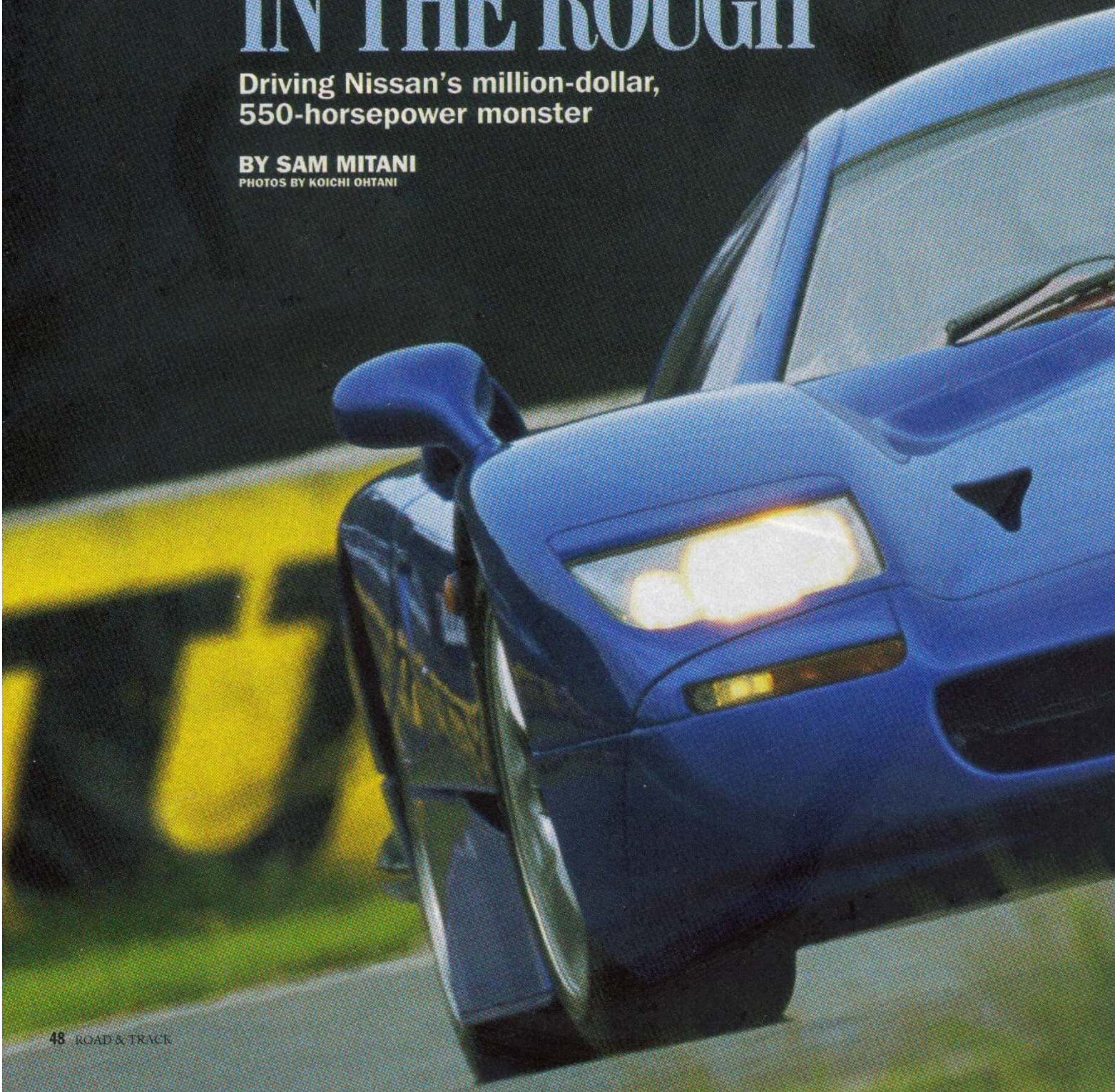


Nissan  
R390  
GT1

# Blue Diamond IN THE ROUGH

Driving Nissan's million-dollar,  
550-horsepower monster

BY SAM MITANI  
PHOTOS BY KOICHI OHTANI



**T**HE STEERING WHEEL vibrated like a jackhammer in my sweat-drenched hands as I gently depressed the throttle pedal for more power. The car felt as though it were glued to the tarmac as I came out of the sweeping left-hand corner, while the engine, sitting directly behind my left ear, let out a deafening, Godzilla-like shriek. At that instant, the car shot forward like a discharged bullet, hurtling down the

front straight of Fuji International Speedway at about 140 mph—and this thing wasn't even breathing hard.

