

Comparison: 5 GT Cars - Datsun 240Z, MGB-GT, Fiat 124 Sports, Opel GT, Triumph GT6 Mk 3

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JULY 1971 UK 25p SWEDEN KR. 6.50 INKL. MOMS SEVENTY-FIVE CENTS

ANALYSIS: MERCEDES' NEW 4.5-LITER SPORTS CAR
Improved Performance for the Fiat 850 & 124





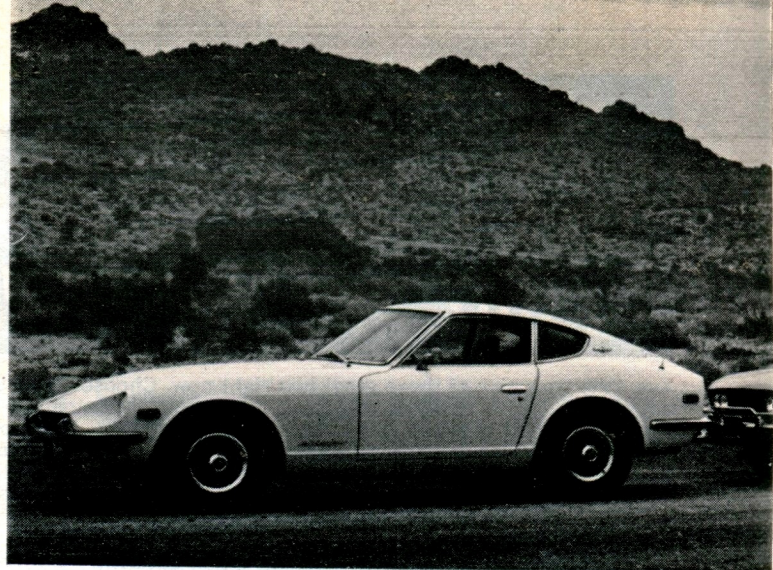
Comparing the Datsun 240Z, Fiat 124 Sports, Opel GT, MGB GT and Triumph GT6—a closer contest than we expected

WHAT DOES ONE get when he buys \$3500 worth of Grand Touring car? Generally, a small, light closed car, adequately but not spectacularly powered, a cut above the average in handling and braking, offering a measure of comfort not found in an open sports car. This month we take a comparative look at five such cars. None of them is a new model, all having been tested before by R&T in separate road tests. There have been detail changes in all of them since we last tested them although their basic character has not changed; still there's nothing like getting a group of cars together, taking a journey in them and comparing them nose-to-nose. We're always surprised at how much we learn in a comparison test and the reader may be surprised at some of the results of this one. We were.

As the General Data table shows, the list prices of the five cars all cluster around \$3500. And each car is reasonably complete at the basic price—you don't need to pay extra for adjustable seats, a cigarette lighter or a 4-speed gearbox. All are front-engine, rear-drive cars, all have inline piston engines, all have at least two disc brakes out of four, and all weigh between 2000 and 2500 lb; one is from Japan, one from Italy, one from Germany and two from England. And they are all very different from each other.

The Datsun 240Z set U.S. motoring on its ear when it appeared in early 1970. It seemed too good to be true: a really fast, good-handling and good-looking coupe with great refinement and extensive standard equipment—all at what seemed an incredibly low price. Strictly a 2-seater but a roomy one, it is the longest car of the group though not the widest, the heaviest by a small margin, and by leaps and bounds the most powerful with 150 bhp from its 2.4-liter overhead-cam 6-cyl engine. It has independent suspension all around (by struts and coils at both ends) and a combination of disc front brakes and drums rear. Its styling is professional and up-to-date if a bit "pop culture," and that the 240Z is an exciting package cannot be denied.

