

MARKETPLACE BUYER'S GUIDE



'THE GOLD STANDARD IN SPORTS CAR LUXURY'

BY MARK J. McCOURT

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CRAIG FITZGERALD

The Ford Thunderbird isn't the first car that springs to mind when considering Datsun's 280-ZX, but the evolving tastes of the automotive marketplace led that American car to pile on the luxury items and evolve from a sporting car to a four-seat grand tourer, a path that was followed in some form by Nissan's flagship as it evolved from the first-generation 280Z to the all-new 280-ZX.

That evolution from the half-price E-Type coupe 240Z to the "mass-produced sporty personal car that would offer superior safety and handling characteristics, as well as a combination of luxury, comfort and perfor-

mance" (as noted in a Nissan press release) 280-ZX was well in line with the changing tastes of buyers who were abandoning the British sports cars of their youth for more comfortable vehicles, as well as the growing focus on fuel economy. The move was a smart one, and it kept Datsun abreast of competition from the Toyota Supra, Mazda RX-7, Mitsubishi Starion, Porsche 924 and Alfa Romeo GTV6, as well as keeping it competitive in SCCA racing.

Few fans of the original Z cars' styling were disappointed by that of the crisp, athletic 280-ZX, and careful wind tunnel testing improved the new car's drag coef-

ficient from 0.467 to 0.385. Like the later two Z series cars (the 280Z was a U.S.-only model), the internal code "S130" ZX would be sold in \$9,899 short-wheelbase two-seat and \$11,599 long-wheelbase four-seat forms.

While the body changed from its predecessor, the 280-ZX's "L28E" engine was mostly carried over. Displacing 2,753cc and sporting an 8.3:1 compression ratio, this seven-main-bearing, Bosch L-Jetronic fuel-injected straight-six had a 3.39 x 3.11-inch bore and stroke, and made an SAE-rated 135hp (132 in California) and 144-lbs.ft. of torque, lowered in name

1979-'83 DATSUN 280-ZX/280-ZX TURBO



Fuel injected 2.8-liter six carried over from 280Z, and its durability was proven; most engine parts are readily available today.



Front and rear fenders and sill metal are reproduced, as are taillamp gaskets; used taillamp lenses can be sourced if required.

only from the previous gross-rated 170hp and 177-lbs.ft. of torque. The four- or five-speed manual gearbox and optional (\$295) three-speed automatic were also carried over, but the range-extending 21.1-gallon fuel tank was new. Air conditioning was available, and the \$2,285 Grand Luxury option package added velour upholstery, aluminum alloy wheels, a rear window washer/wiper, cruise control, power windows, a power passenger door mirror, a four-speaker cassette stereo system and a dual-range fuel gauge.

Underpinning the 280-ZX was a four-wheel independent suspension composed

of MacPherson struts, coil springs and a 22mm anti-roll bar in front, and semi-trailing arms, coil springs over telescopic dampers and a matching anti-roll bar in the rear. The four-wheel disc brakes (with vented front rotors) behind the steel 14 x 5.5-inch or alloy 14 x 6-inch wheels were new, as was the manual rack and pinion steering setup. Power steering was optional, and from 1979 through 1981, it acted on a recirculating ball system.

Keeping the Z car's performance heritage alive, the 1979 two-seat models sprinted to 60 MPH in roughly 9.2 seconds and topped out at 124 MPH with a manual,

or 112 MPH with an automatic transmission. A special edition called the 280-ZXR was built to the tune of 1,012 cars, all sparsely equipped two-seaters sporting tri-tone blue striping over Silver Mist paint and a large molded rubber rear wing for \$399. This wing was the car's *raison d'être*, as ZXRs were designed to homologate the wing—good for 370 pounds of downforce at 100 MPH—for SCCA and IMSA racing. It was also available through the Datsun Competition Parts catalog, and included heavy-duty hatch struts. "One way to tell if your 280-ZX is a true ZX-R is to remove the padding on the center console," explains

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Specifications

SPECIFICATIONS

Engine: I-6, SOHC, cast-iron block and alloy head, 2,753cc (168 cubic inches)

Horsepower: 135 (132 in California; from 1981, 145) @ 5,200 RPM; 180 @ 5,600 (Turbo)

Torque: 144-lbs.ft. @ 4,400 RPM (1981-1983, 156 @ 4,000); 202-lbs.ft. @ 2,800 (Turbo)

Induction system: ... Electronic fuel injection

TRANSMISSION

Gearbox: Five-speed manual with synchromesh on all forward gears, three-speed automatic with lock-up torque converter

