while friends were mastering 'The Corkscrew' with the NSX in *Gran Turismo*, I was too busy swearing under my breath at the Lancia Delta on *SEGA Rally's* desert stage. The Ferrari F40 on my bedroom wall was going nowhere even if the blue tack was starting to give, and the first drive on my bucket list was reserved for the Lamborghini Countach. Yes, during a 15-year production run, the NSX raised the bar for supercars, made Ferrari question its then top-of-the-range 348, and combined the allure of Italy's pre-eminent supercars with

the everyday reliability of a Civic. And yes, yes, Ayrton Senna, loafers, etc. But for me, the NSX rarely featured on the radar.

Given the NSX's recent resurgence with the launch of the new model (you've probably already read Monkey's feature on page 36), this is an opinion best left buried deep in my internal filing cabinet. Recently though I rather stupidly let this thought slip to a friend of mine, owner of the pristine 1992 example you see above. The reaction, spit-take aside, was predictable: "it proved a genuine supercar didn't have to be Italian", "it revitalised the sports car industry", "the man heeled-and-toed in white socks around Suzuka, for God's sake!" Violence is mercifully averted when a set of NSX keys is thrust into my hand as he insists I take his beloved car for a spin and attempt to right this dastardly wrong. "And

Above: 15 years after production first began, the plug was finally pulled on the original NSX in 2005. Several nations wept...



make sure you take the revs to at least 6000rpm before shifting."

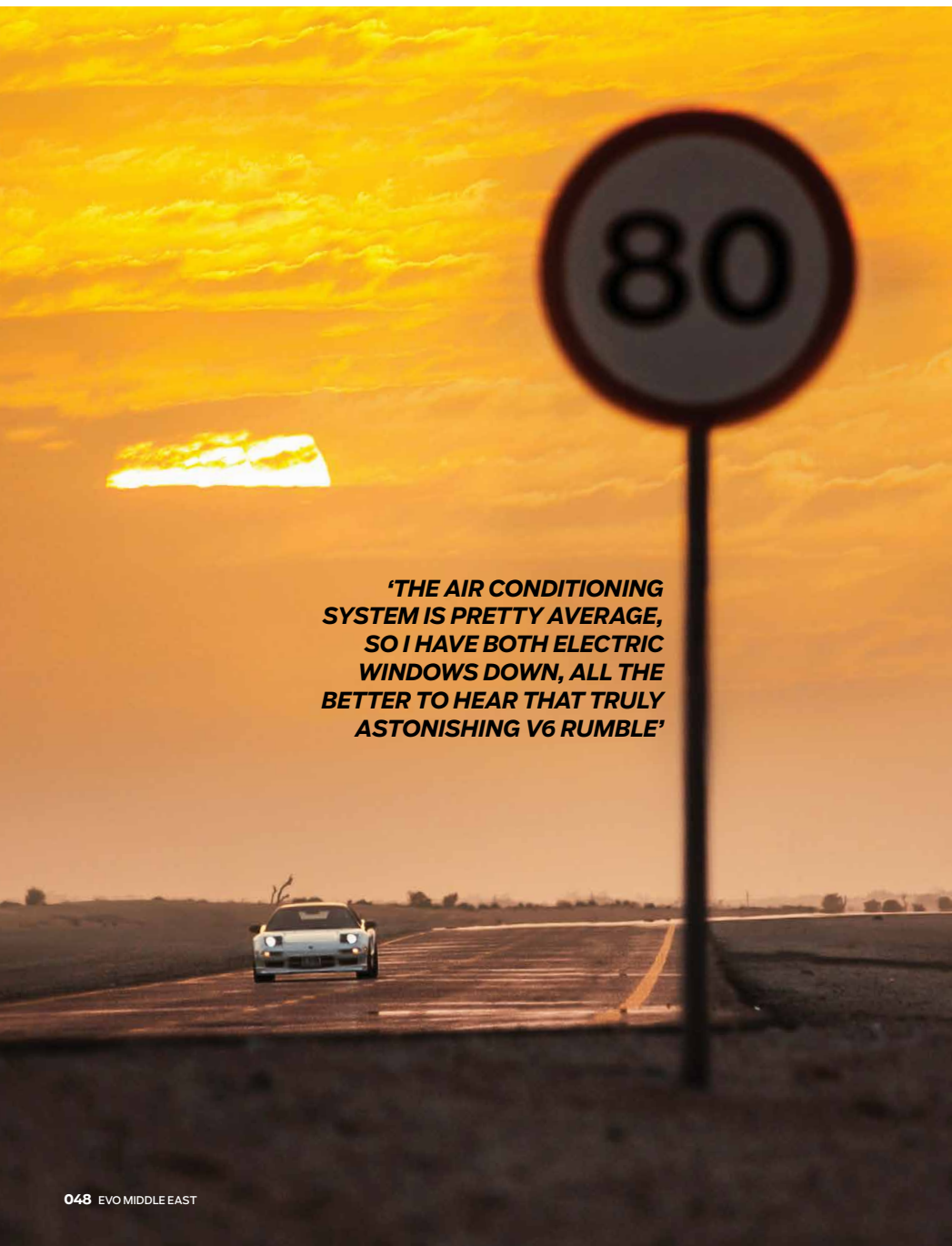
My ears are still ringing as I make my way to the parking lot where said legend is housed today. And I must admit, despite the model now being into its 26th year, the classic NSX lines are admittedly still a thing of beauty. Look past the short overhangs and the pop-up headlights – which Honda criminally gave the boot in 2002 – and the grooved door panels draw so much of the eye, that I almost don't notice the surprisingly small wheels complete with NSX brake calipers. Somehow the single rear brake light still seems charmingly futuristic even in 2016, and since I'm trying my best to ignore the North American 'Acura' badge on the rear bumper (there's nothing Yankee about this design), the height of that non-targa roof keeps drawing my eye: it's about as high off the