In fact, it is so exciting that it has generated a supply-and-demand situation virtually unprecedented in the U.S. The waiting list for delivery on one is as high as six months, even though it has been over a year since the model was



put on sale. Datsun programmed a supply of 1600 per month for the U.S. and they're now getting over 2500, but they have found that the demand is for about 4000 per month. Interesting, for we asserted in the 240Z introduction story that a domestic carmaker probably could build an equivalent car for the same price (\$3600) in quantities of 50,000 per year or so. Anyway, Datsun stopped production on the 1600 roadster to make way for more 240Zs but the supply is still far behind. In some areas, for instance, dealers are telling customers they can't get the cars without lots of optional equipment—wide alloy wheels, air conditioning, etc., and getting away with it. And the *Kelley Blue Book* retail value for a used 1970 240Z is over \$4000!

So—though the list price of a 240Z may be only \$3596—one may or may not be able to get one for that price. If you can find a dealer who will sell you one for that price you'll probably have to wait months to get it. We must give Datsun the credit for producing such a package at such a reasonable price but we have to caution the reader that Datsun's price may not be the dealer's price. The laws of supply and demand still work, list prices or no.

Standard equipment on the 240Z includes a signal-seeking AM radio (with electrically powered antenna) and a heated rear window. Our test car had no options except a set of wide wheels (14 x 5½, part no. 40300E4600, \$13.50 each) that can be obtained from Datsun dealers but are not installed at the factory; for the price table we estimate a total charge of \$74 for the wheels and installation.

The Fiat 124 Sport Coupe has been updated this year with a smooth new front-end look and a 1608-cc engine of longer stroke than the older 1438-cc unit. It's not any faster than before but the larger engine is stronger in the middle ranges (so that less gearshifting is required to maintain a given pace) and both smoother and quieter. The Fiat is almost as long as the Datsun and somewhat wider; it is the only car in this group to offer a real rear seat and it's so real a seat that the car can be compared to some small sedans. It has several engineering distinctions: the only twincam engine in the group (the two camshafts are driven by a single toothed belt), the only 5-speed gearbox and the only 4-wheel disc brakes. It's the only car in the group with a separate, lockable trunk where one can hide valuables; three of the others have "tailgates" and one a cockpit luggage area. And its luggage capacity is the largest in the group.

The 124 Coupe test car, working from a POE price of \$3292 (the lowest in the group), had the nice Cromodora alloy wheels, which cost only \$135 for the set, a rather poor AM/FM radio (one shouldn't expect much at \$85) and add-on chrome side strips and luggage rack; the last two items aren't included in our price tabulation.

British Leyland's MGB GT has been around since 1966

THE \$3500 GT



and is based on the MGB roadster introduced in 1962. It's a classic British sports car but with a nicely designed fixed roof. The only one of the group attempting to be a 2+2, it has a very small bench seat behind the two main ones; this is big enough for small children only, and it can be folded to extend the luggage area. Surprisingly, the B is nearly as heavy as the Datsun, and with only 92 bhp from its pushrod four it is the slowest of the lot. Its front suspension is conventional—unequal-length A-arms and coil springs—and rear suspension is by the simplest means possible, a live axle on leaf springs.

The MGB GT comes with radial tires as standard equipment; styled steel wheels are standard, wire wheels (either painted or chrome) optional. Our car had the optional overdrive (\$165), the familiar Laycock-de Normanville hydraulic unit that shifts in or out at a flick of a stalk on the steering column to give a 0.802:1 reduction. Thus 4th gear becomes 3.14:1 overall instead of 3.91:1 and the MG becomes the longest-legged of the lot. The overdrive works on 3rd gear also.

Opel's GT is based on the Kadett chassis, so it actually isn't as up-to-date in that department as its bulkier cousin the 1900 Rallye. Its front suspension is odd, based on a

transverse leaf spring and one set of lateral control arms, but at the rear everything is shipshape with a live axle located by trailing arms and Panhard rod and sprung by coils. Its all-steel unit body (many people assume it's plastic because it looks so much like a Corvette) is made in France to a very high standard of finish and for 1971 it is available only with the 1.9-liter engine rather than both the 1.1 and 1.9. The engine has taken a power cut, though, to satisfy the politicians; bringing the compression ratio down from 9.0 to 7.6 so it could run on 91-octane fuel has reduced power from 102 to 90 bhp. Performance has suffered (0-60 time is up from 10.8 to 11.9 sec) but the GT still holds its own in the class. Amazingly, the GT has had a price cut too—it's now nearly \$200 cheaper than it was in 1969 with the 1.9 engine.

