

W E I R D C A R S

Swimming against the flow of dull, average cars come these high-performance sports coupes. The Subaru SVX, Mazda RX7, and Renault Alpine A610 are fast enough to thrill, comfy enough to live with and unusual enough so you know you won't end up parking next to three of them every time you go anywhere. But are they fine examples of a rare breed or rightly neglected oddities?



As our automotive world becomes ever more heavily regulated and restricted, too many of the cars we're buying have become characterless and bland. Many of the world's major car manufacturers seem to be churning out products which appear distinguishable only by their badges and their chassis numbers.

Their looks are similar, their performance is comparable and their engines and general layout are uniform. The whole concept of individuality now seems lost forever. Or does it?

Not quite. Fortunately there are still a few important exceptions and three of them are high performance sports coupes.

For example, there is just one car on the

market with a rotary engine – and that's the twin-turbo, 237 horsepower Mazda RX7.

And there is only one four-wheel-drive, four-seater coupe powered by a front-mounted, horizontally-opposed six-cylinder unit – the 226bhp Subaru SVX.

There are actually two sports coupes with rear-mounted engines. One, of course, is the Porsche 911 but the other is much less well-known. The 250bhp, V6, turbocharged Renault A610.

Now in spite of, or perhaps because of, this trio's distinctiveness, they sell in small numbers, with a combined total of only about 170 RX7s, A610s and SVXs leaving dealers' showrooms, in roughly

equal proportions, during 1993.

The two Japanese cars are subject to import restrictions and Renault simply doesn't build enough A610s to fully satisfy demand. But even if all barriers came down tomorrow, it's unlikely these three oddballs would sell in Porsche-style numbers. They're just not the sort of safe bets that today's coddled customers seem to want.

If they were, why would Renault need to have cut the A610's price by about £10,000 during 1993 to £29,950 or Mazda need to have lopped £6,550 off the price of its RX7 making it £25,950? The answer: to compete with Porsche's new 968 Club Sport. The Subaru, which

is very possibly too odd for the 968 to be considered a rival, has held its price at £30,499.

Oddballs we may call these three, but they're still high performance cars and there is every reason to suppose that they are not in the slightest bit odd on the road. Which means they could be the perfect transport for anyone who wants to stand out from the crowd.

#### STYLE & IMAGE

It's hard to imagine anyone saving up the £25,000-plus required to buy any of these and rushing into their club or gym exclaiming to the excited onlookers: 'Hey everyone, I'm going to buy a Renault (or Subaru or Mazda)!' These names just don't have the right ring to them – so what they lack in image they just have to make up for in style.

And here the Mazda is a clear winner. Passers-by who didn't have a clue about its identity mumbled things to each other about Porsche and even Ferrari before being told the truth. That's got to be a good thing. Another likened it to a small, hardtop Dodge Viper and another to a 'sort of Jaguar E-Type for the 1990s'. Whatever you care to call it, the front-engined RX7 has beautiful, flowing lines which will have classic appeal years from now.

The A610 has taken its cues from the GT cars of the '60s and early '70s, which isn't too surprising considering its oldest and most direct ancestor, the popular Alpine A110, hit the streets in 1963 and stayed on sale until 1977. The A610 is a fine-looking car. Its GRP composite body may be a little slab-sided and angular but it's low, lean and aggressive, and looks like it means business.

The Giugiaro-inspired SVX is described by Subaru as having the breath-taking originality of a concept car. In truth, this isn't quite how people seem to see it. Most seemed distracted and bemused by its odd appearance, especially the window-within-a-window side design and the strange black, plastic-looking roof and bootlid. An oddball it most definitely is, albeit one with an exceptionally low drag co-efficient of just 0.29. There's method in the madness.

