

By **PETER HALL**

Selling for a mere £690, this baby car from Japan may find plenty of willing homes in Australia's big cities when suitable distributors can be arranged.

MOST successful used car dealers are content either to continue their trade or, if the chance presents itself, to take on the franchise for a well-known, long-established new car.

Not so Frank O'Brien, the best-known and probably the biggest used car dealer in the big, old central Victorian town of Ballarat.

In the palmy days of used cars — from the end of the war until about six years ago — O'Brien did very well out of used cars and various new car franchises he held from time to time.

Even since the used cars' cream turned sour, he did quite well, and during the last few years has been Ballarat's Jaguar dealer, as well as its big used car man.

But last year, Frank O'Brien decided to look around for fresh fields to conquer. His interest fell onto Japan.

He went to Japan and for more than four months looked around, learned a lot about the strange and fascinating country and left with the Australian franchise for a Japanese car which many other, much bigger Australian concerns were also after.

Recently the first of his little Japanese cars came to Melbourne and Frank O'Brien took them to Ballarat to begin the ambitious project of putting the Subaru Maia, previously unheard of, on the Australian motoring map.

At the same time he loaned me the Subaru he had been trying out in Victorian conditions, for a full road test.

An individual-looking car only four inches over 10 feet long, the Subaru was full of technical surprises.

Most noticeable at first glance was the fibreglass roof. The Japanese designers have ingeniously woven an invisible radio aerial into the Subaru's top — at one corner is a small

steel connection post where the radio aerial is joined.

The test car was fitted, as are most of the cars O'Brien is importing, with a magnificent Japanese transistor radio — one that clips into a carrier under the dashboard and operates there from the car battery with clear tone and remarkably loud volume.

Clip it out of the car and the radio works well off tiny built-in torch batteries.

Perhaps the most impressive design feature of the car was the power and transmission unit.

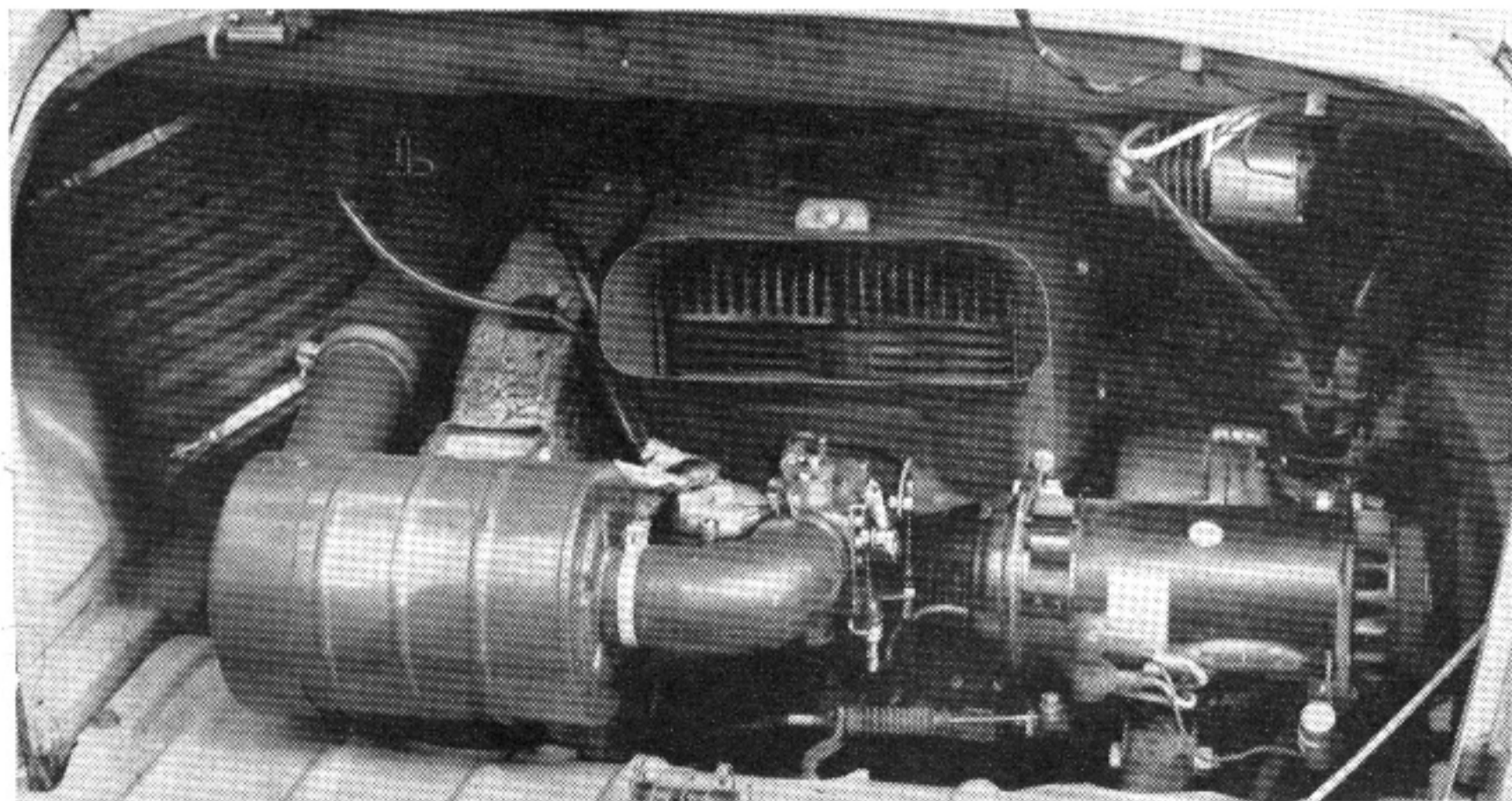
Volkswagen-Fiat style, it was at the back with engine, clutch, gearbox and diff all bolted together into one accessible whole.