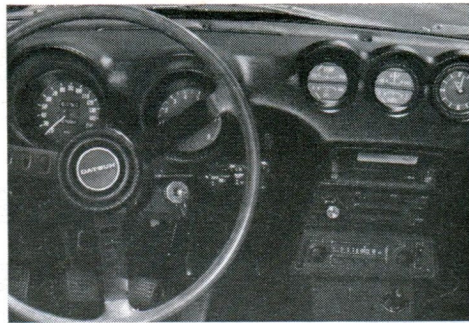
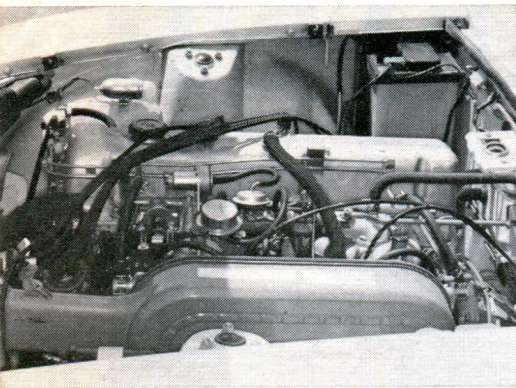
The Opel GT is strictly a 2-seater: luggage is carried on a flat floor behind the passengers and loaded in through the car doors. The spare tire lives behind a vinyl partition just aft of the luggage area. Thus it has the least convenient luggage accommodation, though not the least capacious. Other distinctions for the Opel: it's the lightest and most economical of fuel in the group and its brakes can stop it in the shortest distance. Our test car had but one extra, a good AM



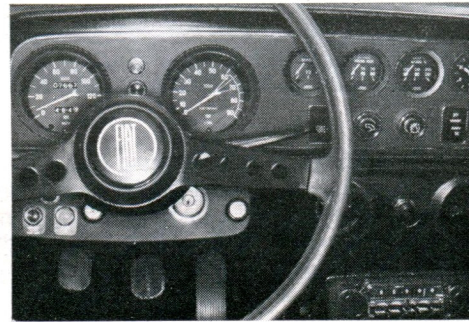
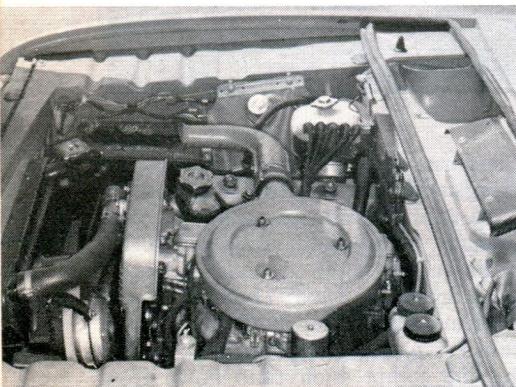
PHOTOS BY GORDON CHITTENDEN



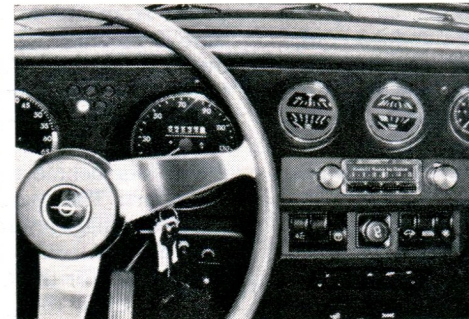
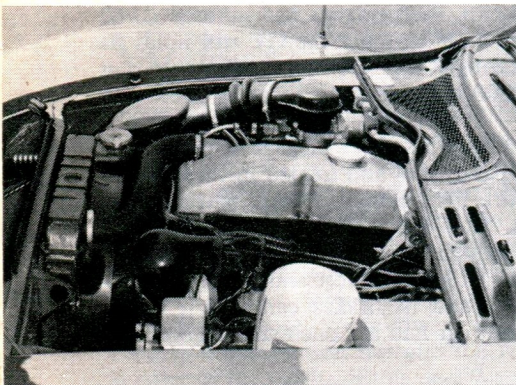
\$3500 GT



