

Japanese Secondhand Imports

For all our concerns, many people have had a great run from Japanese imports



Few topics have stirred such controversy as imported secondhand Japanese cars. They wiped out New Zealand's car manufacturing industry and would do the same in Australia if they were ever allowed in *en masse*.

For those that don't know already, a Japanese secondhand import is a car originally sold new onto the Japanese domestic market, then imported secondhand into New Zealand or Australia. Because the Japanese road safety tests are so tough, Japanese consumers sell their cars while they are still relatively new.

If you see having lots of cheap cars as being a good thing, then Japanese imports are the best thing that ever happened to New Zealand. How good? You only have to look across the Tasman, where the local industry is still closely protected. We did a lot of work comparing car prices in Australia and New Zealand and it's clear that the Australian motorist is paying a high price to support the local industry.

Cars that would be demolition derby material in New Zealand often fetch rather high prices in Australia simply because there are too many Australians trying to buy too few vehicles. Inevitably the old rubbish stays on the road long past its use-by date.

Don't believe all the horror stories about Japanese imports. Although many have had their speedos falsified and some buyers have bought dreadful lemons, the fact remains that the average Kiwi buyer has done very well from Japanese imports, thank you very much.

In theory, Japanese imports represent extremely good value for money, because they are late-model, low-mileage cars, usually in good condition. In practice, however, there are a number of problems, which can be summarised as:

1) Japanese imports are not always the same as local models.

Just because the badge on the boot says Corolla, it doesn't mean that the import you are buying is the same as the one your neighbour owns. Although they may be similar, there may also be a large number of parts that are not immediately available for imported models when it comes time to fix them. Please note that most car companies, such as Toyota, can supply parts for most import models, but they are unlikely to have them in stock, that is, the parts may have to come from Japan.

Worse, until recently, the Japanese car manufacturers issued a large number of short-run, different versions of the same car – if it sold, they kept the run going, if not, they quickly withdrew it and issued another. That's why there are literally dozens of different motors that may be available in the same car – again a problem when it comes to parts.

Because Japan suffers from terrible pollution problems, Japan has super-tough exhaust emission laws. That's why Japanese imports have a staggering number of tubes and pipes running in and out of the engine – it's mostly anti-smog gear, and it stops working properly when it gets old, often making the car much harder to tune.

2) Japanese imports are sometimes worn out when you buy them.

New Zealand's Serious Fraud Office once estimated that 70% of the speedo readings on import secondhand cars had been falsified. In most cases cars have had about 30,000–120,000km knocked off the actual mileage (our estimate), which is why many still give their owners a good run.

The real horror stories are with diesel vehicles, which are likely to have been used commercially, and so may have up to 1,000,000km on the clock yet still have shiny paint and clean carpets, thanks to those obsessive Japanese. Diesels can be hellishly expensive to fix, and they will need fixing, we promise.

In recent years the New Zealand government has tightened up the regulations to make it harder to import 'clocked' cars, but now the dodgy car dealers simply change the speedo reading *after* the cars are imported.

Then there's the question of makes which are nice to own when they get old: Toyota & Nissan tend to make cars that are both simple and relatively easy to fix regardless of age. On the other hand, cars produced for the Japanese market by Honda may be the Antichrist when they get old.

Just one small example: the seatbelt bolts on some Japanese import Hondas are glued in to stop them accidentally coming loose. Unfortunately, the glue is so strong that when these bolts are removed for repair or inspection, the metal thread that they are glued to sometimes comes out along with the bolt, meaning that there is now nothing to rebolt the seatbelt to. Hondas are designed to give years of trouble-free use, and upmarket models are engineered as well as the very best from Germany, but they are not designed to live forever, and when they break, the costs would make the Pope snarl.

3) Japanese imports have many expensive-to-fix accessories.

Traditionally (although this is changing somewhat), the Japanese consumer wanted a whole catalogue of fancy gadgets with his/her new car – air conditioning, turbochargers, onscreen dashboard display, electric seats, sunroof & automatic headlights to name just a few.

The trouble is, all these fancy doodads stop working after a while. Air conditioning you can simply disconnect and open the windows on summer days, but what happens when the electric windows give up the ghost?

Turbochargers, which offer such promise of high performance with economy, are a disaster waiting to happen if you are not careful. They all give trouble eventually, and because it is sometimes difficult to tell the real mileage, you have to be very careful with what you are buying. As a general rule, you should avoid models with turbochargers or diesel engines.