#### PERFORMANCE

This is like a two-horse race that goes to a photo finish. The closest scrutiny of the performance figures finds precious little to choose between the twin sequential turbocharged, twin rotor RX7 and the

single turbo three-litre V6 A610. At the test track these two are not only very quick but fantastically evenly matched. Up to 60mph there's less than a tenth of a second between them and by 70mph they're neck and neck – to the nearest hundredth! At the quarter-mile post there's just two hundredths of a second and a minuscule 0.15mph separating them. Above 100mph they stay in close touch with each other until the 250bhp A610, with its 13bhp advantage over the RX7, eases ahead and touches its impressive 160mph top whack. This is almost seven mph more than the Mazda can manage. But at this speed the A610's bonnet, incidentally, is lifting rather alarmingly.

The silky-smooth 3.3-litre, 226bhp, automatic Subaru is no slouch but at the test track it gets left behind by the far more racy A610 and RX7. It will dash from 0-60mph in a fraction over eight seconds and will better 145mph but unfortunately that's sluggish in this company.

The performance equality of the Renault and Mazda at the track is not quite matched on the road, where the growling A610 soon reveals that it has that little bit of extra usable urge. Step out of the Renault and straight back into the burbling Mazda and you'll find yourself stirring its sweet gearbox in an effort to match the Renault's gutsy gait over the same fast road.

In town, and more noticeably in town when it's wet, the Mazda can be a little over-sensitive to throttle and clutch co-ordination and that can make the hustle and bustle of inner city motoring rather tiring as well as thumping your passenger's head unpleasantly hard against the high-backed seat whenever you move off.

The Subaru can't match the outright acceleration of the other two but, in its own way, it is a fine machine. The easiest way to describe it would be to call it a Japanese XJS. It's very smooth, very quiet and has plenty of low-down power. Allied to that super-slick-shifting four-speed automatic gearbox, this gives a constant flow of more than adequate performance.

The braking ability of all three cars is well and truly in the supercar league. Stopping distances are all exemplary, though the Mazda's brakes are incredible – it is now our record holder, having out-braked even the new Toyota Supra. The RX7 will come to a dead halt from the motorway speed limit in just over 146ft. That is 100ft less than the current

*Highway Code's* guideline stopping distance.

The A610's brakes, while being effective, lack progression and feel 'wooden'. The floor-hinged pedals are not comfortable to use and may be partially to blame – we've noticed these characteristics, though not as acutely, on Porsche 911s which have a similar pedal arrangement. The A610's handbrake can be a fiddle to operate and while the car was with us, it was less than 100 per cent reliable. Our car took itself for a downhill drive across a car park and into a wood, coming to rest on an exposed tree root without hitting anything, despite the handbrake having been pulled full on.

#### HANDLING / RIDE

The Mazda and Renault, although having completely different engine and chassis layouts, actually behave in a remarkably similar fashion when their very considerable limits are approached. Firstly, they both have very fast and accurate steering responses with the nose of each car obeying the driver's directional inputs exactly. The RX7 has especially quick turn-in, feeling closer to a racing kart than a road car. From there, assuming a corner is entered in a controlled manner and speed is increased through the turn, they will both safely understeer initially and then transfer to controllable and enjoyable oversteer.

Although we were initially a tad wary of the A610, with its muscular V6 hanging behind the rear axle, it behaved impeccably and, apart from an irritatingly rubbery gearchange, was terrific fun to drive. The RX7 was highly controllable and immensely enjoyable, even more so than the A610. If we must split hairs, then it has to be said that, at speed, the stiffly-sprung RX7 can feel a little less settled on an imperfect surface – a little less firmly planted on the road than the A610.

The four-wheel-drive Subaru has loads of grip, stacks of traction on a wet surface and good chassis composure to go with these. If it is cornered hard, it will gently understeer, and if this warning is not observed, all four wheels will drift in unison, but even then the SVX feels predictable and is easily returned to normal simply by backing off the throttle. None of this is particularly exciting or rewarding but it's extremely surefooted and anyway, by now you'll be getting the impression that the SVX is more of a gentleman's express than a hairy sportster.

Not surprisingly, it's the SVX which wins when matters of comfort are considered. Compared with the other two, its ride is smooth and quiet, though in common with most cars these days, concrete motorways can be the cause of some intrusive road noise.