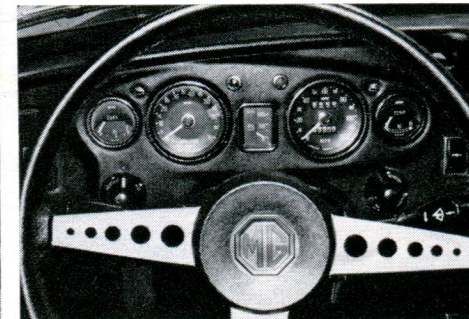
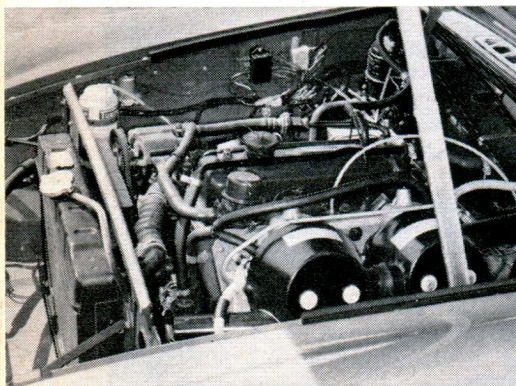
Datsun's engine is the largest and its instruments and controls the best.



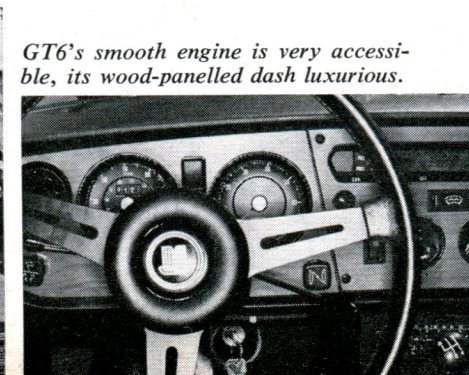
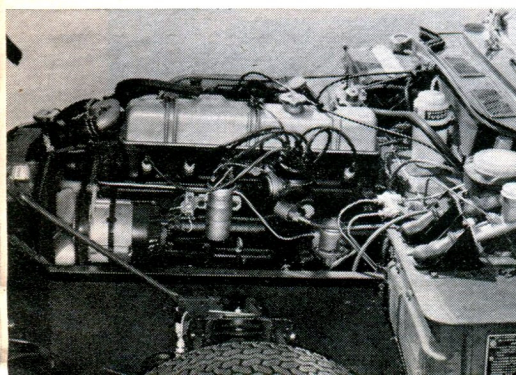
Fiat has the only dohc engine and excellent instrumentation.



Opel's engine has generous displacement and unusual high-cam design.



MG has time-proven pushrod engine, safety-modified instrument panel.



GT6's smooth engine is very accessible, its wood-panelled dash luxurious.

radio at approximately \$75 (dealer installed); like the Datsun, it can be ordered with a 3-speed automatic transmission.

Before the 240Z appeared the Triumph GT6 was the only car in its class with a 6-cyl engine, but now its 95-bhp, 2-liter six is no longer a big attraction. It's the smallest car of the group and only insignificantly heavier than the Opel; these points relate to the fact that it's derived from Triumph's smallest, lightest sports car, the Spitfire. It shares basic chassis structure (a backbone frame with separate body), front suspension and body structure from the beltline down with the open-bodied, 4-cyl Spitfire though the Spitfire's swing-axle rear suspension is replaced in the GT6 by a more satisfactory unequal-arm linkage for the rear wheels. The GT6 has the tightest interior dimensions of the group but not the smallest luggage capacity, and its luggage area is loaded easily through a tailgate as in the Datsun and MG.

