

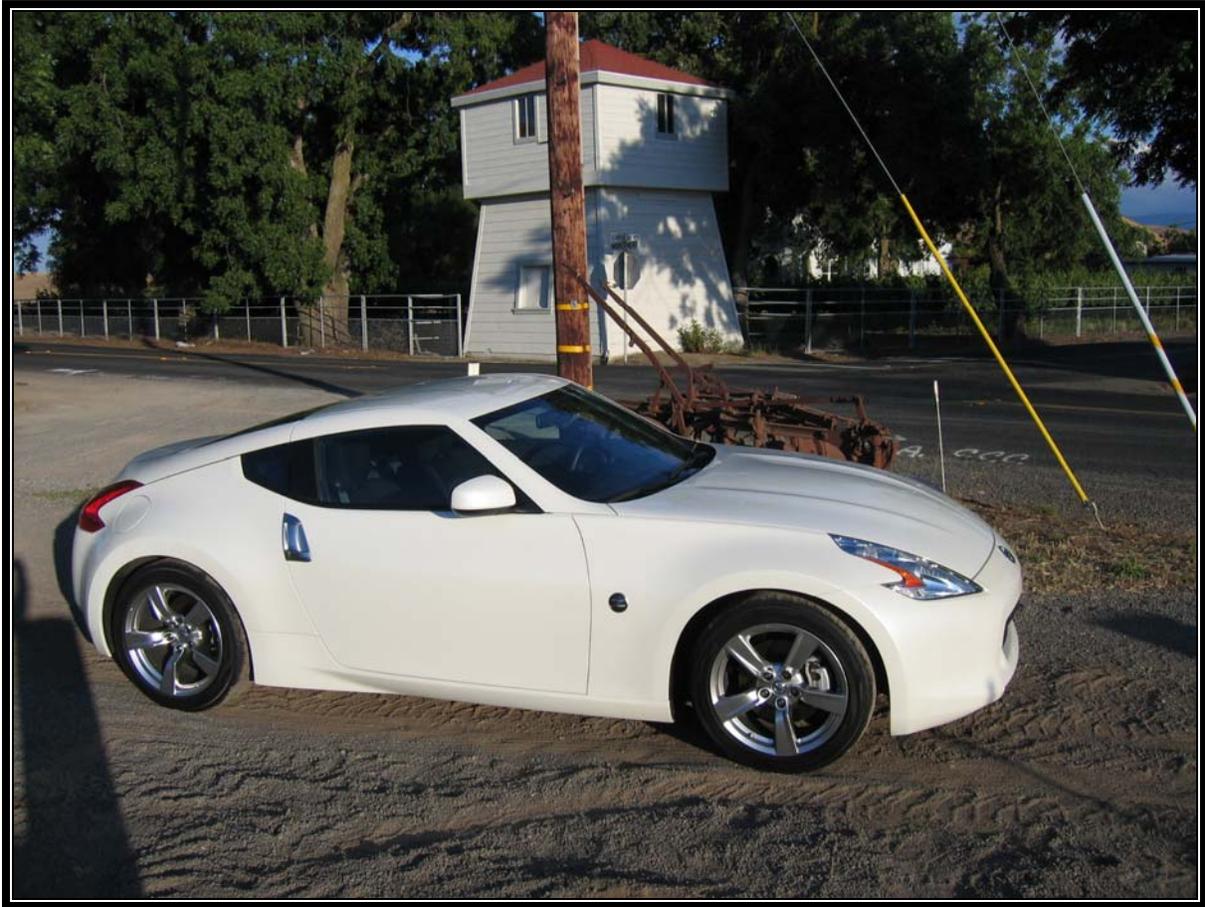
2009 Nissan 370Z
Were Our Expectations Too High?
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For: The Wheel

I'll never forget the little Datsun dealership that opened up down by the railroad tracks. The first car to appear in the small showroom of this former parts store, was a burnt orange 240Z. I'd never seen a car like this before. Dagger-like in shape, seemingly made to cheat the wind. With long hood, sloping coupe roofline, sugar spoon headlight buckets and a practical hatch, this was a car after my 16 year-old heart. My Dad, loyal American sedan driver, thought I'd lost my young mind. "Dad, we have to go see this 240Z, I'm sure it would be the perfect commute car for you!" No sale was made back then....then college budgets kicked in, new job, new wife, kids, you know the drill. Opportunity lost, I guess life is just full of those little lessons....you just can't always get what you want.....but the 240Z, regardless of how poorly Datsun managed the brand through the 80's, just wouldn't go away.

