

MARKETPLACE BUYER'S GUIDE



BLENDING HIGH-TECH PERFORMANCE AND GT-CAR ACCOUTREMENTS

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF KOCH

By 1983, the fabled Datsun Z-car that took our nation by storm a dozen years earlier had largely faded into memory—and was sorely missed. Big bumpers added length and weight to later iterations of the original Z, and by the late 1970s, Nissan (then using the Datsun name) decided to take the Z upmarket. The result, perhaps as much a result of worldwide emissions legislation as a way to drive up profitability in the face of Japanese car quotas here in the States, was the 280ZX. On the one hand, a turbocharged powerplant was available to help reinstate some of the immediacy and vigor of the original Zs. It also had much of the style of the previous Zs. On the other, it had grown soft with luxury options—it was often decried as being the sort of car your orthodontist would drive and think was sporty. (Mine had a brown, naturally aspirated 2+2 that

was in perpetual need of a wash.)

A fresh approach was needed, so when Nissan announced that they wanted to continue the comfort of recent ZX models but offer performance in the spirit of the original Z, enthusiasts grew hopeful. Everything about the all-new 300ZX, internally coded Z31 and launched in the fall of 1983, was fresh yet familiar: It was still rear-wheel-drive, but while the engine still had six cylinders (and a turbocharged option was maintained), it was a V-6—the first V-6 engine that Japan had built. The iron-block, SOHC aluminum-head VG30 allowed for more modern construction methods and tighter tolerances as well as a lower hoodline, allowing both a more aerodynamic profile and an 80-pound weight savings (compared to the competitive Supra's inline-six) over the front wheels. Production VG30 blocks and head

castings powered the thrice-IMSA-championship-winning GTP-ZX Turbo and NPT-90 racers.

The turbocharged version utilized an oil-cooled AiResearch unit putting out 6.7 p.s.i., and was rated at a healthy 200hp—a number that many enthusiasts never thought they'd see again as they entered the 1980s, much less from a six. (Mid-'87 and later engines were rated 5hp higher, thanks in part to better coolant flow and fully floating wrist pins; 1988 and '89 turbo models also featured a lower-boost Garrett T25 turbocharger and higher compression.)

Suspension remained fully independent, but more modern chassis design allowed a wider track, an additional two degrees of caster in front and two more degrees of negative camber in the rear, offset springs for the MacPherson struts in front and

1984-'89 NISSAN 300ZX TURBO



The Z31's crisp, aerodynamic lines allow strong acceleration up to the 137-mph limiter. Hard to believe that it's a quarter-century old.



All-new VG30 V-6 engine was good for 200hp in turbocharged trim; 1984 models had an oil-cooled turbo, but later ones were watercooled.



Red taillamps and 300ZX callout atop the license plate were red for 1984 only; 1985-'86 Turbos said "300ZX Turbo" and were smoky gray.

springs completely separated from the shocks in back, a more linear rate of toe change from bump to rebound, and 20 percent less roll stiffness than the 280ZX. The result was both a smoother ride and better handling.

The style was sharpened up with hard-edged early 1980s aesthetics, including pop-up half-hidden headlamps, integrated bumpers and (for the turbos) a hood scoop. Designer Kazumasu Takagi took advantage of the lower headline allowed by the VG-family engine, and managed a cutting-edge drag co-efficient of .030. (A steady diet of body changes throughout the car's

life altered that number slightly over time.) The aero-friendly sheetmetal worked in concert with the engine to produce an electronically limited 137-mph top end in the Turbos. A 2+2 was still available, but not as a Turbo.

Whether Nissan's gambit worked or not can be debated by Z-car enthusiasts until the end of time, but buyers spoke: 75,351 two- and four-seat 1984 300ZXs were sold in the United States; by the time the run of this generation concluded, some 329,000 were built, including more than 294,000 for export, 270,000 of which ended up in the States. For the purposes of this story, we

will discuss only the two-seat turbo models, as they're the most desirable.

