

Comparison: BMW Bavaria, Jaguar XJ6, Mercedes 280
Tests: Porsche 914 2-liter, Mazda RX-2 Automatic

ROAD & TRACK

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***BMW Bavaria, Jaguar XJ6, Mercedes 280 –
Which is Best?***

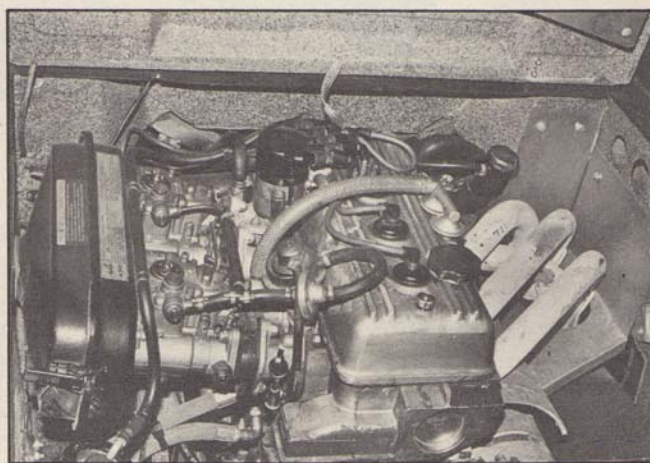


Driving Impression

ALPINE RENAULT A310

France produces a handsome, fast rear-engine 2 + 2 based on Renault running gear. We tried it there.

PHOTOS BY JOHN DINKEL



A TRIP TO Europe is always a treat. Inevitably it affords us the opportunity to drive any number of interesting cars that never make it to the U.S. because of safety and emission regulations and marketing considerations. A recent week in France was no exception, and Cibié's *attaché de presse* Jean-Claude Mosconi arranged for R&T's Engineering Editor to spend some time touring Paris and its surrounds in a handsome new French GT, the Alpine Renault A310.

The A310 was announced to the public at last year's Geneva Auto Show, and as Alpine had just finished devastating its opposition at the Monte Carlo Rally the introduction couldn't have been better timed. The Alpine with its eye-catching and functional lines was one of the stars of the show. Nearly another year passed, however, before the men in Dieppe got the model to the assembly line and even now production is only four units per day.

With an overall height of only 45.3 in., the A310 does not provide generous head room; this plus a sharply sloped windshield account for a very reclined driving position. The seats are excellent, however, affording good lateral and back support. And once accustomed to lying down on the job, the driver finds himself in both a comfortable and relaxing driving position.

Befitting a car of this nature, full instrumentation is provided. A 9000-rpm tach (without a red line) and a 260-kph (162 mph) speedometer flank a central oil pressure gauge. Other engine monitoring gauges and a clock are clustered to the right above the central console.

At the rear, two occasional seats are provided; these are best used for small children and luggage. Storing the latter there will be a necessity, because luggage space is definitely at a premium. The "space saver" spare promised for the car never materialized, so the spare had to be accommodated in the car's nose along with the fuel tank instead of in the rear engine compartment.

A true rear engine placement is a surprise in a new design these days. In contrast to the currently fashionable midship location, Alpine stuck with an overhung rear engine design to provide space for the rear seats, an impossibility with central engine placement in such a compact car. Alpine had a great deal of experience with rear engines and decided they could minimize the tail-heavy handling of most rear engine designs. For this they went to some trouble designing their own double-A-arm rear suspension instead of using Renault pieces. Front suspension is independent also, with upper lateral arms, lower A-arms and (as at the rear) coil springs. The chassis itself is

a stiff tubular backbone affair to which the fiberglass body is bonded.

The time and money Alpine spent to perfect the suspension is obvious as the handling and road holding are outstanding and there's little evidence of tail heaviness. What's even more remarkable is that the good handling has been achieved without any undesirable ride motions. Quite the contrary: the suspension is very well damped and the ride over Paris cobblestones is quiet and unobtrusive. Larger bumps and dips are taken with equal aplomb.

