

# First road test of Honda 600

*Mighty mite makes sense*

**BY WILLIAM QUINN**

One of the highlights of my recent trip to Japan was the opportunity to road test the Honda '600,' the huge motorcycle firm's first four-wheeled vehicle to be imported into the United States. I also had a one-hour private interview with Mr. Soichiro Honda, and feel that the 600 is more significant than "just another Mini-car."

There can be no mistake that the 600 is a small automobile. Those of you who are familiar with the Austin-Cooper, or Mini, will find more than a vague resemblance here. There is some educated speculation that Honda engineers took a long hard look at the Mini and, being practical men, adopted that which they felt was desirable and modified

those things they believed needed improvement. The result is highly satisfactory, both in terms of appearance and performance.

It is in this area of performance that I found the Honda most outstanding.

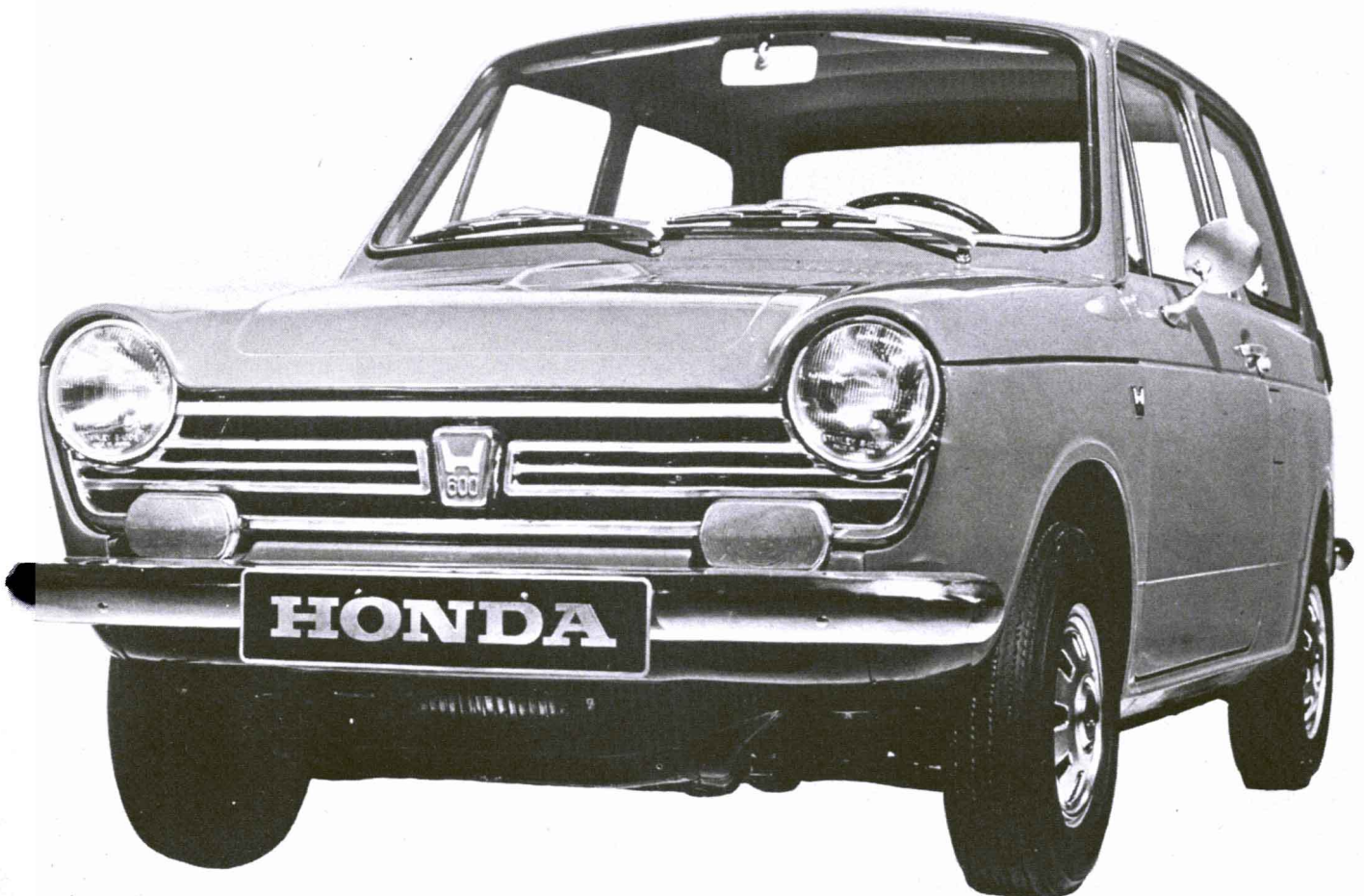
The 600's power plant is based on proven motorcycle practice. With more than 9 million cycles made and sold, Honda certainly should know all the secrets for extracting the maximum from this type of engine. What Honda has actually done is to marry the best of automotive and motorcycle designs in the rugged 600 cc air cooled power unit.

