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TEST DRIVE



2015 HONDA S660

What is nearly as small as a CNG auto-rickshaw, but has four wheels?
A Kei car. What is that? It is a tiny super mini segment of automobiles produced in Japan for the domestic market. It has restrictions on two major factors - physical size and engine displacement. It all started after World War II, when the average Jap could not afford a full size car. Hence, 360 cc motor vehicles became the norm. Eventually the motor displacement went up to 550 cc in 1976 and since 1990, the government took up the restriction to 660 cc.

Do we see Kei cars around Dhaka?
Nope. We do see plenty of Kei trucks, hauling not-so-heavy industrial materials. Daihatsu Hi-Jet, Mitsubishi Minicab. Then there is this hideous little dog-like minivan called the Toyota Sparky. These are mundane

and hideous, but practical for a congested metropolis. In the 90s, we saw a couple of soft-top Honda Beats and the three-door Pajero Minis zip around the capital, and recently, a few turbocharged (barely) Daihatsu Copens. These are tiny cars with tiny engines, but draw a lot of attention thanks to their quirky looks.

Now we have the Honda S660...
We all liked the quirky little Beat roadster. Why? Three cylinder motor with individual throttle bodies - that is sick. Even last week I saw one flaunting a funny body kit and a Ferrari badge. Honda decided to bring back the mid-engine RWD heart-Beat by introducing the new S660. This time around, it has a turbo.

Because it has two doors, no roof and a turbo, is it a sports car?
Having a turbo the size of a yo-yo, the S660 is

very, very underpowered. It produces 63 hp and 77 lb-ft; the maximum output limit of a Kei car. In June '15, Top Gear reviewed the S660 to be "lacking power but extremely maneuverable". Exactly. The sub 900 kg car has brilliant handling and maneuverability, thanks to the mid-engine rear-drive layout and 45-55 front-rear weight distribution. That means, although you can spin the rear wheels and drift out the tail, getting it to do so is quite difficult as the car refuses to lose traction even if you want it to, even with some of the skinniest tyres you'll find on a new car. The steering feel is extraordinarily responsive, and with the tiniest of steering input, you can change lanes in the blink of an eye.

Boost feel comes beyond 3,000 RPM. The S660 also gives out a waste gate whoosh. It has an LCD screen displaying G forces, a Sport

mode that will make your instrument cluster glow red and displays the boost level. Regardless of the CVT, it has paddle shifters. I think the S660 is sporty enough.

Is it practical?
You can save a lot of money as it drinks very little fuel. You can't take much luggage with you though, since it doesn't have a trunk. If you want to have the roof down, you have to manually get it off and stow it away in the front of the car. The leather bucket seats seat two people very low - almost kissing the road. If you have back-ache issues, you can't own this car. If you are plus-sized, you can't get in and out of this car. If you're too tall, you won't fit in this car. However, if you do fit in this tiny car, and can compromise on practicality, you will absolutely love the drive. And the attention.

VERDICT

It won't set the streets on fire and it'll be difficult owning it, but the S660 is definitely a drivers' car - perfect for weekends and well worth going on a diet for. Eat your vegetables, let go of the red meat and if you want a fun drive in a superb Kei sports car, contact Car House Limited for inquiries into importing another piece.

WORDS: MAHBUB HUSSAIN
PHOTOS: RAHIN SADMAN ISLAM



THE MYTH OF DEPRECIATION

Depreciation - it's what you call a situation where you start with four wheels, some seats and an engine (otherwise called a car) and, when you try to sell it after 8 years, you realise it's a cow. Not a cow you can eat or find use of either. Some cars are seemingly better at being useless cows than others, but what really drives the value of a cow/car up or down?

In the summer of 2015, my neighbor bought a 2014 Toyota Premio. It was pearl white, duller than drying paint, and "loaded with equipment" such as the optical instrument cluster, chrome door handles, and wooden paneling, thus somehow justifying the nearly 30 lakh taka price tag. It was horrifyingly conformist - the automotive equivalent to a vaporizer enthusiast in 2016.

You know what else is popular in 2016 besides Toyota Premios and vapes and skinny jeans? Donald Trump. That alone should tell you what a steaming pile of raw sewage the years 2015/16 have been. Like the brain-dead people buying into Donald Trump's idiotic, hate filled message of making America great "again", there are throngs of people waiting in line to buy what I honestly consider to be the worst car currently sold on the market. At least in terms of how much it promises, what it delivers and how much you pay for those hollow dreams of floating away on a Premio shaped cloud.

