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Legendary Japanese Cars

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SUBARU SUBARU 360 1958-1970

SUBARU 360

Model	K111
Engine Name	EK31
Displacement	356cc
Maximum Output	16ps/4500rpm
Maximum Torque	3.0kg-m/3000rpm
Overall Length	2990mm
Overall Width	1300mm
Overall Height	1380mm
Wheelbase	1800mm
Vehicle Weight	385kg



The Subaru 360, created based on the "People's Car Concept," transformed the previously expensive and unattainable passenger cars into affordable "my cars" for the general public.



The emblem featuring six stars mounted on the front. The photo is from the debut period, and the color and design have changed in the subsequent grades released afterward.

Starting from the July 1958 model, an air duct grille was added to the rear. During this update, slight modifications were also made to the body lines and door shapes.





A New four-seater Kei car was suddenly considered for development

In 1954, a related company of "Nakajima Aircraft," the predecessor of Subaru, completed a prototype of its first passenger car, the "Subaru 1500." However, due to financial issues and the lack of opportunity to enter a market already dominated by other manufacturers, the plan for mass production was scrapped. At the same time, the company began considering the development of a new model, and engineers and executives turned their attention to a 360cc Kei car, which had many advantages. At that time, Kei cars could be driven with the newly established "light passenger car driving license," which was available from the age of 16. Furthermore, Kei cars were exempt from regular vehicle inspections, and taxes and maintenance costs were relatively low.

While Kei cars were still considered a luxury and loan approvals were strict, making them unattainable for everyone, Fuji Heavy Industries, being an aircraft manufacturer at its core, had confidence that a nimble, functional, and durable car would sell. Moreover, the market for Kei cars was seen as more promising than

that of the Subaru 1500, and they believed it had future growth potential.

In May 1955, the Automobile Division of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (now the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry) announced a policy overview called the "Outline for Fostering Light Passenger Cars." This policy, known as the "People's Car Concept," was intended to promote the development of the automobile industry and motorization. However, while the technical challenges could be overcome, the sales price was so low that it would not be profitable. As a result, most automakers showed little interest, and Fuji Heavy Industries decided to independently begin the development of a Kei car that would surpass the "People's Car Concept." Shinroku Momose, the lead developer of the Subaru 1500, even attended the launch event for the Flying Feather, a car developed by Suminoe Manufacturing, where he carefully observed its mechanisms and design.

The conclusion reached was that success could only be achieved with a Kei car that could seat four adults. At the time, the overall length of Kei cars was limited to 3 meters, and most of them were two-seaters. However, Momose believed that with

clever design, it would be possible to seat four adults. He also aimed for the power performance, including hill climbing and acceleration, to be on par with a bus. While there were many challenges, Momose approached the project with a reversal of conventional thinking. His method was to first secure cabin space for four adults and then determine the overall size of the car.

Placing the engine in the front would exceed the size constraints of a Kei car. Additionally, at that time, precise constant-velocity joints did not yet exist. As a result, the idea was born to place the engine in the rear and use a rear-engine, rear-drive (RR) layout. Around the same time, a similar concept was being considered in Italy by an engineer named Dante Giacosa, who was the technical director of Fiat and well-versed in design and packaging. In 1955, Fiat introduced the Fiat 600, followed by the second generation Fiat 500 (Nuova 500) in 1957, proving the advantages of the RR layout.

High-speed performance and the arrival of affordable Kei cars

Meanwhile, at Mitaka Works, which had been producing the scooter 'Rabbit,' there was a growing push to develop an engine for lightweight



A catalog from the time of release. It highlights not only the vehicle's indoor comfort, acceleration, and climbing power, but also emphasizes the low maintenance costs and the fact that it can be driven with a 'light vehicle license.'