PERFORMANCE

0-60 MPH: 9.2 seconds (7.4, Turbo)

Top speed: 124 MPH (112, automatic; 129, Turbo)

WEIGHTS AND MEASURES

Length: 174 inches (181.9, 2+2)

Width: 66.5 inches

Height: 51.0 inches (51.4, 2+2)

Wheelbase: 91.3 inches (99.2)

Curb weight: 2,783 pounds (2,860 2+2; 3,050 Turbo)

Production

U.S. Sales Figures*

1979..... 86,007

1980..... 53,687

1981..... 73,177

1982..... 63,855

1983..... 55,011

**Nissan Motor Co. USA reported calendar year sales; may include units from previous or following model year*



BODY

Advances in rust protection technology meant that the 280-ZXs were better prepared to withstand harsh weather conditions than

earlier Z cars, but they aren't impervious. Joseph suggests inspecting the mounts for the rear crossmember, which will require removing the seats and lifting up the carpet. "If your car is rusted here, it will take a lot of time and money to repair." Other hidden rust spots can include the floorboards and frame rails; "Because of the spot welds and seam sealer that were used in production, water finds its way into the frame rails and sits there, rotting them from the inside out. Charlie Osborne of Zedd Findings makes reproduction frame rails and floorboards." More easily viewed corrosion hot spots include the rear hatch area around the taillamps, the battery tray, rocker panels and around the windshield. The leading edge of the hood and the fender arches are other areas to inspect; new and used hoods and hatches are available.



INTERIOR

Most 280-ZXs came with fairly comprehensive equipment, so it pays to take a few minutes to check all of the car's

many gauges and accessories to make sure that they still function. Cars from sun-baked areas will often exhibit cracks in the vinyl-covered dashboard. "If they really offend you, you can get a dash cap or a carpet cover for the dash for about \$80," writes Internet Z Car Club member Dr. Al Powell. "Replacement dashes start at about \$200 for used ones, and new ones from the dealer are \$700-plus!" Molded carpet kits in all colors are available, and faded or stained carpet in the luggage area can be replaced by a good trim shop for less than \$100. While vinyl seat upholstery kits are available, the optional leather upholstery isn't sold in kit form; if the original leather is intact, it can be brought back with hide food and re-dyed with products like those from Dynamic Systems (www.dynamicsystems.com).





ENGINE

"Properly cared for over its lifetime, a Datsun 280ZX with 150,000 miles still provides another 150,000 miles of fun. Mechanically, they're bulletproof," Carl says. Joseph explains the various heads that were used: "The N47 came on the 1979-'80 280-ZX, and it has diamond-shaped exhaust ports with emission liners and steel valve seats. If you install this head on the later (F54) block, the compression will be in the mid-10:1 range. The P79 came on 1981-'83 (F54) blocks; it has a 53cc chamber, and must be used with flat-top pistons, as compression drops to 7.8:1 with dished pistons. The P90 is the 1981-'82 Turbo head, while the P90a was in use in 1983 Turbos; both are said to be the best flowing heads, and the P90a has hydraulic valve lifters. Al recommends having dry and wet compression tests done to check the health of the rings and valves, and notes that a cold engine should show at least 60 PSI of oil pressure at 3,000 RPM, and that a 10-15 PSI reading at idle is fine. A rebuilt turbo can cost about \$500; its oil feed line should also be replaced.



TRANSMISSION

A number of transmissions and differential ratios were used in the naturally aspirated and turbocharged 280-ZXs. The automatics of every year, which featured a three-element hydraulic torque converter and two planetary gear seats, were mated to 3.545 rear gears. All 1979-only four-speeds were mated with the R180 differential and 3.364 gears, like the 1979 five-speed two-seater, while the 1979 2+2 used 3.7 gears. The R200 differential was used with four- and five-speed manual cars equipped with 3.364:1, 3.7:1 and 3.9:1 axle ratios. These transmissions and differentials are generally quite durable, although abuse can lead to popping out of gear or grinding during shifts; used gearboxes are available. Al writes, "If you feel 'slack' in the drivetrain, have a shop look at the rear motor mount and the differential."



BRAKES AND SUSPENSION

The four-wheel disc brakes with vented front rotors that were standard equipment on all 280-ZXs were state of the art at the time. Some testers complained of brake fade from high speeds; making choices easier today are non-standard options like drilled and slotted rotors, braided stainless steel brake lines and special compound brake pads. While the more compliant tuning of the ZX's four-wheel independent suspension was great for touring, it came under fire in sharp handling maneuvers. Today's aftermarket offers numerous upgrades in the form of performance struts, lowering springs, thicker anti-roll bars, urethane suspension bushings and more. Grippy modern tire compounds can add yet another layer of competence to the 280-ZX's performance portfolio.