What prompted this vitriolic rant against the preferences of people in this country?

The whole issue came out of a discussion among the Shift team about cars that should be great for the local market, but won't ever be because most of the car buying crowd will stop dead in their tracks beside yet another reconditioned showroom selling a Premio, awed by yet another "red wine" paintjob. Not only will the owner-to-be stand around looking at the Premio from 200 different angles, admiring one of the most uninspiring shapes to ever exit a designer's brain, it's very likely that this person

will end up buying it, thus adding to the massive pile-up of uninteresting cars on the roads of Dhaka. "Resale value", "maintenance cost", "will Jorina be impressed by my luxury ride" will run through this person's mind - perhaps the worst case of myopia affecting car buyers today.

This is a market where a 2009 Honda Civic, bought for a brand new price of 30 lakhs, is sold off in 2016 for a price of 11 lakh taka - a '09 Premio will easily fetch a secondhand price of 15-16 lakhs, despite having much less standard equipment, less power, horribly plain exterior design, and subpar interior design.

Let's look at the facts. Is the Premio worth the praise it receives for its apparently magical anti-depreciation powers? Well, considering the depreciation affecting much better cars all because these cars are not Premios, it would seem that Bangladeshis are quite fond of upsetting the balance of market forces in determining and comparing the values of two perfectly running vehicles in almost similar conditions.

This is a trend built up over generations - the idea that Toyotas will always retain value, they'll work forever unconditionally, they'll be cheap to run, parts will be available. These are not absolute facts. Reconditioned Toyotas WILL break down, WON'T be as cheap to run at some point down the line, and parts are just as expensive as other brands. Yet, almost inexplicably, they will retain value - mechanics and neighbours and that uncle you have who knows everything there is to know will keep

insisting used and abused reconditioned Toyotas are worth their salt. This is akin to a snake biting off its own head, as these very people will turn around and moan about people asking exorbitant prices for turd second-hand cars. In the process, the true depreciation value of these old Toyotas are lost and people pay through the nose for pretty bad cars, while the Hondas and Nissans and Mitsubishi's roam around, worthless but wonderful.

This presents a final dilemma - for car enthusiasts, "those in the know", cut-price secondhand Hondas and Nissans can be gems to own, love and maintain. However, if they ever want to sell them off, they'll be in trouble because of the lack of Toyota badges on them. Because, no matter how good a 1995 Honda Civic might be, it'll never have the same kind of value as a used car as it actually deserves, precisely because there's a myth going around that everything other than Toyota vehicles are worth more.

In other countries, the market treats depreciation as a legitimate factor - it's nearly scientific. Build quality, equipment levels, complexity of the car, past track record with other users, and more go into deciding a car's resale value, not just the insistence of users and people around them. The idea of depreciation is a dynamic, flowing concept which changes with time and new products - it's high time Bangladesh viewed it in the same way as well.

WORDS AND ILLUSTRATION:
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AUTO NEWS

Peugeot for emerging markets



French car-manufacturer Peugeot launched the 301 model line in 2012 to serve as an entry level sedan for emerging markets in Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe, bringing customers their first taste of French quirkiness. There's a new model out, and with Peugeot set to make an official entry into the Bangladeshi market, there's a chance, if the stars align, that the fantastically proportioned 301 might make it to our shores.

The 301 utilises the Euro 6 line of petrol engines - options include a 1.2 litre (82 HP, 87 lb-ft) and 1.6 litre (115 HP, 110 lb-ft), both combined with a 6-speed automatic. That's decent power, and the 1.2 motor will benefit from a low tax bracket - leading to a pretty competitive price in the entry level segment. The 301 comes well equipped - full range of safety features, touch-screen infotainment, driver aids, cruise control, and more. If it does come to Bangladesh, trim levels might change quite a bit.

AG Automobiles is expected to bring in the Peugeot brand soon, but chances are they'll be targeting the luxury and mid-range market, which possibly means the 301 won't make the cut. Let's hope it does though, because it looks brilliant and is seemingly going to be great value for money - we'd definitely like more French quirkiness on the road.

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