The engine was a two-cylinder, air-cooled unit sitting transversely across the line of the back axle.

To increase its simplicity, the engine is a two-stroke with a total swept volume of 423 cc. Developing 22 brake horsepower, it provides the eight cwt car with quite a respectable power-to-weight ratio.

The Subaru's performance, indeed, was not bad at all for a machine so small and so obviously built more for economy and long life than high speed and flashing acceleration.

Top speed averaged out at 62 mph, and on one run with a fairly strong tail wind, it registered better than 66 mph on the flying quarter mile.



Engine is a lusty two-stroke mounted transversely and driving the back wheels. Big air cleaner should be efficient for Australia's dusty roads.

MINI-MOTORING



The gear ratios were well spaced and the motor did not seem to mind being wound out to its limit in any gear.

Perhaps the worst feature of this well-built little Japanese machine was the noise. When the Subaru was accelerated vigorously, it sounded inside like an early model Volkswagen. Once at cruising speed — anything between 50 and 60 mph — however, the noise dropped appreciably and was then well below the annoying level.

The gearbox was a rugged three-speed affair with strong synchromesh on second and top gears. The change lever was well-placed between the front bucket seats and rapid, smooth changes were no trouble at all.

The Subaru, which is made by the giant Fuji Heavy Industries Ltd of Tokyo, has been on sale in its homeland for many years, but with a smaller engine than this recently released export model.

Australia is only the second coun-

The appearance of the Subaru is unusual because it lacks bright hardware externally. Nevertheless, the shape is practical for a small car.

try to have it, the United States having beaten us to the gun by about three months.

Its finish would have been exceptionally good on a vehicle twice its price — for the under £700 market, it was outstanding.

All body panels fitted perfectly, the engine was finished with great care, the paintwork was without blemish, the interior was trimmed with good, hard-wearing materials and the doors and all minor controls operated smoothly and seemed sturdy.

It was not an easy car to clamber in to and get out of. The door, with their hinges set at the back, opened wide enough, but the whole passenger compartment is so far forward on the wheelbase that the forward edge of the driver's and front passenger's seats were actually ahead of the line of the windscreen pillars.