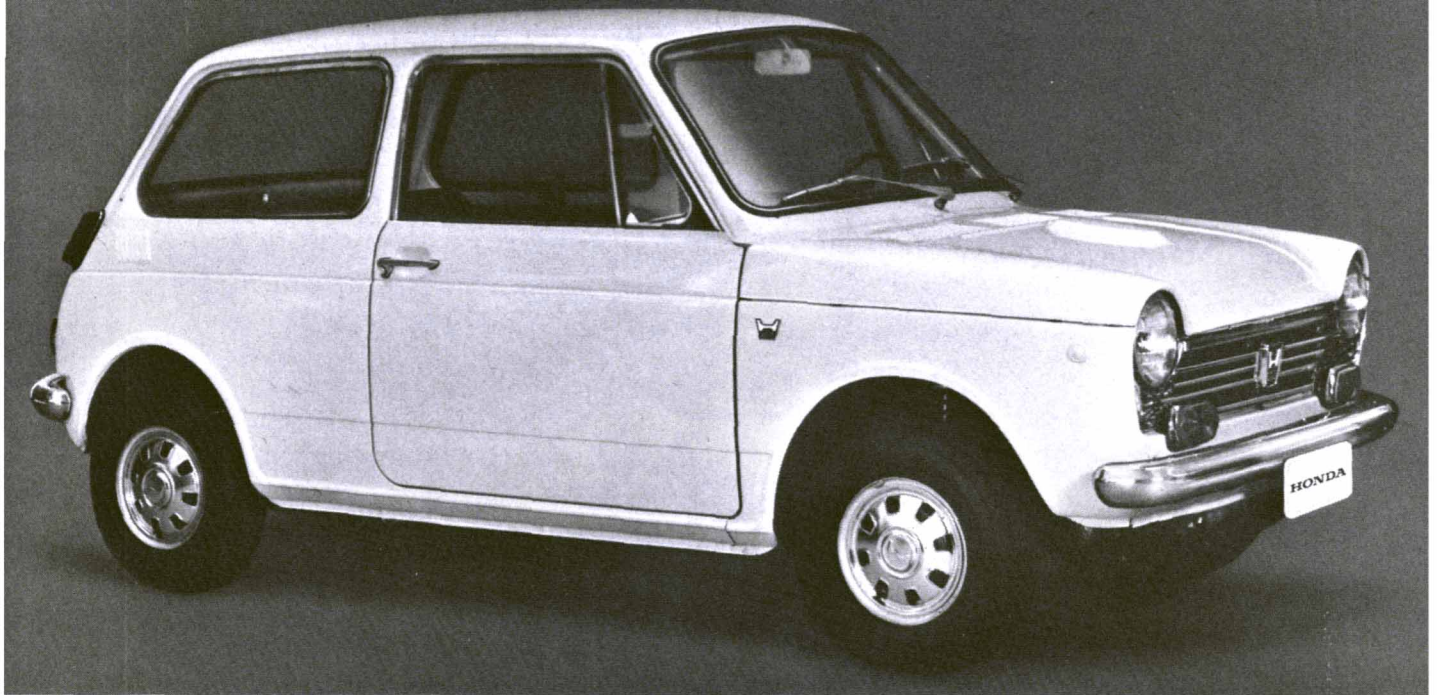
The unit is a two cylinder overhead cam, four stroke, with steel liners in deeply-finned aluminum

cylinder castings. The engine is small and light, thus makes its contribution to a very favorable weight to horsepower ratio. Maximum horsepower is 45 bhp at 7000 and, with a displacement of 36.5 this figures out to 1.23 hp per cubic inch. Torque output is 40 lb/ft at 5000 rpm.