Intimidating doesn't begin to describe the driving experience of the Nissan R390 GT1. Despite its label as a "road car," this animal is a virtual clone of the R390 GT1 race cars, developed in conjunction with Tom Walkinshaw Racing (TWR), that finished 3rd, 5th, 6th and 10th at Le Mans this year, with all four entries

successfully completing the rigorous 24-hour event. For Nissan, the R390's impressive showing at Le Mans was like receiving a dose of Viagra, providing it with a much-needed jolt of excitement that has recently been missing from the company. Now Nissan is keen to keep the ball rolling, announcing plans for another Le Mans effort next year (without the help of TWR) and officially making the R390 GT1 road car available to customers





■ As the successor to the Nissan R380 that challenged Porsche in the Sixties, the R390 fell a bit short of its goal at Le Mans this year. However, all four cars finished the race, signifying that Nissan is once again a force to be reckoned with. Virtually everything about the road-going version is the same as the race car, from its 550-hhp engine to its right-hand-drive configuration. Because most of the corners at Le Mans are right-handers, this seating gives better view of the turns' apexes.



for the cool price of \$1 million.

"The road car *is* the original R390," said Yutaka Hagiwara, general manager of Nissan's motorsports and planning center. "We developed the road-going version first and then built the race car from it. You can say that the road car is the diamond in the rough, while the racing version is the finished, polished product."

That the R390 GT1 road car has been around for more than a year is no secret. We've seen it gracefully displayed at various auto shows all over the world, and it has appeared in numerous publications (including R&T, January 1998). But no one had yet driven it—a situation I felt needed serious attention.

It wasn't easy, but after a year, I finally found myself on pit lane at Japan's Fuji International Speedway waiting to be the first journalist to test-drive the show-stopping exotic. Numerous executives were on hand to witness the event, as well as former Formula 1 pilot Aguri Suzuki, now one of Nissan's factory drivers. My hands trembled with excitement as six crewmen in matching red suits slowly rolled the car out of the garage.

Catching that first glimpse of the R390 is enough to take your breath away because, unlike some B-movie starlet, this car looks far more enticing in the flesh than it does on film. It's



wide and sits amazingly low to the ground, with numerous curves flowing along the length of its body, creating an overall effect that's beautiful yet imposing. For 1998, the folks at Nissan's motorsports division (Nismo) gave their prize thoroughbred a significant makeover, swapping virtually every one of its carbon-fiber body panels. The front sports a new hood with pronounced scoops and vents, and the rear has been completely restyled, most notably the section above the engine compartment.

Despite being a 2-seater, the R390 GT1 is an unusually large automobile, with an overall length of 185.8 in. (2 in. longer than an Altima sedan). But most of that space belongs to the engine—the car's occupants must make do with a tiny bubblelike compartment that seems barely large enough to house two seats and a steering wheel. As you can imagine, squeezing into the driver's seat takes extraordinary agility, especially for those taller than 6 ft.

"Okay Sam, you're up," said the Nissan official in charge. "Please be careful. It's the only R390 currently in existence."

Words of encouragement. It was the fifth time I'd heard them that day.

Turn the ignition key, press the start button located on the center dash, and the engine screams to life with a vicious growl. The magnesium-block

3.5-liter twin-turbocharged V-8 mounted amidships delivers a whopping 550 bhp at 6800 rpm and 470 lb.-ft. of torque at 4400 to the rear wheels. This 32-valve powerplant comes mated to a transversely mounted 6-speed sequential gearbox that's shifted via a long aluminum lever on the center console. The theory is simple—push forward to downshift, pull it back to upshift—however, once you're at speed on the racetrack, things can get mighty confusing in a hurry, especially if you're not accustomed to right-hand drive.