This year the GT6 has been freshly restyled on the outside, and if some staff members noted that the rear end is reminiscent of the old Sunbeam Harrington coupe, all agreed that the car is better looking than before. It has one feature that makes it uniquely maneuverable in a crowded city: a tiny turning circle made possible by front wheels that can be steered well beyond the limits of proper geometry. One can turn around in just 25 ft, 6.5 ft tighter than the next twistiest car in the group, the Datsun.

Standard equipment at the GT6's basic price of \$3424 includes white-stripe radial tires and a heated, tinted rear window; it has a 4-speed gearbox and an overdrive like the MG's can be ordered as an option; brakes are a disc/drum combination. Our test car had only an AM/FM radio—again a rather poor and low-priced (\$100) one. A final distinctive feature of the GT6: A rich wood-panel dashboard in the traditional British manner.

AS IN PAST comparison tests, we chose a test route appropriate to the character of the cars. In this case it was a route we'd used two years ago for a group of more expensive GT cars. We left our office in Newport Beach, topped up all the cars at a nearby filling station, and drove south

GENERAL DATA: 5 MEDIUM GTS

	Datsun 240Z	Fiat 124 Sport Coupe	MG B GT	Opel GT	Triumph GT6 Mk3
Basic POE price*	\$3596	\$3292	\$3620	\$3306	\$3424
Price as tested	\$3745	\$3562	\$3823	\$3409	\$3674
Engine position/driven wheels	f/r	f/r	f/r	f/r	f/r
Chassis type	unit	unit	unit	unit	separate
Brake type	disc/drum	disc	disc/drum	disc/drum	disc/drum
Swept area, sq in./ton	233	227	227	222	209
Suspension, front	ind. coil	ind. coil	ind. coil	ind. leaf	ind. coil
rear	ind. coil	live coil	live leaf	live coil	ind. leaf
Standard tires	175-14 rad.	165-13 rad.	165-14 rad.	165-13 bias.	155-13 rad
Steering turns, lock-to-lock	3.5	2.7	2.9	3.0	4.5
Steering index	1.10	0.99	0.93	0.99	1.13
Fuel tank capacity, gal.	15.9	11.8	12.0	13.2	11.7

*POE prices vary slightly for east, west and Gulf ports

As-tested prices include: for Datsun, 14 x 5 1/2-in. wheels and installation; for Fiat, alloy wheels, AM/FM radio; for MG, overdrive; for Opel, AM radio; for Triumph, AM/FM radio. All as-tested prices include charge for preparation at dealer.



Opel's separate lap-shoulder belts work but are a mess.

on the Coast Highway through Corona del Mar and Laguna Beach (stoplights galore) to Dana Point, where we turned inland to connect with Ortega Highway, California 74. This highway, a nicely surfaced, 2-lane route with a delightful variety of turns and hills as it winds through some of Southern California's finest country, was lightly traveled and the weather was beautiful; it was easily the highlight of our trip. At Lake Elsinore we connected with route 71 toward Temecula; after Temecula, route S16 to Pala, 76 to Santa Ysabel and 78 to the little town of Julian high in the Laguna Mountains, where we stopped for lunch. Then on down 78, another wonderfully twisty road, into the Anza-Borrego desert, out across the desert at speeds dictated by road conditions and car capability rather than artificial limits, up through the Joshua Tree National Monument, and over clear, generally straight back roads to our overnight stop at Victorville, from where we freewayed it back to Newport Beach the next morning. In all, a rich and varied 500 miles of motoring in which we found out all about the five GTs.

Back at the office we set about scoring the cars. Each driver was given a score sheet on which he could rate each car on 15 different aspects of behavior, such as handling, ride, quietness, braking, steering, gearbox, engine, controls, seating, ventilation and heating, vision, finish, luggage accommodation and so forth. All these categories could be scored on a 1 to 10 basis, 10 being the score for a topnotch performance and 1 being the lowest score possible. These scorings were then totaled for each driver and for the entire group to get an overall rating score for each car.