The 1984 and '85 models are visually indistinguishable from each other; they are also the most plentiful, with nearly 150,000 sold in the U.S. between these two model years. The '85 turbo taillamps went from red to smoky gray, with a center tail panel callout above the license plate that reads "300ZX Turbo," and the turbo became watercooled. These two years are the Zenki (early) style Z31s. Model year 1986 was something of a transitional year and is sometimes known as the Chuki (middle, or as-is) year: standard 16-inch

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Specifications

ENGINE	(1984 Turbo Model)
Type	SOHC V-6, iron block and aluminum heads
Displacement	2,960cc (190.6-cu.in.)
Bore x stroke	87 X 83mm
Compression ratio	7.8:1
Horsepower @ rpm	200 @ 5,200
Torque @ rpm	227-lbs.ft. @ 3,600
Turbocharger	Garrett T3, air-cooled, integral wastegate, 6.7 p.s.i.
Fuel system	Nissan ECCS electronic fuel injection

TRANSMISSION	
Type	Five-speed manual

DIFFERENTIAL	
Type	Hypoid, semi-floating, open
Ratio	3.54:1

STEERING	
Type	Power-assisted rack-and-pinion

BRAKES	
Type	Four-wheel hydraulic disc, power assist
Front	10.8-inch vented disc
Rear	11.4-inch solid disc

WEIGHTS & MEASURES	
Wheelbase	91.3 inches
Overall length	170.7 inches
Overall width	67.9 inches
Overall height	51.0 inches
Curb weight	3,050 pounds

PERFORMANCE	
0-60 mph	7.1 seconds
1/4 mile ET	15.1 seconds
Top speed	137 mph (limited)

SOURCE:
Car and Driver, November 1983

Production

1984-1989 300ZX	
1984:	30,546
1985:	74,551
1986:	62,754
1987:	33,621
1988:	20,280
1989:	4,227
TOTALS:	270,344



BODY

Japan had a better handle on rust issues by the mid-'80s. The only two spots to seek out rust are in the

spare tire well, and right above the muffler, under the tool kit. Even so, those spots are rarely affected. "It's not much of an issue," says Smith. "The Z31 is the first Z that benefited from upgrades in design and quality of materials." Many body parts are still available through Nissan, although the price is a little stiff.

The hood scoop disappeared altogether in 1986; the '87-up models received new hoods, front fascias and headlamp doors, so if you're updating the look of an older car you'll want to install these together.

As far as sussing out previous accident damage, check the frame rails and see if they're tweaked at all. The A/C condenser is an easy tell for a previous wreck also: It's under the front bumper, ahead of the radiator, and is easily tweaked in even a minor shunt, but still usable.

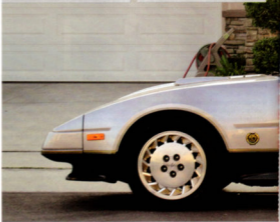


INTERIOR

Shouldn't be an issue, according to Smith, since, as with the body, material quality improved inside.

There is spotty availability on interior trim and door panels, with parts for special models like the '84 Anniversary cars bordering on impossible, but these don't suffer the same interior peeling issues that earlier Zs did.

This was the first generation of Z to go heavy on the electronics in the cabin, and all of these have the potential to go wrong. Z31.com reports that the flexes are frequently simple (taillamps not working? Try replacing the sensor inside the right-hand taillamp; cruise control not activating? Try replacing the stoppers on the clutch and brake), although others are considerably less so (if the digital dash fails to light up, it's probably the power supply, which requires soldering breaks in the circuit board to correct). There was a headlamp-switch service bulletin, but chances are your car was either fixed or is too old to qualify.





ENGINE

Z31.com reports a service campaign to change fuel injectors; reformulated gas ate up seals and

allowed fuel to leak onto a hot engine and potentially cause a fire. Most cars were okay, and nearly all have been changed by now, but fire damage to wiring and the underside of the hood will be obvious. If the change hasn't been made to your car, do it.

Most Z31s will be at an age and mileage where the timing belt should have been replaced at least once, regardless of mileage; make sure that it has been. Turbochargers had their own service bulletin early on, so if your 1984 Turbo ZX has a watercooled turbo, it could have been replaced by the dealer. The early cars are more sensitive to cooling down, so be sure to let your Z31 idle down for half a minute or more before shutting it off.

Also, "Watch out for the mass-air sensor," Smith warns. "It's really sensitive to dirt and soot. A lot of injector issues came from a bad EGR that let dirt into the mass-air meter, and probably 90 percent of the Z31's engine issues that I've seen have stemmed from soot fouling the sensor."



TRANSMISSION

Five-speeds were the transmission of choice in these cars—they're more common

than the automatics. The Borg-Warner T5 five-speed that came in 1984-'85 Turbos is regarded by some as being fragile, but rebuild kits are cheap (\$125). Manual non-turbo transmissions, built by Nissan, are considered to be stronger, but the 1987-'89 turbo five-speed is the most desirable of the lot. Second-gear synchro will be an issue if the car had been driven hard previously.

All of the four-speed automatics are called 4N71B; it lasted the duration of the Z31. It has a temperature sensor that prevents overdrive from engaging until the trans is completely warmed up, so a highway cruise right after a frigid night may yield odd behavior. All transmissions will swap into any Z, give or take some transmission mount and drive-shaft issues between years.

