



Hidden Zeds

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An Aladdin's Cave in the country.

By Jeff Whitten



Ross Dunkerton drove a Datsun 260Z to the Australian Rally Championship in 1976.

If you drove very slowly you could just make out two of them sitting forlornly under a tree in the paddock. One was a faded red, the other faded bronze, yet the sight of the pair of them made the pulse race a little faster. To the casual onlooker driving past, they were probably no more than a couple of beat-up and derelict old cars that had been put out to permanent retirement, and wouldn't have raised more than a passing glance from those not in the know. Little would the average person know what else lay behind that farmer's fence way out in the country.

Many of us dream of finding a cache of cars tucked away in some remote property out of sight of the public. Not just any cars but something really special - you know, the sort of car that you really admire or would like to own and perhaps one day restore. It might be an Evo Lancer, a Porsche 911, perhaps an early Monaro, a genuine Falcon GT HO, a Datsun 1600 or any one of a thousand different makes of car that just seem to tickle your fancy. Some day, one day, you hope that you'll stumble over a shed containing something interesting that a previous owner has tucked away for restoration "one day".

Of course, most of us know it never happens. We're never lucky enough to come across such a car - somebody has beaten us to it just days previously or if we do discover something interesting, the owner doesn't want to sell. It's an all too-familiar story.

But back to our story. Having recently 'discovered' that Datsun's "Z" car makes a very good classic rally car or even a competent road car, the sight of a couple of rusted Zeds under the tree mentioned previously made for further investigation. Any serious car fanatic spends half his time, when driving in the country, looking to see what cars lurk in back yards and paddocks. And this time was no exception. Reckoning that it was too good an opportunity to turn down, the next port of call was the owner's house, where a knock on the door summons the owner from inside. "I see you've got a couple of Zeds in the paddock," the conversation went. "Any chance of having a look at them?" What followed was one of the most incredible discoveries I'd ever witnessed - 20 Datsun Zeds stored away for "future restoration."



Finland's Rauno Aaltonen in an early Southern Cross Rally in Australia.

Of all the well-recognised sports cars that were ever made, the Datsun Z and its variants was the best-selling sports car of all time. Forget things like the MGA, the hugely-popular MGB, Triumph TR3's and 4's, Mazda MX5s and so on - the Zed outsold them all. Designed specifically for the American market, the Datsun 240Z (or the 240 Zee, as the Yanks called it) was so well received in the 'States that in three years, no fewer than 135,000 were sold. Australians bought their fair share of Zeds, too, being one of the first countries outside Japan to get a reasonable quantity of cars to sell. Designed in part by Albrecht Goertz who was famous for some classic BMW designs, the first Z went on sale in Japan as the Datsun Fairlady after being given rave reviews at the Tokyo Motor Show in 1969. A similar welcome was given the car in America. Why Fairlady? Well, the fore-runner of the Zed was a Japanese sportscar called the Fairlady which had been on sale in Japan for some years in 1500, 1600 and 2 litre forms. In Australia it was relatively popular and known here as the Datsun Sports Roadster. When the new Zed was released, the Fairlady name was carried over for a while and early 240s still carried the Fairlady tag. The name, considered effeminate by some hairy-chested sportscar drivers, was given to the earlier car after one of the senior people at Datsun in Japan had been to see the new stage play, My Fair Lady, and decided to name the new car after it.

Datsun's new Z car was an instant success with buyers who, until then, had a choice of some technically-old sports cars like the Austin Healey, Triumph TR4, Sunbeam Alpine and a few European cars which were generally more expensive. With a big and lazy 2.4 litre, 6 cylinder, 130 horsepower engine, independent suspension by McPherson struts all round, rack and pinion steering and a remarkably well-equipped interior, it soon found lots of buyers. Described at the time as a cross between an E Type Jaguar, a Corvette and an Austin Healey, the looks of the car

alone sold it. In America it became an icon and the Yanks couldn't get enough of them.

The 240Z sold well until December 1973 when the updated 260Z went on sale with a few important improvements which included increasing the size of the engine to 2565cc. The "26 Ounce" remained until August 1979, selling alongside the 260Z '2+2', a model that incorporated 2 extra children-sized seats in its platform that was stretched by 12 inches. Many enthusiasts claim that the introduction of the 2+2 was the start of a downhill design slide that saw the Zed turn more and more into a boulevard cruiser, not helped by stiff emission regulations that stunted the car's performance. With the eventual demise of the 260Z, the larger-engined 280Z and ZX were released but buyers were by then starting to tire of the car and its "ladies hairdresser" image. Only much later would the 300ZX and the more recent 350Z turn Nissan's famous sports car into what it was originally intended to do - appeal to the sporting motorist.

As far as rallying is concerned, the Datsun 240Z and 260Z had quite a successful career in events throughout the world. As early as 1973, a Z was competing in European rallies and in the 1973 Monte Carlo Rally, in the hands of Rauno Aaltonen and Paul Easter, their car was as high as eighth outright until they hit problems on the final night. Zeds were great cars in the East African Safari, an event which the factory entered a number of times, proving the strength and durability of the car under extreme conditions. In Australia, Ross Dunkerton won the 1976 Australian Rally Championship in one after contesting all six rounds of the championship in a 260Z, and in England the Zed fared particularly well on many British events, including the rough Scottish Rally in 1972, one of the cars' earliest appearances.

