



EASILY AMUSED

BY TYSON HUGIE

"Midship Amusement"—what in the world could that possibly mean? Sometimes a translation comes across a little funky when crossing continents. When Honda engineers put together the Beat, a 3-cylinder compact car, in Japan 27 years ago, they thought that would be a fun tagline to promote the car.

I've been driving for 20 years—that's how long it took until I finally spiced things up and landed myself in the driver's seat of a stick-shift, right-hand-drive vehicle. And I can say with a certainty that this little two-seat mid-engined car did indeed provide the most automotive amusement I've had in years!

My friend Scott recently went through extensive efforts to import and register one such car to the states: a remarkably well-kept 1991 model in yellow, with only 47,000 kilometers on it (about 29,000 miles). He brought the car to Arizona, and I got to try my hand—my left hand, that is—at shifting through its five gears.

One of about 33,000 total cars produced between model years 1991 and 1996, the car is a total grin-machine. It turned heads from the second we backed it off a trailer, on every street corner, and in my own driveway—and that's with people not even seeing its zebra-patterned interior. Speed demon it is not, but the handling is precise and the shifter operates with typical Honda flawlessness.

I was able to get comfortable in the small cockpit and got acquainted with the controls. Everything is the same as a left-hand-drive car except for the turn signals and wipers being reversed. So the pedal layout, shift pattern, and everything else is exactly as you're already used to. My friend and I blasted through the gears in urban Phoenix for a few miles, and by the time I'd gone a couple of blocks, I was already comfortable managing it.

And that zebra-patterned interior really is one of the best parts.



Not even two weeks after mastering RHD on Scott's Honda Beat, I got to drive a few more right-handers, thanks to my friend Greg, who has an incredible collection of micro-cars (or "kei" cars) from Japan. Whoa, I could get used to this kind of fun and games!

Kicking things off was my time with a red 1985 Honda City "R," a 5-speed, 4-seat, 3-cylinder compact that was produced in its first generation from 1981 through 1986. While certainly no drag racer, this car gave more grins per mile than I ever imagined. Following Greg, in a black 1990 Honda Today, we stopped at a gas station in the southeast Valley and turned a few heads as we fueled up our square boxy econocars. The coolest thing about the City was that it could be equipped with an accompanying (and matching) 50cc scooter called a Motocompo. Greg's City is of course complete with this, and I had a blast tooling around the parking lot on it.

I made the mistake multiple times throughout the evening of approaching the left side of the car as opposed to the right. Fair enough—that's what I get for 20 years of being trained to drive a certain way!

Continuing the game of musical cars, I got to try my hand at all sorts of rarities, including the Today (since sold at auction), a Suzuki Alto Works, an Autozam AZ-1 (with gullwing doors!) and a Toyota Aristo (which we saw in the states as the Lexus GS 300). The Toyota was definitely the big boy of the right-hand-drivers, boasting a straight-six 3-liter powertrain that growled so heartily it sounded almost like a muscle car. A new addition to the collection is a 1989 Legend coupe 5-speed, which runs and drives just as it should.

As a grand finale, we ditched the non-Hondas in the lineup and added two white left-hand-drive Hondas: a 1991 CRX Si, and a 1989 Prelude Si 4WS. The Prelude tugged at my heartstrings particularly aggressively, since it took me back to my roots of 20 years ago when I bought my first Honda at age 17. Greg's runs and drives even better than mine did back then. My "newest" Prelude had 132,000 miles on it. His only has 33,000. That comes out to only a little over 1,000 miles per year over its nearly 30-year lifespan. Sheesh.

The night was capped off after sundown with a ride in a domestic car for a change of pace: an über-rare 1987 turbocharged Buick GNX (production #70) with only 22,000 miles on the odometer. Greg demonstrated its tendency to kick the back end out even under just moderate acceleration.

And finally, I spent a few minutes behind the wheel of a 14,000-mile 1993 Mazda RX7, which is a beast in its own way. It demonstrated some NSX-like characteristics but had a feeling all its own. The RX7 went up for auction on Bring a Trailer not long after.

Many thanks to Scott and Greg for their "adult toy box" hospitality. ■

