

Nissan Micra

Featured model: 1.4SE 5-door



Photographs show 1.4 Sport+ manual version

IT'S BEEN AROUND FOR EIGHT YEARS now, so it's not surprising that this Micra is showing its age. It never was a tearaway – indeed, the original came over as chummy rather than exhilarating.

Attempts have been made to infuse a bit more dynamism into the Micra – not altogether convincingly. The Sport versions' "contemporary" styling can't disguise the middle-aged design wrinkles, while tauter suspension with lower-profile tyres, have admittedly sharpened the handling and stability, but at the cost of a more fidgety ride. Those wider tyres have also enlarged the turning circles and added steering weight.

Engine power has edged up from 54 to 60bhp on the one-litre version, and the 1.3 is now a 1.35litre/82bhp unit – feeling a shade more raucous when accelerating, but in automatic guise, feeling very unstressed when cruising, yet lively with it.

In fact, the continuously variable transmission is the one facet that puts the Micra ahead of the competition, with recent revisions emphasising its superiority. Admittedly, it lacks the stepped manual control that has recently come into vogue (as on the Primera), but we didn't miss it because the "Sport" and "Low" alternatives, plus normal D, cover every condition one is likely to encounter.

The new small torque converter gives seamless step-off and manoeuvring response, plus "creep" on hills – a characteristic missed by some auto devotees before. Most importantly, this CVT's mechanical efficiency runs rings

around "conventional" small autos – most of which use 15 per cent more fuel, for example. Even so, ours had a thirst on it for the first mile or so, first thing.

Space efficiency inside lags behind later designs and the rear cushion no longer tilts when required, for cargo-carrying. Up front, things are better, although all CVTs should have a tachometer, (so that you can see what's going on) and the driving position has a dearth of adjustments even on the dearer versions. The displays are clear and the gear selector moves beautifully nowadays, with ideal pedals, too.

This Micra has maintained the name's long-standing reputation for reliability and the automatic seems to have proved reliable, as well; there's consolation in avoiding up-to-the-minute trendiness. Parts are more expensive than for a Fiesta or Corsa, but you're likely to need fewer of them.

VERDICT

Apart from reliability, this test car's auto 'box is its most significant attribute. Without it, the Micra is now looking rather dated, with undistinguished if competent road manners and accommodation. It's also quite expensive in SE guise – the version that strikes us as the best compromise and the automatic costs twice that of a Punto CVT.

Nevertheless, it's a safe bet that you'll like it more, the longer you keep it. Its virtues are low-key but endearing – and enduring.

AT A GLANCE

considering size, price and rivals

Overtaking ability	★★★★○
Space/practicality	★★○○○
Controls/displays	★★★○○
Safety	★★★★○
Handling/steering	★★★★○
Comfort	★★★★○
Fuel economy	★★★★○

SPECIFICATION

engine 1348cc, 4-cylinder, petrol; 82bhp at 6000rpm, 80 lb ft at 2800rpm; chain-driven twin overhead camshaft, 16 valves

transmission continuously variable automatic, front wheel drive; 2640rpm at 70mph cruising = 26.5 mph per 1000rpm

suspension front: independent damper/struts with integral coil springs.

Rear: five-link independent with coil springs and a Panhard rod

steering hydraulic power assistance, 2.8 turns lock-to-lock; 10.6m diameter turning circle between kerbs (14.7m for one turn of the wheel)

brakes ventilated discs front, drums rear, with optional anti-skid control, electronic brake distribution and brake-assist package on test car

wheels/tyres 5½in steel with 165/60R14 tyres (Dunlop on test car); full-size spare

LIKES AND GRIPES

three beeps when it's time to refuel
centre vents stay cool with heater on
CVT automatically "changes down" for hill descents

speedo reads 75 at a true 70mph
no sill protectors for boot or doors
fiddly radio – find the on/off switch!
rear speakers mounted on load cover

THE MICRA RANGE

body 3 and 5 door supermini hatchback
trim levels S; SE; SE+ or Sport and Sport+

engines petrol: 4 cylinder/1.0 litre/60bhp; 4/1.35/82, diesel: none

drive front-wheel drive, 5-speed manual; (CVT-type automatic available on non-Sport versions)