As an SCCA club racer, the Z reappeared on the scene with the ascension of a new racing class: IT – S not really sure what the S stands for...I just figured it was "Super." The ITS class had a real hey day in the late 80's and early 90's with the Z, 944S, Supra, 325is, RX7's, and others making claims to their superiority, but the Z was the marque to have for just a few magic years. Light weight, great handling, huge Goodyear GSCS tires, and a careful touch on rear brake (yes, shoe) adjustment, put the Z in continuous contention at the front of the pack. I liked this car that Dad wouldn't buy so much that I bought a pretty rough ITS car just because I could. We had two great years campaigning this car and quite a few very fun moments.....but was this all a dream? Don't tell me they let the Z brand die!! No, that's not possible!!

Dateline 2003: Nissan awakens from the dead and builds a new, bigger, faster Z. This time with a 350 in front of the name, but it's determined to be a Z after all. Is it perfect? No. Is it exactly what the purists want? No. But does anyone complain and send it back to Japan? HECK No!! The 350Z, after some minor initial teething issues, is declared a worthy successor to the Z heritage. Z shops can reopen after years of tuning Maximas. Enthusiasts are no longer embarrassed to be seen at a Nissan dealership. A thing called NISMO, (Nissan Motorsports) is born and a customer can purchase cool tuner toys for the Z and other Nissans. Funny, the entire Nissan product line begins to show spirit, innovation, quality and an attitude. The Altima and Murano badges are introduced and are smash hits. Nissan sales grow and stabilize to represent a solid brand in a very difficult period for the automotive industry. Better yet, Nissan is not dependent on SUV sales which tank in 2008 and take other great companies down the tube.

And yes, while other brands are cutting models, marques, and laying off, Nissan is busily making major improvements to its "halo" model, the Z. In late 2008, consumers welcome the 2009 370Z to some stunning TV ad campaigns showing an aggressive and very handsome next gen Z. And then they park a press fleet test model our driveway. Whew! This is quite an anticipated moment. After campaigning the 350Z in T2 for two great years, my bond with the Z is undeniable. Objective opinion? Probably not. However, as you'll learn shortly, one who is closest to a thing might be just a tad bit more critical.



The 370Z, on paper shows all the right moves in the evolution from the 350. A bit shorter, a bit lighter, all good things. A more commodious rear hatch area...much needed. And a lower longer look – fact is – the new 370Z, in my opinion is a top 5 all time auto design (excepting exotics and prototypes). This car is simply menacing in the driveway. I had a productive day underway until the fleet manager dropped the car off. Now I can't get a thing done. An errand comes up, but I need the truck...drat, no driving the Z yet. The anticipation is building – so let's go for some real old fashioned stone-walling here and divert our attention to the relevant facts of the new toy:

2009 Nissan 370Z – 2 seat coupe with hatch

Curb weight: 3232 Distribution 54/46 front/rear

Mid-front engine: V6, Variable valve timing, Direct injection, 332 HP 270 lb ft of torque

Suspension: Front – Double wishbone, aluminum alloy

Rear – independent four link aluminum alloy

Transmission: 6-speed manual with Syncro Rev match on downshifts or 7-speed automatic with shift paddles and downshift rev-matching

Wheels/Tires: (standard) 18" X 8" front, 18" X 9" rear, 225/50 X 18 front, 245/45 X 18 rear standard 19" wheel/tire package with lightweight aluminum wheels optional

Brakes: 12.6" vented rotor disc brakes, Sport brake option includes: 14" front and 13.8" inch rear rotors with four piston calipers in front

Finally, the schedule clears, as does the weather, and we're off on our Z experience!! We've planned a driving loop that should take it all in – side roads, freeway, canyon curves, and my bumpy remote road that will give us an all around impression.