Snick. I eased the shifter into 1st and gently depressed the throttle. The rear tires spun slightly, but quickly managed to grab hold of the driving surface. I gently guided the 2400-lb. machine onto the straight and then, in my usual no-holds-barred fashion, floored it. With the wail of a hungry carnivore, the R390 catapulted forward and never let up, squeezing my entire torso into the seat until my lungs begged for air. And was it *loud*. I haven't experienced anything this earsplitting since sitting in the front row of a Spin Doctors concert. Before I knew it, the tachometer needle bounced around the 6500-rpm mark, telling me to shift into 2nd gear. Depress the clutch, give the engine a blip and pull the shifter back. Bang! I was greeted by another violent surge forward (and another out-of-breath experience);

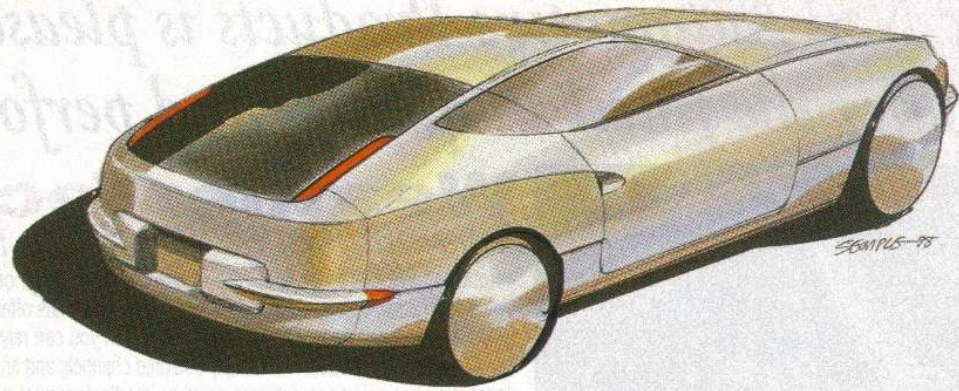
by this time I was nearing 100 mph. According to Nissan, the R390 runs to 60 mph in a scant 3.9 seconds and reaches the quarter-mile mark in 11.9. Top speed? Somewhere in the neighborhood of 200 mph.

The long straight at Fuji Speedway ends in a hairpin right-hander that requires heavy braking, three quick downshifts—from 5th to 2nd gear—and careful modulation of the throttle to maintain the balance of the car: a perfect forum for the R390 to show its braking and cornering abilities. Thanks to a specially designed ABS system, the R390's large brakes—14-in. vented discs front and rear—have little difficulty slowing the car. Depress the clutch, shove the shift lever forward three times in rapid succession and steer toward the apex. The R390 demonstrates a rock-solid turn-in feel, thanks to a super-rigid carbon-fiber chassis. And its excellent suspension—upper-and-lower A-arms at all four corners—keeps the car stable through all types of corners, with minimal body roll. As for the car's balance, it tends to understeer during abrupt tight turns, but remains wonderfully neutral on all others. Nismo engineers said that, for practicality's sake, the road-going R390's spring rates were significantly softened from those of the GT1 racer, and the ride height was raised about a half inch.



# The return of the affordable Nissan sports car

Is the price tag of \$1 million for the R390 GT1 too steep for your wallet? Well, not to worry—Nissan has just given us a glimpse of a future sports car that it says should sell for about \$20,000. Still early in the developmental stages, the new, unnamed car has been designed to capture the spirit and essence of the 240Z that put the Japanese automaker, once known as Datsun, on the sports-car map more than 20 years ago.



"We wanted to make this a pure sports car that's very affordable and one that possesses its own character and identity," Jerry Hirshberg, president of Nissan Design International, said. "We needed to return to what Nissan used to be. We've learned that although other car

companies can get by with making appliances on wheels, we cannot. People have come to expect more sporty cars from us."

What will go underneath the car's sheet metal is not yet known. However, there is talk of an inline-6 or a high-performance 4-cylinder engine

finding its way into the car, either of which would send power to the rear wheels. The car is expected to make its debut early next millennium. Nissan says it plans to unveil a prototype to the public at next January's North American International Auto Show in Detroit.—Sam Mitani

Among the short list of standard equipment in the R390 is traction control; however, for some reason, it was turned off during our testing session. Therefore, the rear end of the car had a tendency to break loose when I was too anxious with the throttle coming out of a tight corner. That said, the R390's quick-ratio steering made it simple to catch most any drift, although you're subjected to quite a shoulder-and-arm workout from the non-power-assisted rack-and-pinion steering.