The front seat has a very simple design. By folding the backrest of the rear seat forward, you can access the maintenance hatch for the rear engine.

vehicles. This shift was driven by the plateauing demand for the Rabbit and the increasing desire for a comfortable city car suitable for all weather conditions. Additionally, legal reforms in September 1954 had a significant impact, as the engine displacement limit for 2-stroke engines was expanded from 240cc to 360cc, aligning it with that of 4-stroke engines.

In December 1955, a project titled '4-Wheel Vehicle Planning Conference' was officially established in the main conference room of Fuji Heavy Industries' Isesaki Works, with the development code name designated as 'K 10.' By January of the following year, the project had moved to the director's office at Mitaka Works for a meeting to finalize the technical concept. At this meeting, the engine, already proven in the Rabbit, was discussed, and Momose presented the concept for the new lightweight vehicle.

The engine, which had already proven itself in the Rabbit, was decided to be a 2-cylinder air-cooled 2-stroke type, which could be produced using existing equipment. Efforts were made to reduce the vehicle's weight, aiming for 350 kg. With this, the target top speed of 80 km/h became achievable. To maximize foot space, small 10-inch tires were

selected. Since no such size was available on the market, Bridgestone was asked to develop them.

The adorable design, which would later earn the nickname "Ladybug," was created by Tatsuzo Sasaki. Although it was his first time designing a car, he applied his experience in designing interiors for large ships, focusing more on emotion than logic, and designed the car based on three-dimensional models rather than sketches. Fuji Heavy Industries placed human safety as a top priority, recognizing that both aircraft and cars are vehicles that directly impact human lives.

Two years after the start of development, on March 3, 1958, at noon, Fuji Heavy Industries held a groundbreaking press conference at their headquarters in Marunouchi, Tokyo, to unveil their revolutionary Kei car. Thus, the Subaru 360, a car that would shine brightly in the annals of 20th-century automotive history, was born. The factory price was set at 425,000 yen. While Momose, later known as the "Father of Subaru," had aimed for a price under 400,000 yen, this goal was not met. Still, considering that 1000cc sedans were priced over 600,000 yen, the Subaru 360 stood out as an excellent value.

The vehicle was unveiled to the general public on March 28, and sales

began in May, although full-scale mass production did not start until July. The first owner of the memorable inaugural car was Konosuke Matsushita, president of Matsushita Electric. The Subaru 360 got off to a strong start, receiving positive feedback from its users.

Unique design with excellent ride comfort! Safety enhanced through continuous improvements

One of the highlights of the Subaru 360's mechanism is its remarkable lightweight design. Leveraging aircraft technology, it achieved a monocoque body that is both light and incredibly strong, with excellent aerodynamics. Extensive safety tests, including rollover and collision tests, were conducted to ensure its reliability. The vehicle's weight was kept to 385 kg, equivalent to two Rabbits, while boasting a highly efficient package that comfortably seated two adults and two children.

The rear-mounted engine was an air-cooled, two-stroke inline twin-cylinder named the EK 31. With a total displacement of 356cc, a compression ratio of 6.5, a maximum output of 16 PS at 4500 rpm, and a peak torque of 3.0 kg-m at 3000 rpm, this engine also featured meticulous antivibration measures to reduce the characteristic vibrations



The dashboard area was also simple, with only a speedometer and an odometer as instruments. The controls consisted solely of the steering wheel and a turn signal lever operated with the left hand.



To make it easier to enter and exit the rear seats, the doors are designed with hinges at the rear.

of two-stroke engines. The transmission was a unique lateral H-pattern, 3-speed non-synchromesh for forward gears and 1-speed reverse. The top speed was announced to be 83 km/h.

The Subaru 360 also had a distinctive suspension system. The front used a trailing arm, and the rear a swing arm, both providing four-wheel independent suspension. A combination of transverse torsion bars and coil springs contributed to the soft ride, which became known as the "Subaru Cushion," allowing for smooth driving even on rough roads. The steering system employed a light and sharp rack-and-pinion setup.