After the full tour – the verdict is in: The 370Z is a very fast, very capable, exciting to drive two-seat sports car. Thank you Nissan!! This car begs to be modified and taken to the track – certainly for track days (this car is among a couple of others at the very top of the track day car recommended list for Hooked On Driving) and even more so for T2 club racing. On the freeway stretch, the linear power made for easy lane changes without any shifting – there’s plenty of torque for practical day-to-day stuff without having to wind the V6 up. The ride is right on the edge of sharp, but not too sharp. It’s a firm feel that is dangerously close to choppy, but close doesn’t count – we give it strong marks on overall ride quality and a civilized Dr. Jekyll nice guy attitude. The interior is cozy – maybe a bit cozier than one would think considering the overall size of the car, but we expected this from the 350Z and it’s no different...maybe a little less headroom along the doorsill area, as that gorgeous roofline is a bit swoopier than before. The rear hatch area is no longer cut in half by the body brace of the 350, but with the sleeker roofline, the overall space is pretty compact. We think that this is a car that calls for run-flat tires and no spare, as the spare tire takes up fully 40% of what could be the rear storage area. In the canyon curves, the Z shines. This Z, the base model with almost no options, priced at \$30,740, turns as crisply as we’ve ever experienced with a stock automobile. Turn in is precise, and the speed-sensitive power steering is a huge asset here, lending great feel of the rubber on the road and the weight transfer taking place as the car settles into the turn, rotates and pulls nicely upon exit. The stock brakes were great – good feel and bite – and did not fade under heavy use on back roads...this is a big improvement. But I’d still want an upgrade for the track – drat the Brembo option is gone, but a factory upgrade may just be good enough.

And now, the really difficult part of this story – (yes, I know, this is more of a short story than a car review). There are some things missing from the 370Z. Intangible things. And, some things that were a mild disappointment with the 350Z, but are just a bit more aggravating with the new version – simply knowing that Nissan missed the opportunity for improvement. I still hate the clutch. Shifting smoothly in day-to-day driving is just hard. Difficult to explain, this clutch seems to have an engagement point that is all-of-the-sudden at the top of the pedal uptake. I’m not sure whether it’s a less than linear tension of the clutch spring, or it’s just that there seems to be a high spot in the engagement. It’s just not a fun shift process and takes too much effort to be done smoothly. The much ballyhooed Syncro-rev match function to replicate heel/toe downshifting is confounding. Having practiced heel/toe for years, this seems like an attempt to replace an analog skill with a digital solution. I’d just as soon continue to heel/toe the six-speed and save up my money for an F1 gearbox in my next car. I will say that the Nissan 7 speed automatic with the blip downshift feature is awesome (having had customers with this on board), so this might be a very viable option. There are two other niggling issues that add up to significant disappointments. One is the sound the engine and driveline makes. The V6 moans and the transmission whines. This is killing me to admit, but it’s true – true enough to take some of the joy out of the driving experience. On a roll now, the other niggler is tire noise. I have the utmost respect for Yokohama/ADVAN tires, but not the ADVAN Sports that come on the base Z. They grip just fine, but they absolutely HOWL. Enough that I’d try to trade them away on day two of Z ownership. Put these things together and we’re perilously close to not falling in love the way we’d planned to. Yes, what is missing is the sensory experience of being at the keyboard of a Steinway, or the fretboard of a Fender. The Z just doesn’t send out romantic, intoxicating feels and noises that makes one smile. The smiles are left to result from the driving of a very competent and balanced car. This Z car is still a GREAT car, a GREAT value, and a ton ‘o fun. Yes, I’d put the NISMO or other aftermarket exhaust on the car to give it a sexier howl. Replace the loud tires with others, shift so many times that the lack of silkiness fades into

a distant memory. And what I'd be left with is a Z – a really great sports car – one to be appreciated for years to come.

Were our expectations too high? In a word: Yup. We'd hoped that Nissan would come forth with a Scaglietti for \$30K, a Veyron for \$32K, or a Continental Turbo R for \$38K (the loaded one). But alas, the 370Z is a merely mortal sports car for the people – a car to be enjoyed by those young and old, who know exactly what the Z brand is all about.

