Wheels

$3.00*
NZ $3.50*

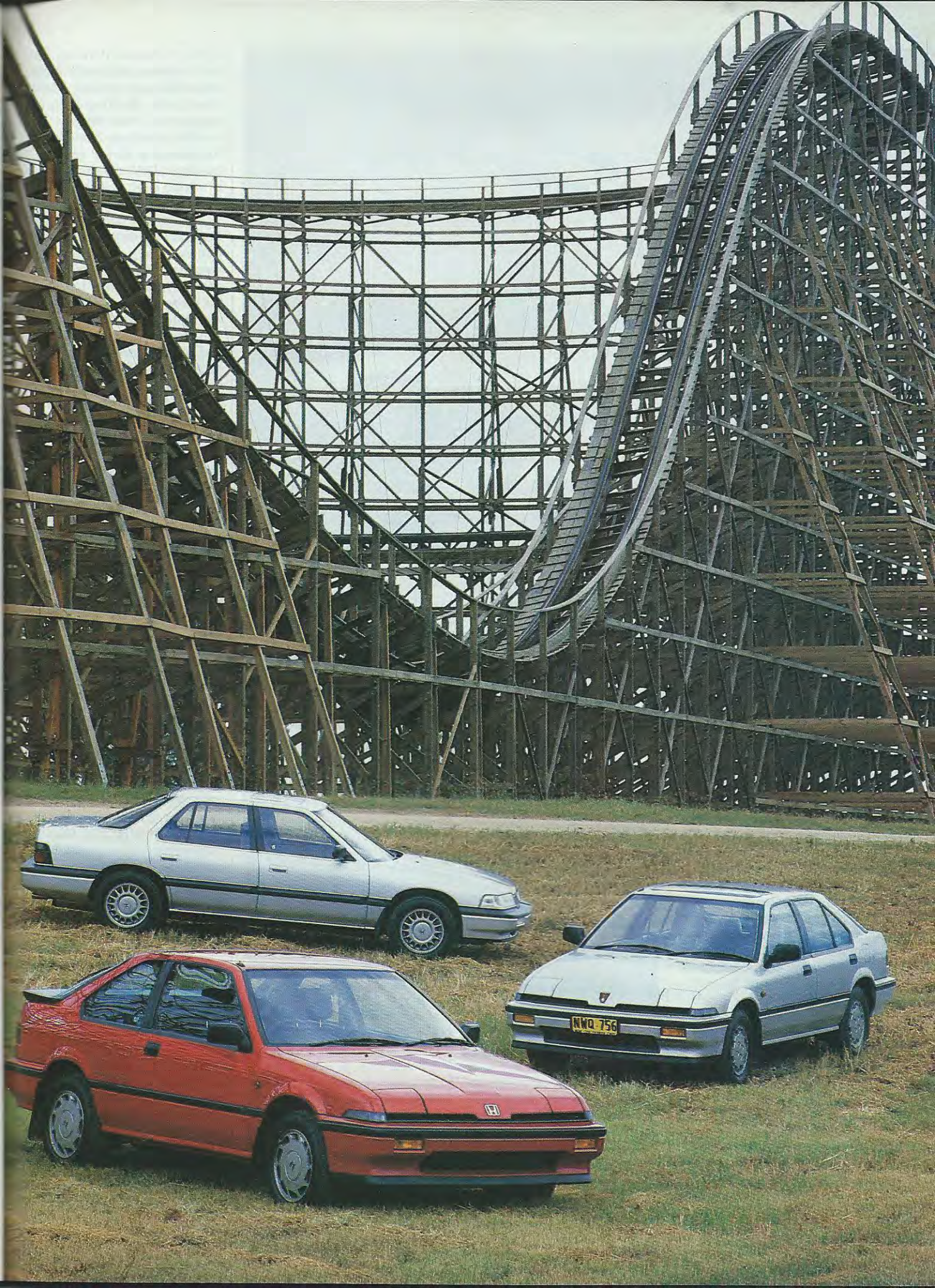
AUSTRALIA'S TOP-SELLING MOTORING MONTHLY

MAY 1986

HONDA INTEGRA AND ROVER 416i

Badge-engineered *brilliance!*

(and we've driven Honda's world-beating Legend)


NWQ 756

INTEGRAL ROVER

Back-to-back testing Honda's Integra and Rover's 416i version. John Wright reports

THE ROVER Quintet was an uninspiring little hatchback Honda that was brilliantly marketed by JRA. Now, after lengthy equivocation, Honda has come good with the Quintet's successor. Fact is, Honda was so impressed with the way JRA moved the Quintet — a model Honda itself had trouble selling in Japan and Europe and had rejected for Australia — that the decision was taken to let JRA have another rebadged 1.6 litre Honda.