Owners of 1984-'86 models may spy some fluid leaking down the steering column; Z31.com identified this as the speedometer pinion gear leaking at the transmission, and with new seals and a bit of cleaning, all will work fine again.



BRAKES AND SUSPENSION

Check the rear tires for uneven wear, the semi-trailing arm rear

suspension improved the previous generation's excess negative camber, but didn't perfect it, and hard driving will wear the insides of the rear tires. Both Smith and Z31.com tell of a modified rear crossmember that would take care of the issue, but Smith reports that "a spring and shock upgrade takes care of the squatting problem on acceleration." He recommends a quality aftermarket shock, like Tokico, although aftermarket replacements will eliminate the functionality of the cockpit-adjustable suspension. "There wasn't really that much difference between positions anyway," Smith says. "Unless you're doing a concours restoration, I'd forget about it and go with an aftermarket shock."

There are no specific brake issues, but the '87-up Turbos also received dual-piston calipers with slip-on vented rotors; these are a bolt-on modification for all Z31s. Vented rear rotors also came online for '87, but swapping these into an earlier car will also require swapping rear control arms for clearance issues.



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Price Guide

Low	\$3,000/\$4,000
Average	\$6,000/\$7,000
High	\$8,000/\$10,000

Parts Prices

A/C compressor	\$75
Alternator	\$40
Brake booster	\$60
Brake master cylinder	\$120
Distributor	\$100
Engine wiring harness	\$125
Fender	\$400
Front bumper	\$500
Fuel pump	\$50
Gas tank	\$150
Harmonic balancer	\$60
Headlamp assembly	\$50
Radiator	\$200
Rear crossmember	\$100
Rear view mirror (power)	\$60
Starter	\$40
Taillamp	\$50
Wheels (Turbo 16-inch)	\$250/Set

Recent Ads

1984 Nissan 300ZX Turbo 50th Anniversary Edition. Completely restored - new exhaust and clutch, A/C compressor, paint, timing belt, and tires. \$5,500 (reserve not met).

1984 Nissan 300ZX five-speed. Original adult owners, all options except turbo. A/C converted to R134A. Factory vinyl in the all-leather seats replaced with leather. Tires at 40 percent tread. Never driven on salted roads, completely rust-free. \$6,600.

1985 Nissan 300ZX Turbo. All original, no major dents or scratches, 132,000 miles, very minimal rust bubble under rear quarter. \$3,500 obo.

1986 Nissan 300ZX Turbo. T-tops, 61,000 original miles, clean CARFAX. White/red interior. \$6,995.

1987 Nissan 300ZX Turbo. 95,000km, never winter driven, original paint with slight surface rust, new tires, rotors and pads to be installed. Black. No accidents, runs good. \$6,500 (reserve not met).

wheels, the scoop shaved from the hood, a new rear spoiler with integrated third brake light, and the flared front fenders (now with similarly blistered rear) and side skirts from the 50th Anniversary 300ZX.

The next year, 1987, saw another facelift, this time with a new hood and headlamp doors, foglamps moved from inboard the headlamps to the front bumper, smoother bumpers front and rear, and the taillamp panel going full-width across the back of the car. The '87s also got 16x7-inch wheels,



Half-hidden headlamp was a sealed beam with inset fog lamp until 1986; 1987-up models had only the headlamp up top, while the fog lamp moved into the front fascia.



A number of styling features that helped make the 1984 50th Anniversary model special eventually ended up on the 1986 300ZX; these fanned, plastic-coated 16-inch wheels were just one of them. Or, rather, four of them. (Reshaped front fenders were another.) The rear fender flare didn't come back, however.

larger front brakes, vented rear discs, and standard-power front seats. Late '87s (after April) received a clutch-type limited-slip differential that's a bolt-in to earlier Z31s and features a 3.7:1 final drive; 1988 models got gray wheels, a compression bump to 8.3:1, a Garrett T25 turbocharger with 4.5 pounds of boost, and a 5hp boost (though torque numbers were unchanged). The '89 models were carryovers.