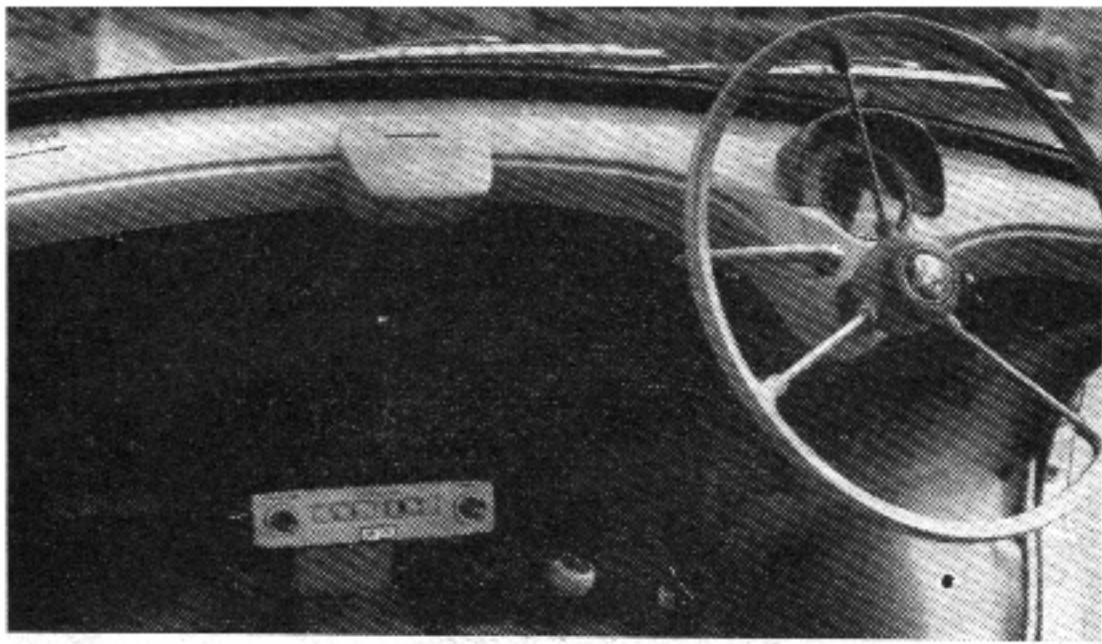
A large dog leg is cut into the front wings, but it is not sufficiently deep, nor could it be with this design, to make getting in and out as easy as one would like it.

I found practice improved matters quite a lot.

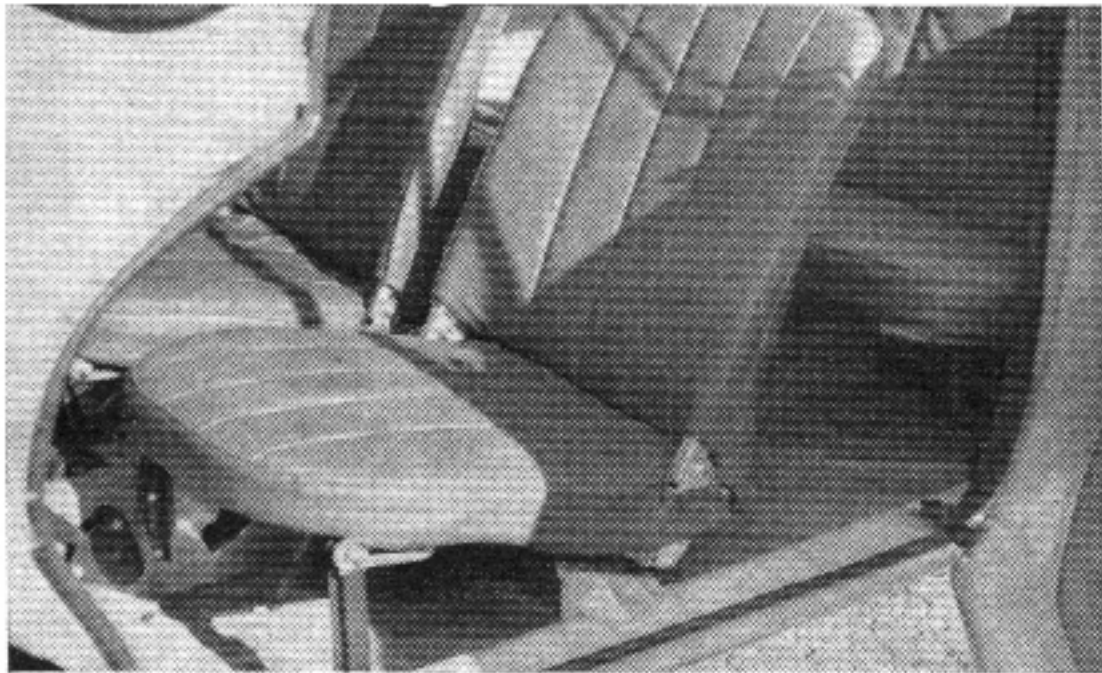
Once inside the car there was ample room both for the driver and the front seat passenger.