This car is the 416i and JRA does not want us to think of it as a Quintet successor. For starters it has moved considerably upmarket and is virtually a class bigger in size. Secondly, it is far more interesting and competent.

However the troubled relationship between the $A and the yen has meant that the JRA marketing men will really have to put their best feet forward. Although no price was fixed at the time of writing, $28,000 looks like a likely starting point. And no matter how you care to look at it, that's megabucks for a 1.6 litre Japanese car, albeit one with a 16-valve twin-cam engine and programmed fuel injection.

The specification level of the 416i is suitably high. Electric windows, central locking, air, powered mirrors, a removable glass sunroof and velour interior trim are all included. The rack and pinion power steering is speed sensitive. There are ventilated disc brakes up front, which goes some way towards compensating for the fitment of rear drums.

The styling is both contemporary and interesting, clearly in the current Honda idiom, yet different from any other model. This is no Quintet.

The car we drove was one of only two in the country. Unfortunately, it had been much fiddled with. The automatic transmission, for example, had been rebuilt three times — not because of any problem, but as a training exercise for the JRA mechanics. Job three wasn't satisfactory and the

transmission was slipping when we tested the car.

With everything working correctly, the automatic 416i should certainly manage to accelerate from zero to 80 km/h in less than nine seconds and to 100 in less than 12.5, which were the stopwatch times we achieved. Tales out of school point to a top speed in the vicinity of 170 km/h. The manual should top 180.

The engine itself is a far cry from the SOHC unit in the unlamented Quintet. Displacing 1590 cm^3, it develops 90 kW at 6500 rpm and 142 Nm at 5000. The power makes itself felt from around 4000 rpm and comes on strongly at 5200. So it is an enthusiastic, free revving engine in the best Honda tradition but peakier in a familiar, twin-cam way.

Taken to the 6800 redline, the engine is noisy but not unhappily so. The peaky characteristic of Honda's twin-cam 1.6 feels strangely at odds with a

slick shifting four-speed automatic with lock up torque converter. So the Rover 416i should be more pleasant and Integra-ted with the five-speed manual.

For the size of the car (length 4350 mm, wheelbase 2520, width 1665 and weight 1050 kg), the 416i has a spacious, airy interior. The steering wheel is adjustable for rake and with the low profile of the fascia and that fashionably drooping bonnet, the driving position is excellent.

The seats have side bolsters and offer good support. If there is a criticism to be made, it will come from tall drivers and front passengers who might find the cushions too short and lacking in under thigh support. Rear legroom is entirely reasonable.

Less satisfactory is luggage space. The hatch swings up to reveal a shallow boot, surprisingly so in view of the stubby looking rear end.

Both ride and handling are way beyond the mediocre levels achieved by the old Quintet. If anything, the 416i rides more equably than the latest Accords with their much vaunted double wishbone front suspension. This Honda-Rover makes do with torsion bars. It maintains its equanimity over broken surfaces and the ride is flatter and quieter than we tend to expect — even in 1986 — from Japanese cars.

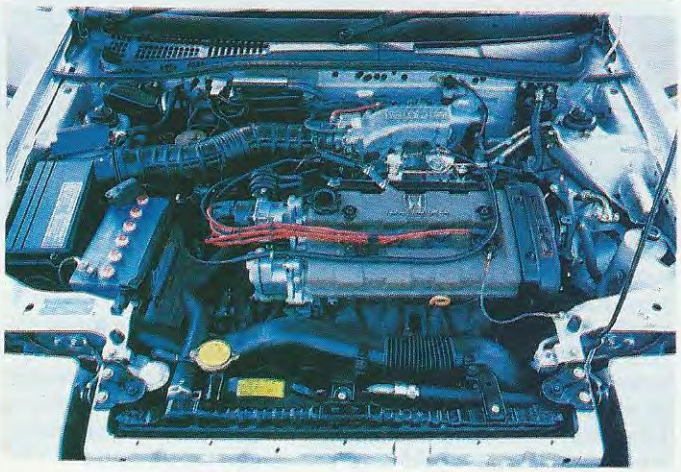
The power steering is very light at low speeds and a touch indirect with 3.5 turns lock to lock on a 9.6 metre turning circle. But there is a good feel at cruising speeds. This is one front-drive Japanese sedan that does not need power assistance so much for the lighter efforts as for the masking of torque steer.