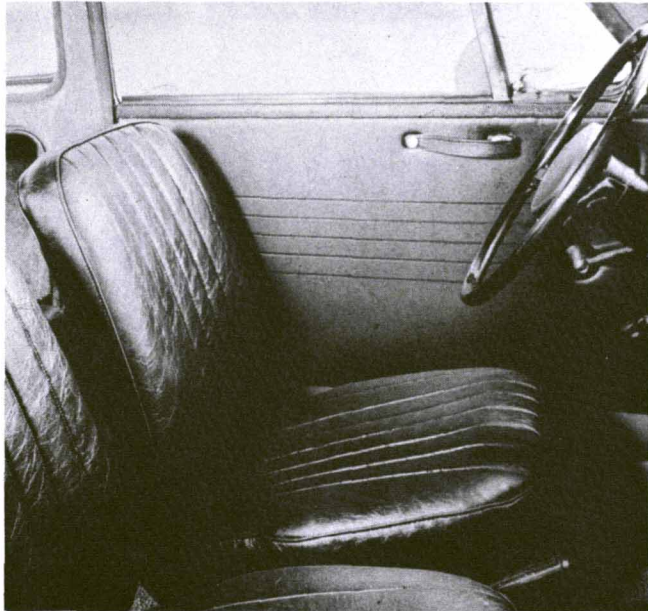
Cooling this engine is a highly efficiency axial fan behind the engine supplemented by ram air from the front. Like the ads for another economy import say, there'll never be a radiator to worry about, nor anti-freeze, nor boiling if caught in a traffic jam. Although the single overhead cam is chain driven, it is remarkably quiet.

Since this is a front wheel drive (FWD) car, all the drive train com-





*Without a reference the 600's size is completely deceptive. While about the same size as the Austin-Cooper, the Honda looks less like a shoe box.*



*Tiny on the outside, the 600 is surprisingly roomy on the inside. Four adults can travel in comfort. Seats are good and upholstery is excellent.*



*With skimpy bumper, protection at the rear of the Honda is minimal. Overrides appear a necessity. Well planned location of the taillights will assure that the small car will be seen.*

ponents are up front with engine, transmission and differential combined. This results in a saving in weight and complexity with the added benefit that all three are lubricated from a single oil supply.

The combination of small engine displacement, low total weight and efficiency throughout results in fantastic economy. Driving the car for extended periods in Japan, I was able to average nearly 50 mpg out on the highway and in the congestion of

Tokyo traffic still got close to 42 mpg—on regular grade gasoline.

The transmission is four speed manual with synchro on all forward speeds. While the gearbox is smooth I found it similar to many British imports in that it requires 'running in.' In other words it was a little stiff but eased up with more and more driving. Clutch action is positive through a conventional single dry plate, diaphragm center type. While at the factory I was told that an auto-

matic three-speed transmission will soon be available, the 'Hondamatic.' During my stay however there were no cars yet equipped with the new gearbox.

Suspension on the Honda 600 is independent at the front with coil springs surrounding the telescopic dampers. Unusual in a FWD car, there is strut type suspension. The forward location of all the engine, transmission and differential components makes this practical. At the

rear is a beam axle hung on semi-elliptic leaf springs.

The rack-and-pinion steering is extremely precise. With a turning radius of only 15 ½ feet the 600 can be parked with ease in a space just barely longer than its own length.

There are drum brakes all around, which, with a car weighing only a little over 1200 pounds should be quite satisfactory. I tried a series of panic stops from 60 mph and not only found no fade but experienced none of the rear wheel lock-up which often occurs in FWD cars.

From photos, with no reference point, it is almost impossible to judge the size of the car. Everything is in remarkable proportion and it is only on approaching it in person that you are aware of its being diminutive.

From the inside, however, it is another story. I am over six feet tall but I found ample leg and head room. Surprisingly there is more than adequate leg room for rear seat passengers as well. There is actually more interior leg room in the Honda 600 than in any of the 'Pony' cars tested in our October 1967 issue. Hip room is not exactly on a par but four six footers can travel in relative comfort.