By contrast, for anyone expecting a high degree of refinement, silence and luxury, the Mazda and Renault will disappoint.

The Mazda is noticeably hard and also has the highest degree of road roar. The Renault is softer, though still very firm and, again, noisy on most roads. But noise and harshness is a small price to pay for the sort of performance and fun these three will give you.

#### I N T E R I O R S

As a sports coupe, the Subaru is more usable and practical than most. In the front there's loads of legroom and the leather-upholstered seats, electrically adjustable on the driver's side, are very comfortable. The glass-domed cabin ensures all round visibility is good, too.

Much of the interior trim is finished in a pleasant suede-like material and the list of standard equipment is comprehensive: air conditioning, cruise control, heated seats in the front, a tilt/slide sunroof and more. Apart from a CD autochanger we can't think of anything important that's missing.

So, this is all pretty good, apart from one thing. The moulded plastic wood finish around the centre console was universally loathed. Americans may have appreciated such tackiness in their cars in the '60s but we don't think anyone wants such tastelessness these days. Real wood or no wood at all, please.

The A610 can't be described as luxurious, particularly modern or well screwed-together, since its plasticised dash seems to rattle and creak too readily. However, it is comfortable in the front and the driving position, apart from the awkward pedals, is good. But those pedals are a real spoiler; as well as being floor-hinged, they're too close together and offset to the centre, leaving no room for the driver's clutch foot to rest except on the pedal itself.

The Renault is not terribly well equipped, either. Apart from a handy trip computer and a steering column stalk to control the stereo, the Renault has nothing the other two don't and it specifically lacks their airbags and air con.

The RX7's interior is by far the best looking. It is lavishly equipped and virtually matches the SVX in equipment, including a sunshine roof. When this is open with the windows down, occupants can enjoy most of the wind-in-the-hair sensation of an open-topped roadster.

The RX7's instrumentation is first rate, the leather seats provide good support in all directions and, unlike the Renault's poor unit, the stereo is tops. A few quibbles: the doors both needed a firm slam to shut and the airbag-filled steering wheel is simply too large in diameter for this type of car. But, overall, the RX7 makes you feel really good just to sit in.

Unlike the others, the Mazda makes no concessions to being anything but a two-seater and has useful, Yorkshire-Terrier-sized cubbyholes in place of the tiny tot seats which grace the Alpine. Boot space is sensible, given its proportions – it's about adequate for two people on a weekend away.

The SVX is the only one of the trio to make a serious effort at rear seat space. Average-sized adult passengers will feel fairly content, if confined, and there's decent space in the boot for their luggage too. Long loads can also be accommodated because the rear seat-back folds down. The A610 can just about pack a pair of adults in the back – as long as they are small or not travelling too far. We can't tell you about boot space because, now that the fuel tank has been moved to the front for improved weight distribution, there isn't one, so you have to throw your bags on the back seat.

#### R U N N I N G C O S T S

The RX7 may cost less than the Renault and Subaru and there are few, if any, new cars costing less which can outperform it, but that's where any complacency will end when matters of cost are considered.

Insurance falls into the group 20 bracket. and, make no mistake, the RX7 is no land yacht on fuel consumption. Super Unleaded was burnt at just over 16mpg while in our hands, and that will dent anyone's wallet if the car is driven enthusiastically.

Don't get the impression, though, that the A610 and SVX are both cheap to run, because they're not. Mpg figures in the low twenties won't suit everyone, nor will group 18 insurance or any of the other costly outgoings (servicing, tyres, fines etc.) which go hand in hand with high-tech sports coupes or budget supercars.

Parts and servicing costs weigh up about even on all three, in fact, and all suffer badly at the hands of depreciation, sliding to little more than a third of their new price after three years.

#### V E R D I C T

If this is to be your only car and you have to carry passengers and luggage then, provided you can live with man-made mahogany, the Subaru SVX is the obvious choice. This is the car for the person who's grown up and is mature enough to admit it. It's the gentleman's express.