Credit is also due the Alpine's rack-and-pinion steering, borrowed from Renault, which adds measurably to the exemplary road manners of the A310. It's high geared and perhaps a bit on the heavy side but extremely quick and responsive. High caster results in excellent self-centering tendencies. There is some kickback on rough roads but the padded steering wheel helps to damp this. Handling is aided by wide 6½-in. alloy rims shod with Michelin 165HR-13 XAS radials at the front and 185HR-13s at the rear. On a car weighing less than 2000 lbs their road gripping ability is exceptional. My seat-of-the-pants evaluation would place the lateral cornering well up in the 0.700 range.

Stopping is another strong point. R12 Gordini-type ventilated discs are fitted up front, solid-rotor discs in the rear. Control is excellent, stops are short and straight and the only minus is a bit of front-wheel locking on fullbore panic stops.

The engine is practically the same as in the Renault 16 TS with bore and stroke of 78 x 84 mm; that bore is 1 mm up on the 16, bringing the displacement to 1605 cc. Power output is around 125 bhp net at 6250 rpm, helped in no small part by dual Weber 45 DCOE carburetors and 4-branch tube headers fitted to the crossflow Gordini head.

Considering the type of car and its price class (the A310 sells in France for about the same money as a Porsche 911T) the acceleration is brisk but not overwhelming. Several runs to 60 mph averaged out to around 8.7 sec and the quarter-mile was reached in a little over 16.5 sec, performance comparable to that of a Datsun 240Z. But the engine is quite torquey and flexible in the lower gears and very smooth for a 4-cyl. The aerodynamic shape is obviously a success as the top speed published in a French magazine (we had no opportunity to check this) is in excess of 130 mph.

About the only giveaway to the rear engine location is the vagueness of the gearshift—very reminiscent of pre-1973 Porsche 914s. Soft engine and transmission mountings are to blame and are also the cause of considerable lever shake on rough roads. Like the 914's the gearbox is a 5-speed but with fifth gear up and to the right. There is a definite gate in the shifting pattern so one must be careful not to bully the lever. Pushing too hard or a bit in the wrong direction results in the lever hitting the gate instead of the gear selected.

Probably the biggest drawback to the keen shape of the A310 is outward vision. The sloping rear window, which lifts up for access to the engine, limits rear vision. Sighting past the rear quarters is also difficult. In addition, the outside mirror is almost useless as it mounts too close to the side of the car. In a city such as Paris where drivers are prone to take every quarter whether it is given or not, this could have proved a problem. But the A310 is still so new and eye-catching that we found ourselves waved onward instead of cut off. The Alpine Renault is that kind of car—a real eye and traffic stopper. With such pleasing looks and excellent road behavior it's too bad most American enthusiasts will never have the opportunity to sample the driving delights of this Gallic 911.—*John Dinkel*



ALPINE RENAULT A310 SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE

Type	ohv inline 4
Bore x stroke, mm	78.0 x 84.0
Displacement, cc/cu in	1605/97.9
Compression ratio	10.25:1
Bhp @ rpm, net	125 @ 6250
Torque @ rpm, lb-ft	98 @ 5000
Carburetion	two Weber 45DCOE
Fuel requirement	premium

DRIVE TRAIN

Transmission	5-speed manual
in unit with final drive	

GENERAL

Curb weight, lb	1820
Test weight	1970
Weight distribution,	
front/rear, %	40/60
Wheelbase, in	89.4
Track, front/rear	55.3/55.5
Length	164.6
Width	63.8
Height	45.3
Ground clearance	6.0
Fuel capacity, U.S. gal	15.8

CHASSIS & BODY

Layout	rear engine/rear drive
Body/frame: steel backbone frame/	
separate fiberglass body	
Brake system: 9.0-in. ventilated disc front,	
10.0-in. solid disc rear; vacuum assisted	
Swept area, sq in.	299
Steering type	rack & pinion
Turns, lock-to-lock	2.5
Front suspension: upper transverse arms,	
lower A-arms, coil springs, tube shocks,	
anti-roll bar	
Rear suspension: upper and lower A-arms,	
coil springs, tube shocks, anti-roll bar	

ACCOMMODATION

Seating capacity, persons	2 + 2
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INSTRUMENTATION

Instruments: 260-kph speedometer,	
9000-rpm tachometer, 99,999 odometer,	
999.9 trip odometer, oil press, oil temp,	
coolant temp, ammeter, fuel level, clock	
Warning lights: brake system, handbrake,	
alternator, hazard flasher, high beam,	
directionals	