The driver, in particular, was well cared for. The light, three-spoke steering wheel was set close to the dashboard, the simple instrument panel (a speedo and a couple of warning lights, no fuel gauge) was right ahead of him and the few hand controls were only inches away from the wheel.

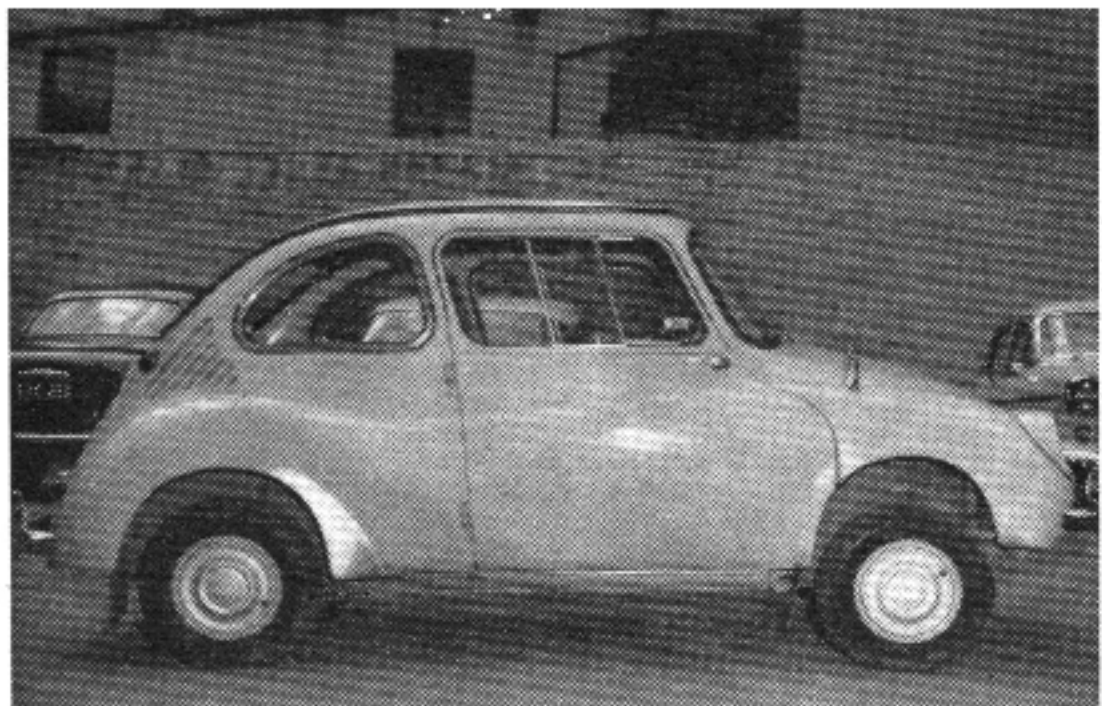
The foot pedals were better placed than those I have used in any other really small car. The three pedals were set well apart, there was room



Simplicity is the keynote for the interior. Major controls are on the floor whilst the driver is confronted with an instrument, winker arm.



Small bucket seats can be tilted forward for access to the rear occasional seats. In spite of door shape entry and exit is still awkward.



Profile view of the Subaru accentuates its simple, but practical shape. Note how front door forms trailing edge of the front wheel arch.

around the clutch to rest the left foot without it becoming seriously claustrophobic and the accelerator pedal was set at a natural angle which saved the right foot from the cramps it often gets in modern cars.

A strong and extremely effective handbrake protruded from the floor on the left of the gear lever.