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Price Guide

	Low	Average	High
1979 280-ZX	\$2,500	\$6,000	\$9,500
1980 280-ZX	\$3,000	\$6,000	\$10,000
1980 280-ZX10	\$4,000	\$7,500	\$14,500
1981 280-ZX	\$3,000	\$6,000	\$10,000
1981 280-ZX Turbo	\$3,500	\$6,500	\$10,500
1982 280-ZX	\$3,000	\$6,000	\$10,000
1982 280-ZX Turbo	\$3,500	\$6,500	\$10,500
1983 280-ZX	\$3,000	\$6,000	\$10,000
1983 280-ZX Turbo	\$3,500	\$6,500	\$10,500

Parts Prices

Air conditioning idler pulley with bearing	\$100
Brake disc pads, front	\$33
Clutch kit, 280-ZX Turbo	\$187
Emblem, chrome 280-ZX for rear hatch ..	\$25
Fender decal, 10th Anniversary	\$18
Floor pan	\$224
Floor support rail	\$80
Fuel injection ECU, rebuilt on core	\$330
Ignition module	\$281
Piston, 1981-'83 non-Turbo	\$77
Power antenna	\$211
Rear-view mirror	\$216
Seal, door to T-top, two-seater	\$38
Strut, rear Tokico pair	\$221
Tailgate (hatch), 2+2	\$753
Upholstery kit, high back seats	\$255
Windshield	\$150

Recent Ads

1981 Datsun 280-ZX: T-top coupe, silver, automatic, restored in 2006, over \$20,000 in receipts, stored indoors, \$9,500.

1982 Datsun 280-ZX: 2-door, six-cyl., original owner, blue with gray interior, \$10,000.

1982 Datsun 280-ZX Turbo: auto, runs, trans issues, great for parts, some rust, minor dents, \$1,500 OBO.

1983 Datsun 280-ZX: 2+2, automatic, 65,000 original miles, second owner, T-tops, Z rims, p/w, p/locks, alarm, leather seats, AM-FM cassette, original tools and pouch, original leather T-top pouch, excellent condition, always garaged, no leaks, no rust, runs like a dream. \$7,500

Ads courtesy *Hemmings Motor News*

www.XenonS130.com webmaster Joseph Melnick. "There is usually a mark on the back side of the pad." The two-seat 1979 280-ZX impressed *Motor Trend* so much that it garnered the magazine's Import Car of the Year trophy.

Another limited-edition 280-ZX was in the pipeline for 1980, the year that our special feature car, belonging to Coplay, Pennsylvania's, Ryan Bordenick, was built. Nissan earmarked 3,000 two-seat models with the Grand Luxury package as code "280-ZX10" to celebrate the Z car's tenth birthday, and these \$13,850 (soon \$14,300) 10th Anniversary edition cars were decked out in big style. Split into 2,500 Thunder Black over Golden Mist Metallic (with beige interior) and 500 Thunder Black over Rallye Red (with burgundy interior) cars, the 10th Anniversary editions featured black-out body trim, alloy wheels with color-matched inserts and Goodyear "Wingfoot" radials, commemorative wreath decals on the fenders and hatch, a T-bar roof with detachable sun screens (newly an \$800 option on all ZXs), headlamp washers, leather seat upholstery, a Hitachi concert hall-effect 40-watt stereo with cassette, automatic temperature control, a "computerized safety check" information display and a numbered dash plaque.

Changes under the long hood were in store for 1981, when the base 280-ZX models got a bump in compression (8.8:1), resulting in 145hp at 5,200 RPM and 156-lbs.ft. of torque at 4,000 RPM. Initially shown as the 1979 Frankfurt Motor Show's 280-ZX 2+2 TT ("T"-roof "T"urbo), a production 280-ZX Turbo became available this year in \$16,999 two-seat, automatic-only guise. This car's engine used 7.4:1 compression and a Garrett AiResearch turbo pushing 7.3 pounds of boost to make 180hp at 5,600 RPM and 202-lbs.ft. of torque at 2,800 RPM, figures good for a 0-60 run in roughly 7.3 seconds. Other Turbo-specific changes included a NACA duct in the hood, 15 x 6-inch alloy wheels, a transmission oil cooler, a 23mm front anti-roll bar, modified rear suspension components (bushings, universal joints, differential mounting, spring rates) twin exhaust tips and standard air conditioning and T-tops. Although the car was criticized for its lack of handling prowess, *Road & Track* magazine's Henry N. Manney III said of the automatic 280-ZX Turbo: "Gentlemen, meet the world's best boulevard sports car, one that can hold up its end with the real racers. Do you suppose that the local junkyard has a suitable transmission?"