Because of the way the pedals are arranged, it's virtually impossible for someone with size 8½ feet to heel and toe—the brake pedal sits too far away from the throttle pedal. So how does one match engine revs during a downshift? I approached this problem by blipping the throttle after getting off the brakes, but this proved unsuccessful on one particular 2nd-gear chicane. Approaching the slight right-hand kink on the back straight, I found myself late for the corner with the car still in 4th. There was no time to blip the throttle. I tried forcing the shifter into 3rd, but it wouldn't budge. Panic time. Right before the apex, the shifter clicked into 3rd, but by this time, the car was already leaning heavily to one side, and the drastic drop in speed threw the rear end out! I tried immediately getting back on the throttle while cranking the steering wheel in the opposite direction, but because the engine was far out of its power band, there was little help there. The car's rear snapped in the opposite direction. I tried correcting again with my right foot flat on the throttle. Thankfully, by this time, the engine revs had climbed

to about 3000, and the rear tires took a firm bite of the tarmac. I was back on course, and had escaped being presented with a million-dollar repair bill. My heart started pumping again.

On my first pass through the front straight, I caught a glimpse of Nissan's worried executives leaning against the pit wall watching my every move with nervous frowns. But by the end of my third lap—after I had become quite comfortable with the car and my lap times showed considerable improvement—those same people were cheering me on. Deep inside, I felt a small sense of pride, as if I had tamed this monster—but in reality I knew I had not come close to the R390's limits.

Do you think you have what it takes? Well, if you're actually interested in purchasing a Nissan R390 GT1, contact Nismo through Nissan at its California headquarters. But be warned: Just because you have the money won't guarantee that you'll be a proud owner.

"We have no plans on how many we will build yet. We have had several inquiries already, but right now we are prioritizing the list to those who want to race the R390. This is a race car and we would like to see it on the racetrack. We would especially like to see it in endurance races because the car's strength is its durability," Hagiwara commented.

Whether Nissan sells a significant number of R390s or not, one thing for sure is that the R390 GT1 represents a gargantuan statement from Nissan that it's back on the sports-car scene. Will we see elements of the R390 trickle down into more affordable cars in the future? Maybe so (see sidebar). For those of us who yearn for the Nis-

san of old—when it produced attractive sports cars such as the 240Z and 300ZX—the arrival of the R390 is a symbol of hope that it will again give us cars that will stir our souls and excite our enthusiasm.

## SPECIFICATIONS

Price	.....	\$1,000,000
Curb weight	.....	2420 lb
Wheelbase	.....	107.1 in.
Track, f/r	.....	68.1 in./65.7 in.
Length	.....	185.8 in.
Width	.....	78.7 in.
Height	.....	44.9 in.

## ENGINE & DRIVETRAIN

Engine	.....	twin-turbocharged dohc 32-valve V-8
Bore x stroke	.....	85.0 x 77.0 mm
Displacement	.....	3495 cc
Compression ratio	.....	9.0:1
Horsepower (SAE)	.....	550 bhp @ 6800 rpm
Torque	.....	470 lb-ft @ 4400 rpm
Fuel injection	.....	elect. sequential port
Transmission	.....	6-speed sequential

## CHASSIS & BODY

Layout	.....	mid engine/rear drive
Brake system	.....	14.0-in. vented discs
Wheels	.....	18 x 8J f, 19 x 10½J r
Tires	.....	245/40ZR-18 f, 295/35ZR-19 r
Steering type	.....	rack & pinion
Suspension, f/r	.....	upper & lower A-arms, tube shocks, coil springs, anti-roll bar
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## ACCELERATION\*

		Seconds
Time to speed		
0-30 mph	.....	1.2
0-60 mph	.....	3.9
0-80 mph	.....	6.0
Time to distance		
0-1320 ft (¼ mi)	.....	11.9

\*Nissan data.