And that is saying something, because the Subaru footbrake system — a conventional hydraulic one — was fantastically good. The result, clearly of having big, well-designed brakes on a small car with excellent balance and first-rate suspension.

Which leads to the little Jap car's finest feature — its roadholding.

A glance at the car will show that each of the four wheels is as near to the extremity of the car as it is possible to get. In Citroen fashion, therefore, nearly all the car is cradled within the wheels — an extremely good start on the way to making a car stick to the road.

Add to that independent suspension on all wheels and suspension by torsion bars, a stabilizer bar and you can see why the Subaru is an outstanding car in the suspension department.

The Subaru clings to the road at all times, whether the surface is smooth as glass or non-existent, whether the car is belting along in a straight line through a gale-like cross wind or being hurled around a corner like a cricket ball being sent over the square leg boundary by a Bradman.

The Japanese seem to have overcome the problem of rear-engine cars oversteering with this one. Maybe that is because the Subaru does not develop enough power or go fast enough for oversteer to become noticeable. At any rate, within its speed range, steering is almost dead neutral.

It is light and direct, too, thanks to a fine rack and pinion steering box.

Anyone who doubts the solidity of this little car would be well advised to crawl underneath and have a good look (he would have to travel to Ballarat, first, at the moment).

The springs, steering arms and other suspension parts look as though they are built to take a merciless thrashing from a 10-ton truck, not an eight-cwt mini-car.

One of the most appealing aspects of the whole Subaru set-up is that spare parts, even with high Australian import duties and sales tax, are remarkably cheap. A complete set of rings and gaskets for a re-ring job, for example, retail at a mere 23/- — and the car's tool kit is adequate for the average handyman to do the job himself.

Frank O'Brien intends to handle his new franchise quietly for a start. His initial batch numbers only a few dozen and he will increase his rate of supply only when he has an idea of the potential market.

At the moment the Subaru is being retailed only from his Ballarat showrooms, but he intends to appoint dealers in capital cities soon, and follow that up with dealers in major country towns. #

wheels ROAD TEST



TECHNICAL DETAILS OF THE SUBARU MAIA

PERFORMANCE

TOP SPEED:

Fastest run	66.2 mph
Average of all runs	62 mph

MAXIMUM SPEED IN GEARS:

First	24 mph
Second	45.8 mph
Top	66.2 mph

ACCELERATION:

Standing Quarter Mile:	
Fastest run	25.8 sec
Average of all runs	27.1 sec
0 to 30 mph	9 sec
0 to 40 mph	16.8 sec
0 to 50 mph	27.5 sec
0 to 60 mph	NA sec
0 to 70 mph	NA sec
0 to 80 mph	NA sec
20 to 40 mph	18 sec
30 to 50 mph	19.4 sec

GO-TO-WHOA:

0-50-0 mph	29.7 sec
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SPEEDO ERROR:

Indicated	Actual
30 mph	28 mph
40 mph	37.5 mph
50 mph	46.7 mph
60 mph	56 mph
70 mph	NA mph
80 mph	NA mph

FUEL CONSUMPTION:

Cruising speeds	59
Overall for test	53

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE:

Cylinders	two air-cooled
Cylinders	two, air-cooled
Bore and stroke	67 by 60 mm
Cubic capacity	423 cc
Compression ratio	7 to 1
Valves	nil, two-stroke
Carburettor	horizontal
Power at rpm	22 bhp at 4500
Maximum torque	24.6 lb/ft at 3500

TRANSMISSION:

Type	three speed manual, floor change
Ratios:	
First	3.11
Second	1.59
Top	1.00
Rear axle	4.92

SUSPENSION:

Front	independent torsion bar
Rear	independent torsion bar
Shockers	telescopic

STEERING:

Type	rack and pinion
Turns, 1 to 1	3½
Circle	26 ft 2 in

BRAKES:

Type	drum
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DIMENSIONS:

Wheelbase	5 ft 11 in
Track, front	3 ft 11 in
Track, rear	3 ft 11 in
Length	10 ft 4 in
Width	4 ft 3 in
Height	4 ft 5½ in

TYRES:

Size	
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WEIGHT:

Dry	8½ cwt
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