A brief drive in the Honda Integra, which was not equipped with power steering proved this. The number of turns from lock to lock goes up only marginally to 3.8. So why couldn't the power-steered version be given more than 0.3 turns worth of extra

quickness? Surely an even three turns would suit the sporting nature of the twin-cam hatch?

Honda has made sure that the 416i won't steal all the Integra's sales. The cars are somewhat differently specified. Firstly, all Rovers are five-door hatchbacks, while all Australia-bound Integras have only three doors — to the benefit of sporty image and the detriment of practicality.

The Rover comes with the aforementioned list of



All Rover versions of the Integra are five-door hatches, while all Australian-bound Integras have three doors. Rover spec includes velour trim, sunroof, air, central locking and electric windows. Interior is spacious and driving position is good. Both cars have twin-cam, 16-valve 1.6-litre engine with programmed fuel injection.

ROVER 416i

goodies as standard equipment, while the Honda is available in two versions. The manual lacks power steering and a sunroof, which are standard in the automatic. Air is an option in both.

While it was impossible to tie NSW distributor, Bennett-Honda, down to a price, it seems likely that the Integras will undercut the 416i's projected pricetag of $28,000. Around $23,000 for the manual and $25,000 for the automatic should be

close. Any higher and the Integra would be munching into the Accord's sector.

One key role for the Integra in the Honda scheme of things is to bridge the gap — to some degree anyway — between Civic and Accord, as well as providing a more sporty alternative to the latter.

The 416i's wheels are particularly interesting. Alloy of course, they are 13-inchers shod with Michelin 185/70 HR 13 MXVs. In fact these are the same wheels that are optional on Civic. Honda has been more lavish with the Integra, which boasts stylish 14-inch wheels with 60 series MXVs. These are of similar style to those on the VL Calais, but Honda — with typical thoroughness — has not made them reversible. Left hand wheels must go on the left side and vice versa. So the spare wheel is a steel one. There is no such complication with the Rover.

With its larger diameter and more contemporary wheels in combination with overtly sporty striping, the Integra offers a rather different image. Obviously this will suit JRA fine.

Despite these marked exterior variations, the interiors are almost identical. Certainly the Integra manual has manual window winders, but the trim is the same as the 416i's — even to the steering wheel (differentiated only by the wording on the hub).

The Integra has good feel in its manual steering, which serves to increase our disappointment at the degree of wheel tug. The best front-drive designs of 1986 seldom advertise which pair of wheels is copping the power. Even moderate acceleration has the wheel stiffening in your hands. It is one of the few features of the manual model's performance that detracts from its appeal.

Then you remember the price and you remember, too, a car called Celica with its superb chassis and lack of torque steer.

These clones are visually

striking and bear some family resemblance to the Legend and forthcoming Rover 825i. This aspect should help JRA more than Honda. It is likely that the marketing team at JRA will stress the connection between 416i and 825i, hoping that this will ease the sticker shock. Nobody there will be suggesting that the rebadged Honda is as dynamically accomplished as, say, the BMW 318i or the Citroen BX GT. But if the public wishes to draw the comparison, that's fine.

The 416i is vastly superior to the old Quintet, but it will have its work cut out in this sector of the prestige market. Better than the Volvo 360, certainly. Sportier looking and probably slightly quicker than the Honda Accord. But is it any kind of match for the image of the 318i? Or can its looks compete with the flair of the small Citroens? □

Integra gets sportier looks with pinstripes, 14-inch wheels and 60-series tyres. Honda will use the car to bridge the gap between Civic and Accord. Inside, Integra and Rover version are virtually identical apart from higher Rover spec. Integra itself comes with either five-speed manual or four-speed automatic

INTEGRA