ground as my belt, which makes me wonder how I'm even going to squeeze myself into this thing.

With a lot less difficulty than I'd imagined, as it turns out. Though the roofline is low, the stance is even lower. It feels like I'm sitting on the floor, but at the very least I have bags of headroom, all save the doorframe, which hangs at temple level with almost millimetric precision. There's no red 'Start' button either. Just one key, which I slide into the steering column and give a quick twist. Then another. Then one more as the immobiliser finally catches up. The 3-litre V6 springs into life with an uplifting roar, akin to barely any six-cylinders I've driven in recent memory. If the looks themselves screamed '90s', the engine note easily beats them to it.

I'm not quite ready to pull away from the

parking space just yet though, as I've been given very particular instructions. The most important of which is to make sure I have the spare key in my pocket at all times: the owner discovered the hard way that all doors lock if he steps out of the car while the engine is still running, and as I left for work without a wire coat hanger this morning, I take heed. Second is to make sure that once I have adjusted my seat on the runners, I should push the metal bar firmly down to make sure it stays put, otherwise I'm likely to go hurtling backwards when I gun it away from the traffic lights. And third, make sure to give myself four or five minutes to affix the seatbelts properly. Much like a racing harness, I have two belts over my shoulders to fiddle with as well as two across my lap. It's only once I've adjusted this here and tweaked that there that I realise closing the door, now that



'THE AIR CONDITIONING SYSTEM IS PRETTY AVERAGE, SO I HAVE BOTH ELECTRIC WINDOWS DOWN, ALL THE BETTER TO HEAR THAT TRULY ASTONISHING V6 RUMBLE'



Clockwise from left: Simple, elegant, and reminiscent to the Honda-powered McLaren MP4/4; don't let the 'Acura' nod to America fool you; our publishing editor was really more of a SEGA man back in the day



I'm effectively strapped to the seat, is actually impossible. Take two.

Yes, the pressures of 90s supercar ownership is already starting to get to me as I finally make my way out of the parking structure and onto the main road. Saying that, I'm thrilled this car has foregone the optional automatic – rumoured to rip all character from the NSX – for a six-speed manual, the short-shift changes through which click into place with a hearty 'ker-chick'. I had worried that the rather tight and elevated position of the pedals would give me fits (I have to bend my right foot around the transmission tunnel, and the pedals are raised so high, I can't even see them under the dash panelling), but fortunately the almost lounge-like position of my seat has allayed that. The advent and pseudo-necessity these days for carbon-fibre shelled bucket seats in any self-respecting supercar had left me wondering if the NSX might offer the same supportive but rather raw contours, and I'm pleased to find that, somehow, the cushioned buckets are actually very comfortable. The almost aggressively raked windscreen doesn't hinder visibility too much either as I begin weaving into the heady flow of traffic heading out of the city, though the truly massive B-pillar and tiny wing mirrors mean lane changes are conducted with several more wings and prayers than I'd hoped for. Plus an intermittent hiss from the aftermarket stereo that needs some fine-tuning.

But already that 'NSX' character is starting to eke through. The air conditioning system is pretty average, I've been warned, and so I have both electric windows down, all the better to hear that truly astonishing V6 rumble. At idle, the notes are lost amidst the traditional

monotony of surrounding traffic, but at pick-up, the deep timbre begins to rise to truly magnificent levels. Inside, the engine notes ricochet about the cabin like an untamed falcon, darting up in intensity when I least expect it.