In addition, each driver was asked to rank the cars in

the order of his personal preference—disregarding, if need be, his separate ratings of the car's various aspects. Here's how the ratings turned out:

The Datsun scored the highest point total. In individual driver scoring, it garnered the highest number of points from four of the five drivers, and three of the five drivers rated it their personal favorite.

Next came the Fiat, and here we emerged somewhat surprised. It had been generally anticipated that the Datsun would win by a large margin, but not so. The Fiat tallied an impressive score, little less than the Z; one driver gave it more points than he gave the Datsun, and the same driver gave it his personal nod.

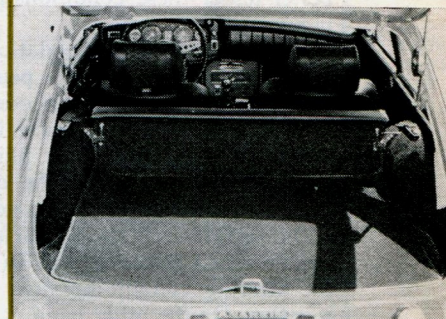
Then the Opel. It was a clear step below the Datsun and Fiat but clearly not in the doldrums. One driver rated it his personal favorite, though in scoring he had given the Datsun more points.

In total points the MG was not as far below the Opel as the Opel was below the leaders, and there was no unanimity in the personal ratings of the MG by the various drivers: two rated it third, two fourth and one last. But these ratings averaged a 4th-place finish just as clearly as the points score indicated; in fact, averaging the "position" of each car over the five drivers' listed orders of preference, the cars stacked up the same way: Datsun, Fiat, Opel, MG, Triumph. Which brings us to the Triumph: It came in last, but not far behind the MG and was ranked last by four of the drivers on their personal ratings. The one driver that ranked it 4th instead of 5th also gave it more performance points, so it had a clear attraction for him. Now let's look ➡➡➡

GENERAL SPECIFICATIONS: 5 MEDIUM GTS

	Datsun 240Z	Fiat 124 Sport Coupe	MG B GT	Opel GT	Triumph GT6 Mk3
Curb weight, lb.	2355	2220	2345	2110	2115
Test weight, lb.	2770	2620	2725	2500	2490
Distribution, f/r, %	51/49	55/45	49/51	54/46	54/46
Wheelbase, in.	90.7	95.3	91.0	95.7	83.0
Track, f/r	53.3/53.0	53.0/51.8	49.3/49.3	49.4/50.6	49.0/49.0
Length	162.8	162.3	152.7	161.9	149.0
Width	64.1	65.8	59.9	62.2	58.5
Height	50.6	52.8	49.4	48.2	47.0
Luggage capacity, cu ft.	8.5	9.6	6.3	6.6	6.6

MG's tailgate-loading luggage area is handy.



THE \$3500 GT

In recognition of the value of seatbelts—and in the hope that we can influence more people to use them—we're rating the belts in each car. Opel has followed U.S. GM practice by simply fitting separate lap and shoulder belts, each with its own pushbutton buckle. These fit well once in place and the roof anchorage for the shoulder belt is far superior, for instance, to the Fiat's which is on the body side behind and slightly below (that is bad—collarbones can be injured) the shoulder. But the separate belt arrangement makes it extremely inconvenient to strap oneself in, thus making it less likely a driver or passenger is going to do it.

Another safety-related item: throne-type seats used to meet the federal government's head-restraint rule impair vision to the rear, and a blind spot created by the rear roof is a further vision problem. The GT needs more outward vision for traffic maneuvering.

But all in all, it's a pleasant if not exciting little coupe. Not a bad car at all—it's just that the Datsun and Fiat are so good.

MGB GT

WE'VE HEARD that British Leyland is simply letting the MGB run its historic course; when it can't be sold anymore they'll drop it and that's that. The car seems to bear it out. Meeting the U.S. crash-safety regulation was done by laying an ugly, add-on instrument panel over the existing one and the little bit of styling facelift has been done in a haphazard way.