Trouble is, there are a number of more mainstream rivals which look pretty tempting alongside the SVX. BMW's fantastic M3 is only a couple of grand more and Audi's S2, at just £4 less, also has four-wheel drive.

When deciding between the A610 and RX7, seating may still be relevant. If you do need to carry more than one passenger, then the RX7 obviously won't do. That aside, what we have here is a remarkably close contest between two highly accomplished, yet utterly different foes.

Both of them can provide large doses of neat adrenaline as often as you like. Ultimately the Renault is faster, and that, let us remind you, is fast. The Renault also has a more relaxed power delivery but its foot pedals are not at all relaxed. The Renault uses less fuel but the Mazda costs less to buy. In the end, our vote goes to the Mazda. It fits like a glove, it's sweeter to drive, we think it's better looking and, when the competition is this close, that's enough □

# F A C T F I L E

	<b>Mazda RX7</b>	<b>Renault A610</b>	<b>Subaru SVX</b>
<b>Performance</b>			
0-30	2.1	2.1	3.0
0-40	3.2	3.3	4.2
0-50	4.4	4.3	6.0
0-60	5.7	5.7	8.1
0-70	7.7	7.7	10.5
0-80	9.5	9.6	13.4
0-90	12.7	11.9	17.3
0-100	14.5	15.0	21.7
0-110	16.3	18.2	27.0
0-120	21.5	22.0	–
max speed	153.1	160.0	145.5
30-50 in 4th	4.9	5.7	–
50-70 in 5th	7.5	7.1	–
30-70 through	5.6	5.6	7.5
braking 70-0	147ft	166ft	163ft
standing 1/4 mile	14.3	14.4	16.2
terminal speed	98.4mph	98.3mph	87.3mph
<b>Technical</b>			
engine	twin-rotor, turbo rotary	V6 cyl turbo, 12v	flat 6 cyl, 24v
capacity	654cc x 2	2975cc	3319cc
max power	237bhp @ 6500rpm	250bhp @ 5750rpm	226bhp @ 5600rpm
max torque	218lb/ft @ 5000rpm	258lb/ft @ 2900rpm	228lb/ft @ 4800rpm
transmission	5 sp manual, RWD	5 sp manual, RWD	4 speed auto, 4WD
brakes	vent discs, ABS	vent discs, ABS	vent discs, ABS
suspension, front	D.w/b, coil spring	D.w/b, coil spring	MacP strut, coil spring
rear	D.w/b, coil spring	D.w/b, coil spring	MacP strut, coil spring
wheels	8Jx16	7&9x16	5.5Jx16
tyres	225/ZR16	F:205, R:245/45ZR16	225/50ZR16
dimensions	L:169", W:69"	L:174", W:69"	L:183", W:70"

## M O R E F A C T S

	<b>Mazda RX7</b>	<b>Renault A610</b>	<b>Subaru SVX</b>
<b>Costs</b>			
list price	£25,950	£29,950	£30,499
test mpg	16.4	21.8	23.4
euromix mpg	25.5	27.0	27.1
insurance group	20	18	18
service intervals	minor: 6,000 miles	minor: 6,000 miles	minor: 7,500 miles
major: 12,000 miles	major: 24,000 miles	major: 30,000 miles	
warranty	3yrs or 60,000 miles	1yr unlimited	2yrs unlimited
3-yr residual value	36%	45%	36%
cost per mile	64p	n/a	67p
<b>What you get</b>			
central locking	yes	yes	yes
radio cassette	yes	yes	yes
CD player	no	option	no
electric windows	yes	yes	yes
sunroof	yes	no	yes
alarm	option	yes	yes
power steering	yes	yes	yes
alloy wheels	yes	yes	yes
anti-lock brakes	yes	yes	yes
airbag	yes	no	yes
aircon	yes	no	yes
cruise control	yes	no	yes
leather trim	yes	no	yes