Unusual stereo design means aftermarket DIN units don't fit; originals can be repaired.



Color-coded alloys exclusive to 10th Anniversary cars; Wingfoot tires no longer available.

Manney's request was granted in August of 1982, when the Turbo engine became available with a heavy-duty Borg-Warner T5 manual, and could be had in both two-seat and 2+2 models; although the five-speed Turbo matched the automatic version's 129 MPH top speed, it was actually slower to 60 MPH, making the sprint in about 7.7 seconds. Other changes for model year 1982 included standard rack and pinion power steering, revised suspension settings, body-colored urethane bumpers and modified alloy wheel, grille and taillamp designs. A standard synthesized "voice warning system" followed the industry trend toward complex on-board electronics.

With the "Z31" 300ZX waiting in the wings for 1984, the 280-ZX had few changes for 1983, and those included softer suspension tuning for improved ride comfort—naturally aspirated and Turbo suspensions were now the same—coupled with wider, low profile tires for increased grip. A trendy digital instrument cluster became available as part of a \$990 Leather/Digital package. Far removed from its spartan 240Z predecessor, the 1983 280-ZX Turbo featured standard air conditioning, power windows, cruise control, a premium stereo and alloy wheels, and the upcoming 300ZX would move the Z further towards "grand tourer" on the sporty car scale.



New molded carpet sets can be purchased, but original T-top bags aren't reproduced, and inner panels must be restored; hatch seals and struts are inexpensive, and easy to replace.

Carl Beck, president of the Internet Z Car Club, says, "Today, Datsun 280-ZXs are being collected primarily by a couple of different groups of buyers: 'enthusiast-users' and 'collectors.' Enthusiast-users, finding first generation Zs getting harder to find and more expensive, are moving to newer and more plentiful 280-ZXs. Although Nissan intended the 280-ZX to be more luxury-oriented, they find it relatively easy to strip out weight, upgrade the suspension and brakes and take advantage of the better aerodynamics of the more

rigid 280-ZX body. And 'collectors,' who look for #1 or #2 condition examples and will pay top dollar for high quality cars, are starting to add specific models of the Datsun 280-ZX to their classic car collections."

Datsun-Nissan Z and ZX fans are a passionate bunch, and they're quite willing to share their accumulated knowledge about how to maintain and improve the cars. Internet-based clubs and forums are also great places to find information and enthusiasm for the 280-ZX in all its forms. 🌐

Viewpoint



This car has been in my family since new. My dad's brother, my uncle John, bought it in 1980. He couldn't find one in Pittsburgh because of the black and gold color scheme [the Steelers had just won the Super Bowl], so he went down to South Carolina where we were living. He actually didn't see the vehicle before he bought it; he looked at an automatic 10th Anniversary, but decided that he wanted the stick. The salesman said that he had one coming in on the truck, and my uncle said, "Sold!" So my father picked it up when it came in, and my uncle flew down from Pennsylvania and drove it home. About a month later, he

realized that, it being a 10th Anniversary, he didn't want to drive it, so he bought a car cover for it, then went out and bought another new car." He drove it periodically, but he saved it as a keepsake.

It had about 6,200 miles on it when I took over, and it has a little over 7,000 now. Uncle John passed away about a year and a half ago; my father and I are the only true car buffs in the family, so we wanted it to stay in the family. I put fewer than 500 miles on it each season; I'll drive it to shows that are under 30 miles each way, and trailer it for longer trips, but I enjoy taking it for a good drive two or three times a month to make sure everything is working well. It will never be sold. I have a two-year-old son, and he may be the only two-year-old with a 280-ZX in his name!

—Ryan Bordenick

Specialists

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800-373-2532
www.zcarsource.com

Zedd Findings

603 Compass Court
Kingston, Ontario, Canada K7M 8V9
613-389-1397
www.datsunzparts.com

Club Corner

www.Xenon5130.com

Online history and technical resource with message board and downloadable owners' and factory service manuals

Internet Z Car Club

www.ZHome.com
Virtual online group with historical and technical information

280-ZX 10th Anniversary Edition Register

www2.zhome.com:81/IZCC/ZRegisters/anniversary.htm

www.zcar.com

Online forums and classifieds