It's truly a car of the past. Everywhere there's evidence of a sports car designed and built in the traditional manner—in a rather homemade way, to be blunt, in great contrast to the professional design and execution of the Datsun, Fiat and Opel.

That impression carries through on the road. The GT is heavy (nearly as heavy as the Datsun) but gets only 92 bhp from its noisy pushrod engine; so it's the slowest of the group. And a rather balky shift linkage doesn't contribute to driving fun—a surprise, because this was one area in which MGs always excelled in the past.

The optional overdrive does make the B GT a capable long-distance tourer; in OD at 70 mph it's turning 3190 rpm, vs the 3980 given in the Engine & Drive Train table for normal 4th gear. And the overdrive gives it the second-best fuel economy figure. But don't expect the MG to be quiet at speed even with overdrive; there's so much wind noise you'd think it was a roadster, not a coupe.

The B handles well enough but rides very stiffly. At the limit there is a bit of oversteer that makes it fun to toss the car around, especially on low-speed curves. The steering is heavy, but the MG has the quickest steering in the group. The brakes are about average.

Ventilation, provided by a simple flap under the dash, is ineffective compared with the best of the group, but one can at least maximize it by opening the door ventwings and/or the swing-out quarter windows.

Vision outward is quite good, and MG augments it with a curious righthand fender mirror, stuck out there all by

itself. The seatbelts are of the simple Kangol variety, same as on the Fiat, and someone at the factory or distributor had also installed them wrong so that one section of the belt had to be twisted.

There's little to redeem the MGB GT, not even a low price, and we can only call it a holdover from another era.

Triumph GT6 Mk 3

THE GT6 is almost as close to the MG in our score-giving as the Fiat to the Datsun. It rates close to the Opel in performance, and with six cylinders its engine is smoother and quieter than all but the Datsun and Fiat. If overdrive is ordered, Triumph installs a 3.89:1 final drive rather than the 3.27:1 of the test car and in this form it will be a bit quicker through the gears. But what promises to be a good open-road car (if the smooth, adequately powerful engine is any indication) turns out not to be because a drumming driveline vibration sets in at about 65 mph and stays there as speed rises.

The gearbox is stiff-shifting and the shifter's H-pattern is oddly skewed; this all takes some getting used to and perhaps the owner could adapt. In any case, the GT6 is a decently enjoyable car over a curvy road at moderate speeds, with light if not particularly quick steering and good handling response. But in ultimate cornering power it is at the bottom of the group. Don't expect the brakes to accomplish much—though their fade resistance is adequate they take a very long distance to stop the car from 80 mph. On bumpy or irregular road surfaces the GT6's backbone-plus-body structure is the least staunch in the group, creaking and rattling when the going gets rough.

There are charms to the GT6. Its interior materials look the richest of any in the group and the instrument layout is particularly handsome. The seats have been upgraded in recent years (as have the MGB's), but in the GT6 they have "throne" backs like the Opel's which are a bit restrictive for rear vision. Also like the Opel, the GT6 has a blind quarter that hampers one's ability to maneuver freely in traffic.

Though the GT6 scores esthetically and in performance over the MGB, it loses it all on comfort. Its seating is the most cramped in the group, the steering wheel is very high, and its seatbelts were next to impossible to adjust to fit anybody. Triumph has gone to greater lengths to update the GT6 than MG has the B, but it still failed to make much of an impression on R&T's five testers and had to be rated last-in-group.

ONE OF OUR five drivers commented after the trip that the Datsun should be rated separately, as it is simply a class above the rest. But when all was said and tallied, the Fiat came surprisingly close and the Opel was far from unpleasant. As for the two Britishers, we do not wish to kick dead horses and sincerely hope that England will be able to get off her duff, produce some competitive cars again and challenge the other countries. We have reason to believe that British Leyland does intend to keep building sports cars and to come up not only with new designs but to realign the product "mix" of MG, Triumph and Jaguar. One of these new products, we would predict, will be a medium-price GT replacing both the B and the GT6—one that we hope will render the choice of a good \$3500 GT a bit more difficult to make.