Initially reluctant, the farmer finally agreed to talk about how the two cars had come to be on his property. As a much younger person in 1974, he had gone out and bought a brand-new Datsun 240Z, a purchase that was considered pretty good value in those days. Over the years his interest in the car increased and he started buying up old, run-down Zeds as they came up for sale. One thing led to another and his collection increased. It was at this time that I started to realise that the two cars under the tree were just the tips of an iceberg. Maybe there were more there? Did he still have the original? My inquisitiveness was starting to get the better of me. His wife appeared at the door and was introduced to me. She soon took up the Zed conversation and it became obvious that she, too, was an authority on the car. It's easy to pick a casual enthusiast from an expert when it comes down to the nitty gritty. She was fluent in shock absorber turrets, single overhead cams and independent rear suspension - an area to which the conversation soon turned.



Dunkerton remembers the 'Zed' fondly.

Many car collectors are a little eccentric - some want to tell you everything about their cars, others want to keep their collection a secret. Finding the mid point is not always easy but it soon became obvious that the farmer was starting to open up, finally agreeing to allow me access to his shed where he claimed 'a couple of cars were stored'. A short walk out into the yard revealed a motly collection of sheds scattered around the yard, some little more than lean-to's, others more secure.

In the first were no less than six cars, all covered in tarps, dusty and torn. Lifting the covers, it was hard to believe

this Pandora's box of motorcars. Six Datsun '2+2's appeared - various year models, various colours and in a variety of conditions. Most looked to be in good condition but the most outstanding one was a red 280ZX, a real "hairdresser's" car if ever there was one, in bright red with matching bright red seats, dash and interior trim, bought for a song from a deceased estate, we were told.

The conversation revolved around where the cars had come from, the negligible amounts that had been paid to acquire them and how the bottom had fallen out of the Datsun Z car market. In the 1970s, the Japanese were more intent on turning out recyclable cars that would last for four or five years than producing them with adequate rust protection. As a result, Zeds are renowned for being particularly rust prone. As I have since learned, there are very few really rust-free Zeds about, at least 90% of them suffering from advanced cases of 'tin worm' at some stage in their life. Their rusty reputation greatly devalues them and a mechanically-good but structurally-poor example can be picked up for very little money. But even good examples seem not to command good trade-in prices when owners want to get rid of them, many reverting to private sales rather than accept a dealer's valuation.

"He's got more cars than this," the wife volunteered, pointing to another, larger shed close by. Sliding the door open revealed another treasure trove of cars, this time all uncovered, dusty and a little more run down than their brothers in the first shed. There was the original 1974 car bought new by the farmer, a rusty brown one, a gold one, a green one - all 240Zs - and a swag of 2 plus 2's - a further six in total! The brown one, it was revealed, had come from Sydney and was trailered all the way home to Victoria by the farmer's wife after she had man-handled it up a steep drive in suburban Sydney and onto the trailer.

All the cars had a story to tell - the brown one belonged to an ex-Policeman who had wanted to keep it for his retirement. Except his wife saw it as a playboy's car and insisted he get rid of it. He cried when the car was driven away from his house.

Another was a little worse for wear as far as rust in the body was concerned, but certainly fixable. "I'm really embarrassed about asking this price for the car, but do you think \$150 is too much for it?" the owner had asked. It changed hands very quickly for \$150 and was soon on its way to the new home.

The best looking car in the shed full of Zeds was a green 240Z. It wasn't its original colour but it had been restored at some stage in its life and was in top condition - new carpets, new trim, complete dash and seats - in fact a really nice car. The farmer paid \$1500 for it! Another one was a gift. "The owner begged me to take it away," the farmer's wife explained.

Many cars were full of spare parts - door trims, consoles, tailshafts, seats, radiators - you name it - enough parts, you would think, to build a few more cars. This farming couple were serious collectors. "Do you ever sell any cars or parts?" we enquired. "No, nothing's for sale yet," came the reply. "We hope to build a big shed and put all the cars under one roof one day so that when we've had enough of farming we can concentrate on doing something with the cars."

We wondered just what that meant.



The 260Z was a popular rally car in the 1970's.

The appetite completely whetted by now, we asked, half jokingly, if that was all the cars. "No, there's a couple more in a shed up on the hill paddock, and several in another couple of sheds which I'll show you now," the farmer volunteered. A short walk to a huddle of run-down sheds revealed another four, the majority the less-rare 260Z '2+2's, again complete but rusty. With the two cars that we first noticed under the tree, that little horde of cars amounted to a grand total of 20 Datsun Zeds. "Are you still collecting?" came our question. "No, we've stopped for the time being until the shed's built, but that could be some time down the track. But if a bargain comes up, we'd still be tempted," was the reply.

Completely overwhelmed by the sheer size of the collection tucked away in those run-down sheds, we were left to wonder just how many other such collections there are around the country, just waiting to be restored, rebuilt and re-loved. One can only hope that the owners realise that it's unthinkable but entirely possible, that a bushfire will raze the sheds, a cyclone will send the roof smashing down on the cars or a flood will go through the property, washing away everything, including the cars, in its path.

Surely the remaining examples of the world's best-selling sports car deserve better than this.

Footnote: This is a true story, the identity of the owners and the location of the property remaining a secret as a condition of being allowed to view the collection. And, yes, my offer to buy a few much-needed items from the cars to finish my own Zed was refused. When the shed is built, perhaps?

So, was it a waste of time looking at the collection? Not exactly. There was one more call to make on the way home and it revealed another little gem - a genuine 1965 low-windscreen Datsun Fairlady Sports under a tarp in yet another country property. Ripe for restoration, its ownership quickly changed hands (but not into mine) and its removal to the new owner's location arranged. Yet again the Datsun sports car legend lives on.