It's not just the noise that's grabbed me though, even if the archaic albeit clean-cut dashboard is rather take-it-or-leave-it. Devoid of any multifunction whatsoever, the Alcantara steering wheel feels so immediate in both feel and placement. It's angled so directly at my chest that old YouTube clips of Honda F1 cars and qualifying laps of the McLaren MP4/4 around Monaco start flicking through my head. There's hardly a more ridiculous comparison than my good self and Senna, but the knowledge that the three-time champ was instrumental in developing the aluminium chassis beneath me begins to grow in significance. Even if the surprising thickness of the car mat means I keep getting it caught under the throttle with my right heel...

I'm enjoying this. The sense of nostalgia is starting to build, the bubbling potential beneath the surface amidst the civility of the

cabin difficult to ignore. Though I've been cautious so far with the American-spec MPH speedometer and as the traffic is beginning to thin, I gradually pick up speed. There's a turning to my right that heads out into the desert down a couple of winding stretches, and I can feel my patience snap. Time to see what the hype is all about.

The result, as I start my run, is initially underwhelming. A gentleman's agreement between Japanese manufacturers back in the 90s meant the NSX's V6 was limited to just 280bhp and torque to 217lb ft, placing the 0-100kph time towards the six seconds mark: even despite a 1410kg kerb weight, today the NSX could be outgunned by a reasonably well-kept Volkswagen Golf R. As a result, acceleration from the lower revs is steady at best. An upshift brings with it a tangible rock in the cabin, but there's little in the way of energy below mid-range. Only once the rev needle swings past 4200rpm does the V6 come alive.

The engine roar finds a new sharp note, and there's a spike in punch from the throttle as 'linear' gives way to 'aggressive' before the



'IT'S AN EQUATION THAT MAKES ME RE-CONSIDER THE WEIGHT OF EXPECTATION LAUDED ON THE NEW NSX. IT'S ENORMOUS'



8000rpm redline. In the lower revs, the NSX maintains a quiet civility, but above that lies a 90s Ferrari-bating energy.

Still though, despite the renewed energy of the acceleration, the mid-engined V6 is not the blue ribbon winner, for that would be the steering. There's a stunning balance to the NSX mid-corner that beggars belief. Low centre of gravity and clever weight distribution means a fluidity (providing you keep the revs up) that can be fully exploited through the long sweeper. Keep feeding the power in and though the front end is loaded up, there's no trace of understeer to deal with.

Indeed, the chuckable nature of the NSX and the level of grip at the front means the rears soon begin to twitch, with little electric nannying preventing them from snapping sideways. Fortunately the lack of power steering means feedback from the front end is beautifully accurate, offering an engagement that modern supercars can't replicate. At low

speeds, this lack of power assistance makes three-point turns a good workout for your shoulders. And yet there's a magnificent balance between the tautened body control and supple damping. I'm reminded though that this performance comes from a car now 26 years old as the 'fuel low' light starts blinking on the dashboard.

By the time the camera car has caught up, I'm several runs in, the soft hiss from the stereo completely obliterated by the V6 scream at high revs. I can feel a knot of tension starting to build in my right shoulder blade, an after effect of the physical nature of the steering. My right foot, having been bent around the centre console for several hours, has now fallen asleep, my brain has banned internal mathematics as night descends and the ratio between kilometres and miles completely escapes me. Even the fuel gauge has started reminding me that I've gone slightly overboard this afternoon.

It's all been worth it though, providing a

peak into this iconic '90s supercar. On roads like these, the magnificence of a time now gone begins to assert itself. There's little give in the steering but sensational amounts of grip and poise through the corners. The acceleration may be sub-par by today's standards but there's plenty of drama in the high revs. And the soundtrack, from a V6 of all things, is about as throaty and magnificent a tone I've come across yet. It's an equation that makes me re-consider the weight of expectation lauded on the new NSX. Make no mistake, it is enormous.

This morning, I'd respected the NSX's reputation, yet never experienced it firsthand nor considered it a 'must do'. Now, with the sound of that V6 still ringing in my ear, the superb balance and lofty handling capabilities still resonating, I wonder whether my 90s self missed a trick. Whether aligning myself with the Delta on SEGA's desert stage over the NSX on Laguna Seca was the right way to go. ❏

HONDA NSX (1992)

Engine V6, 2977cc
Power 280bhp @ 7100rpm
Torque 217lb ft @ 5300rpm
Transmission Five-speed manual, rear-wheel drive
Front suspension Independent aluminum double-wishbone with coil springs
Rear suspension Independent aluminum double-wishbone with coil springs and stabilizer bar
Brakes Ventilated, 282 x 28mm (front), 282 x 21mm (rear)
Wheels 6.5 JJ x 15in (front), 8.0 JJ x 16in (rear)
Tyres 205/50 ZR15 (front), 225/50 ZR16 (rear)
Weight 1365kg
Power-to-weight 198bhp/ton
0-100kph 5.9secs
Top speed 273kph
Basic price \$65,000 (in 1992)
evo rating: ★★★★★