Two special editions were available during the Z31-generation's run: the 1984 50th Anniversary Edition, and the 1988 Shiro Special. The Anniversary Edition, seen here, celebrated Nissan's 50 years of building cars. A total of 5,148 50th Anniversary Zs were built for the American market; Canada got an additional 300 cars of their own. Drivetrain was the same as other Turbo ZX models, and beyond the 10-percent stiffer springs, recalibrated adjustable shocks, and turbo-finned 16-inch wheels with Pirelli P7 rubber, the special model also added silver-over-black paint with gold decal trim and emblems, ground effects, fender flares, mirror-glazed T-top roof panels, bronze-tinted windows, black leather interior with special embossed emblems, the digital instrument display, leather door inserts, an 80-watt AM/FM eight-speaker stereo with steering wheel controls and the Bodysonic sound system, a car cover, floor mats and a golden key. Later model year Zs received some of these upgrades, including the wheels, wider front fenders (1986-'89) and fender flares. Sticker price was a stiff \$26,000; the only option available was swapping out the Borg-Warner five-speed transmission for a four-speed automatic.

The Shiro Special offered stiffer springs with matched shocks, heavy-duty anti-roll bars, a viscous limited-slip differential, Recaro seats, paint-matched 16-inch wheels that matched the Shiro's pearl white body and a special front fascia, and deleted the adjustable shocks that every other Z31 Turbo came with. All had T-tops, analog gauges and a five-speed manual transmission. Motor Trend tested one with the electronic speed limiter disabled and got it up to 153 mph in 1988, the fastest car in Japan at that time. Just 1,002 were built in early 1988, with 75 more built for Canada; for a Z31 enthusiast, this is arguably the most enthusiast-friendly Z31 the factory offered in North America.

And Greg Smith thinks that it's just a matter of time before the Z31 generation catches on. Smith runs Motorsport Auto in Orange, California, a parts supplier for all



Digital dash was optional throughout the Z31's life; it came standard on Anniversary cars.



Feel the music! Optional Bodysonic stereo sends a vibrating pulse through the seats.

Datsun and Nissan Z-cars for more than a quarter-century, and he sees the early 300ZX coming up. "The first 300ZX was a sports car, but it's got plenty of grand-touring touches in it. There are more electronic accessories. There's better fit and finish in the interior. And people are starting to discover that right now. Some new parts are coming on line now, like weatherstripping, but keep in mind that these cars were made of higher-quality materials than some of the earlier cars, so there's less that needs replacing."

Other than the Anniversary cars (like the one shown here, owned by Menifee, California, resident Allen Boucher) and the Shiro Specials, which ones are people

after? "The early '84 cars often came without T-tops, and people look out for those. Later cars have a little extra power and a limited-slip differential, and those '87-up cars are getting a real following in the Z31 market."

So is this the time to buy? "Absolutely, especially if you look at it long-term. It's something you can work on, enjoy and drive for years. As far as Zs go, the Z31s are a bargain. They're one of the few good-performing cars from the late '80s. It's not something you'll want to take to Barrett-Jackson in January, but if you're looking to get into something inexpensively, you can really enjoy a good example at a reasonable entry price." 🗣️

Viewpoint



I bought this one in 2003; it was on a used car lot under a car cover in the back of the lot. Some collector was getting a divorce and had to sell; I made an offer. I

just liked the body style—I didn't realize it was an Anniversary special until I'd already bought it. But it had all of the features you could ever want, especially for an '84 model—the Bodysonic stereo, power windows and mirrors, cruise control...it was really nice and original when I bought it, so I've really just kept it clean. In five years and more than 10,000 miles of driving, I've only ever had to replace the alternator.

I had a couple of Corvettes before this car—a '65, a '74 and a '77 among others—and they had the power, but they don't handle as well as the Z does. I love the ride and handling on this car—and I also like the way the turbo whines! But you never see them on the roads any more! That surprises me, since they made more of this body style than any other Z in history. And still there are parts that are unavailable: If I want to get it repainted, I'd need to paint the stripes on because stripe kits are unavailable. If I had to change one thing, I'd do away with the adjustable shocks. You can't really replace 'em; they're \$900!

I took it to the Nationals the year I bought it, and it won its class. I did the same thing the next year, too. I haven't entered it for a while, but I'm going back this year with it.

—Allen Boucher

Specialists

Motorsport Auto

1139 W. Collins Avenue
Orange, California 92667
www.zcarparts.com
800-633-6331

Club Corner

www.z31.com

Since 1994, z31.com covers anything and everything Z31-related from historical information and research to basic repairs and modifications. Also featuring a forum.

www.zcar.com

Offers a comprehensive classified section, as well as forums.

www.az-zbum.com

Devoted to basic repairs and information.

www.z31parts.com

A site providing parts for the Z31 not found anywhere else in the world.

www.z31performance.com

Growing Z31 forum oriented towards performance and upgrade side of the Z31.

www.redz31.com

A site devoted to performance-oriented information including turbo swaps and ECU tuning.