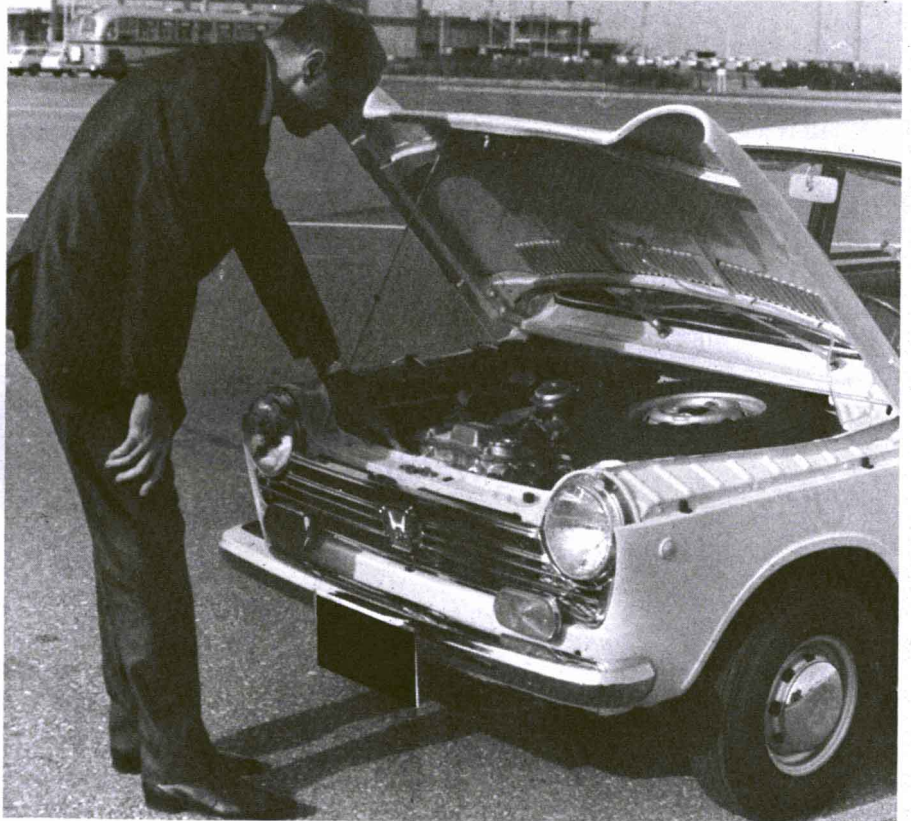
Visibility is excellent. Glass abounds in all directions and all roof pillars are slim. Seats are quite comfortable although the front 'buckets' leave a bit to be desired in lateral support. All instruments and controls are easy to reach and to read and are sensibly located, although instrumentation is understandably a bit spartan. The heating and ventilating system is excellent. When you need it there is plenty of fan driven heat and there are air extractors which work even with all windows closed.

Trunk space is good but for those who want to carry really bulky things, the rear seat can be either folded or removed. You might want to take measurements though before attempting to load a string bass or tympani.

One feature is really unique but so simple we wonder why no one has



*Front wheel drive makes the Honda 600 a cornering little demon. While a rear wheel will lift in a tight turn there is no loss of adhesion with the driving wheels pulling.*



*Lightweight air cooled engine sits well ahead of the front wheels. Honda has employed all the expertise learned in building more than nine million fine motorcycles.*

thought of it before: there is no way the gas tank cap can be removed with the car locked or unless the driver's door is open. A simple pin device is locked in place through the cap with the closing of the driver's door.

On a tour around the exterior I found everything about where it ought to be except that bumpers are a bit skimpy to cope with American parking. The wrap around tail lights will be a boon to those who might feel nervous in a very small car.

I've given a thumbnail description of the car while saving the driving impressions sort of as dessert. All of us like to drive something that is 'just a little bit different,' yet we also want something more.

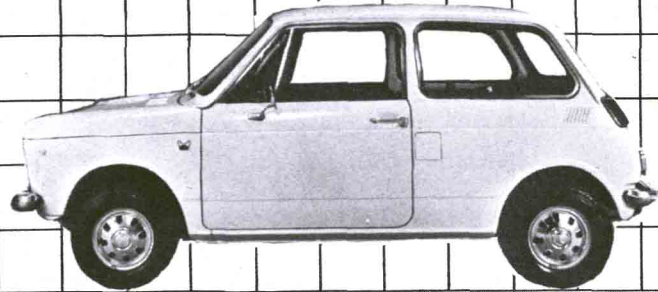
Honda has achieved a happy combination of economy and performance in its tiny 600.