4) Japanese imports may be harder to fix. Because they are different from local



models and there are few English workshop manuals available for them, there are often difficulties fixing them. Many garages have some skills in getting them back on the road by now, but we have heard lots of stories of owners taking their cars from garage to garage trying to get the damned thing running properly.

5) Some imports are damaged or stolen. There have been a number of shipments of water-damaged cars which may prove a disaster for later owners. The main problem is likely to be serious and ongoing electrical & corrosion problems.

It won't be just a question of drying out the wiring. Where computers are concerned, water causes corrosion which may take a few months to take hold but could zap your circuitry at random and without warning. Also, of course, water-damaged cars may rust away before your very eyes. We suggest you avoid water-damaged vehicles, as they are simply not worth the risk at any price.

Accident-damaged vehicles which have been badly repaired in Asia are unlikely to make it through the border inspections in New Zealand and Australia. However, unrepaired, accident-damaged vehicles have been extensively imported into New Zealand, where they are sometimes repaired and re-registered.

Providing that the job is done legally and the new owner knows about it, there should be no serious problems. However, sometimes accident-damaged vehicles are brought in for spares, shonkily repaired and registered, then offered privately for sale. Of course, there are plenty of local vehicles repaired this way, too, and as with all cars, the easy defence is to have the vehicle checked out thoroughly prior to purchase. Any competent mechanic can usually spot a shonky repair job from miles away.

Stolen vehicles are also an occasional problem. These are usually upmarket models like Mercedes and are stolen to order by gangs. If you are ordering direct from some foreign country, you have to accept the possibility that any cheap, privately-sold luxury car may be stolen and you could lose it without notice if the police catch up with you.

You probably won't lose out if you buy the same vehicle from a local licenced

dealer, because they will probably be forced to refund your money. It's worth noting that stolen vehicles don't just come in ships from Asia – throughout New Zealand and especially in Australia, there are and have always been, gangs of crooks who steal cars and then resell them with new papers to the gullible.

Success stories

For all our concerns, many people have had a great run from Japanese imports. Their cheap import has provided them with years of troublefree motoring and a level of luxury that they could not possibly afford from a locally-assembled car.

So, we say go ahead and buy, but buy with your eyes open, and buy with great caution. We recommend you take any Japanese import to a skilled car-checking service for a thorough check before you buy it. This applies especially to turbocharged cars, diesel cars and Hondas of any kind (Hondas give brilliant reliability throughout their expected life – however, their expected life may have been exceeded long before the car left Japan, so be careful) •

WHAT IF YOU'RE THE FIRST LOCAL OWNER?

Maintenance is critical on most modern vehicles, but owners in Japan often stop servicing their vehicles once the vehicles leave the guarantee period.

Thus, the vehicle you are looking at may not have been serviced for several years. Some models come with a comprehensive service history but this will be difficult to check, because it will be in Japanese.

Therefore, if you're the first owner outside of Japan, you have to assume the vehicle you are looking at hasn't been serviced for a long time and you should expect to spend NZ\$500 on your first full service.

Otherwise, friend, you're on borrowed time •

Fancy a Mitsubishi Lettuce?



The very strange Mooku Mook The Tokyo Princess

Japanese domestic models often have names that are guaranteed to produce howls of laughter in any English-speaking country. Names like the Suzuki Afternoon Tea, Daihatsu Social Poze, the Mazda Secret Hydeout, the Mitsubishi Mini Active Urban Sandal may sound daft to us, but they are considered chic in Japan, where few people speak English but English is cool.

Also, the Japanese are fascinated with aspects of English culture, and they often incorporate English names into their vehicles as a result. For example, the English knights hold the same fascination for the Japanese as the Japanese samurai have for the English. Thus, when Nissan went looking for a name for a new car, they named it after the famed medieval knight, Cedric. The people who make the major decisions in Japan speak mainly Japanese, and, like their customers, they are primarily interested in names that sound cool, roll off the tongue, and theoretically translate into something that Japanese consumers can relate to.

We don't know what Daihatsu Social Poze translates into in Japanese, but you can be sure that it will imply that the car is prestigious and desirable. However, it's still a bit difficult for the Western mind to imagine a prestigious translation for the Mooku Mook The Tokyo Princess, Daihatsu D-Bag, Daihatsu Rugged Field Sports Resin Top or Mitsubishi Mum. You had to be there, we suppose •

