

# SPARE THE ROD

TONY WATTS  
FINDS HE'S A HOT  
RODDER AT HEART  
WHILE DRIVING THE  
NISSAN 370Z



**CONSTANT** improvement is the name of the game in the car business. (Maybe not so much in Chrysler's case, come to think of it.) If I had a dime for hearing the same spiel at each new model launch, I'd be worth about S\$20, roughly five times what I've earned writing about them.

The standard story goes that the new model is larger and roomier than the car it replaces; and it is faster, has more horsepower and uses less fuel. Park a new 3 Series next to a 20-year-old 5 Series and you'll see how they evolve: the 3 is about the same size as the old 5. Now you understand how this made room to accommodate the 1 Series.

In Nissan's case there should never have been pressure to make the Z car larger or more luxurious – that just resulted in the hideousness that was the 300ZX. What had started as a sports car, Japan's answer to the E-Type Jaguar, had become an ugly, lardy pile of poop by the mid 1980s. And while Nissan went against its tradition of enlarging the engines, and thus the model designation, with the launch of the second-generation 300ZX, the far prettier and more accomplished car marked the end of the line for the Z car.

We should be thankful to that car, however: it ended the successive run of Z cars that started with the 240Z when it went out of production around nine years ago. All this gave Nissan the opportunity to launch the 350Z, not as an enlarged, more luxurious version of the model it replaced, but rather starting with a clean sheet. It was a car that captured the spirit of the early Z cars – a fact acknowledged by Nissan with the omission of the X in the model designation, which was originally added to signify luxury.

The 350Z was not only a great sporty drive, but it was also a lovely car to look at, thanks to the purity of the design that paid homage to the 240Z without being too retro.

So now we have the new 370Z: is it bigger and better? By the model designation you'll know the engine has been enlarged to 3.7 litres, so it is definitely more powerful (though not as much as you might expect from the extra 198cc of displacement; power is up 20 horsepower to 328, torque is up 5nm to 363nm). The real surprise is that the 0-100km/h dash is completed 0.1 seconds slower than the car it replaces according to Nissan's specifications. For the car equipped with the manual transmission that's still a respectable 5.8 seconds, but it does make you wonder what's happened to that extra power, particularly as the 370Z is supposed to be lighter too.

The really good news for aspiring Z car owners is that the 370Z is actually shorter overall, if slightly wider than the 350Z – that's right, a new model that isn't bigger than the one it replaces.

And the strengths of the 350Z have been built on too. The 370Z is a proper sports car in an old-school sort of way. It mates a powerful, large-capacity, naturally-aspirated engine with a sweet-handling rear-wheel-drive chassis. This is pretty much what Carroll Shelby did in the 1960s with the AC Ace to make the legendary AC Cobra, so nothing new there. (Arguably the original cart-sprung Ace wasn't a sweet handler, but go with me here). What is interesting is that Nissan still sees room in the range for the Z car, given the hype surrounding the high-tech GT-R, which offers turbocharging and all-wheel-drive for mammoth performance.

But maybe that reflects the provenance of the beasts. The GT-R, traditionally nicknamed "Godzilla", is the high-tech Japanese solution, where the 370Z has more of a born in California, modern-yet-traditional vibe. And I like it.

For everyday use the suspension is firm, and there's not a great amount of storage space, but drive it fast and none of that matters. The engine has loads of power – even the automatic



version I tested felt quick; the brakes are strong and the steering direct. The chassis develops loads of grip and responds nicely to driver input.

I'm not completely sold on the styling, which eschews the very clean lines of the 350Z, instead opting for bulging wheel-arches and complex curves. It looks to a degree as though a hot-rodder has been introduced to the styling department, but when it goes like this I really don't care. There's nothing much else available today that comes close, certainly not at this price.

If money is a big motivation, remember that a 3.7-litre vehicle is going to cost when it comes to road tax time. But as the hot-rod saying goes, there's no substitute for cubic inches. ■