The engineering concept of the car, as pointed out to me by the factory engineers, is primarily as a grocery hauler or economical office-and-back transporter. However, those same engineers have put so

RT

**HONDA 600**

\$14,000  
\$12,000  
\$10,000  
\$8,000  
\$6,000  
\$4,000  
\$2,000  
Price



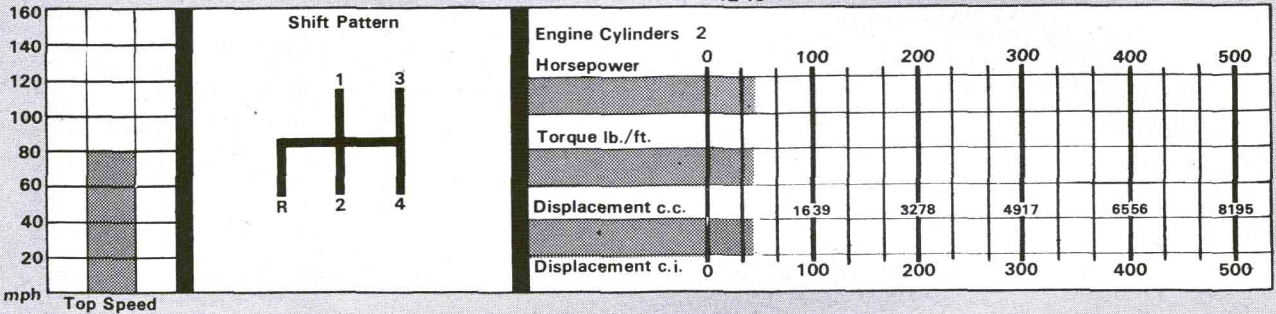
Weight Distribution

Front 60.6%

Rear 39.4%

12 inch squares

Weight 1213 lbs.

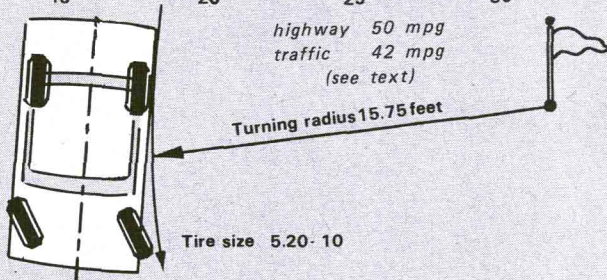


Top Speed

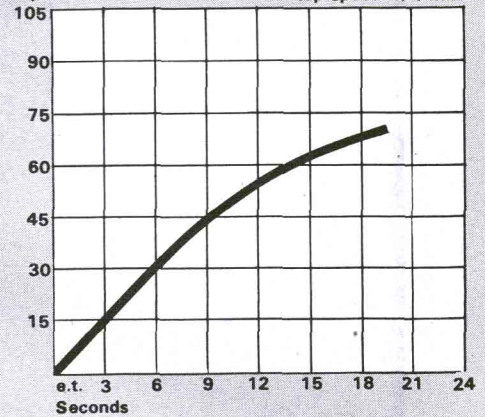
Braking distance from 60 mph



Fuel consumption mpg



top speed 1/4 mile



much rugged stamina into their creation that it will cruise without complaint all day long at near its top speed of 80 mph.

I had my first taste of the Honda's performance on the trip from the factory to the Suzuki race circuit, a distance of some 20 miles. The little 600 behaved flawlessly in heavy traffic. As I mentioned, the gear box was a bit stiff but shifts were positive and the willing little engine pulled briskly away from the many stops.

My first real chance to unwind the 600 came on the race circuit itself. The Seiko timing equipment had been set up so I took a few runs

through the quarter mile. My best time, with a fairly new engine, was 20.1 e.t. and a top speed of 71.6. I am told, however, that factory drivers with well run-in machines are consistently turning 19.7 in the quarter. This is equal to or better than many cars with more than double the displacement.

On take off, the 600's FWD digs in, claws at the pavement and goes with none of the time wasting wheel-spin usually associated with rear wheel drive machines.

The car's light weight, small size and the pulling power up front lets you get around tight bends at high speeds. Like the Mini, the car simply

goes where you point it, and who cares if a rear wheel comes off the ground!

If there are occasions when a third car would solve a transportation problem in your family or if you've had enough of high fuel bills for the second car, the Honda 600 makes a lot of sense.

Or, if you are a sport and get your kicks from the unusual, the \$1,275 price will put you into a practical playtoy.

I feel the 600, if it proves to be compatible with driving conditions here, could be a new breath of life in the 'minimum car' field which failed to rally with the BMC Mini. ♠