In August 1959, a refreshing "Convertible" model was introduced, featuring a canvas top that could be folded back. In December, a commercial variant called the "Commercial" was added to the lineup, with rear quarter panels that folded outward, making loading, and unloading easier. In February 1960, mechanical improvements were made, focusing on enhancing safety. The bumpers were changed from a split type to a single, continuous style. At the same time, the shift pattern was revised to the more conventional H-pattern, and synchronized gears were added to second and third gears, making daily driving easier and more user-friendly. To further improve stability, the suspension was also updated to an oil-damper system.

In September of the same year, the two-cylinder engine was upgraded, increasing the maximum output to 18 PS at 4700 rpm, and the top speed reached 90 km/h. The vehicle's price was also reduced to an attractive level, below 400,000 yen. In October, the "Subaru 450," a registered version of the car, was introduced. Powered by the 423cc EK 51 engine, it delivered 23 PS at 5000 rpm and 3.8 kg-m at 3500 rpm. Since it was not constrained by Kei car size regulations, it featured larger bumpers and was 125 mm

longer than the Subaru 360. Despite being a compelling option, its higher maintenance costs led to sluggish sales.

New lineup additions without a full model change

The Subaru 360 reigned as the king of Kei cars and continued to increase sales while maintaining a sincere approach by introducing improvements almost every year. In September 1961, the highly anticipated "Deluxe" model was introduced, featuring standard equipment like sealed beam headlights and dual windshield wipers, while the "Standard" model saw a price reduction. In the spring of 1963, the interior was revamped with the introduction of an easy-to-read rectangular meter, refreshing the dashboard design. The Deluxe model was equipped with a fuel gauge, and the front seats gained a reclining function. In December, the "Super Deluxe" was introduced, with an overdrive gear added to the transmission of the higher-grade models.

In 1964, Subaru introduced an auto-clutch model and adopted the "Subarumatic" system, which separated gasoline and oil for lubrication. During this time, the engine power was increased, reaching a maximum output of 20 PS at 5000 rpm. The one-key system was introduced in the fall of 1965. With these continuous improvements, the reliability of the Subaru 360 was dramatically enhanced.

However, by 1967, fierce competitors began to emerge. Honda released the N360, Suzuki introduced the Fronte 360, and the power race intensified. Daihatsu also introduced a sporty grade for their Fellow model. In response, the Subaru 360 underwent significant improvements in August 1968, marking the first major update since its

launch. The exterior design was revamped to appeal to younger drivers with a sporty look, and the engine was upgraded to 25 PS at 5500 rpm with a maximum torque of 3.5 kg-m at 4500 rpm. Additionally, all models received an overdrive gear on the 3-speed transmission, enhancing driving performance.

In November, the "Young" series was introduced for those who sought the joy of driving. The "Young S" was a mood model with sporty features like headlamp covers and stripes. The flagship "Young SS" model, equipped with twin carburetors, achieved a remarkable 36 PS at 7000 rpm, producing 100 PS per liter. This model succeeded in attracting new users as well.

Subaru had boasted that it would not change the model, and true to its word, in the summer of 1969, the Subaru 360 handed over the spotlight to the Subaru R-2. After coexisting for about a year, the Subaru 360 quietly retired from the stage. Having led Japan's motorization for 12 years, the Subaru 360 remains an iconic and timeless car.



The "Young SS" that debuted in 1968 had more than twice the maximum output compared to its debut version.



The 2-stroke, 2-cylinder engine mounted at the rear. For forced air cooling, the engine compartment is equipped with ducts to expel cooling air. Air intake to the engine is provided through ducts from the front air cleaner.



The "Custom" model, which secured cargo space at the rear. Additionally, various types of models, including the "Wagon" and "Convertible," were introduced.

The front hood contains the battery and spare tire and cannot be used as a trunk space.



The "Young SS," released in 1968. The front seats were equipped with headrests and three-point seat belts.

The Sambar: Built on the expertise of the Subaru 360

The development of a light-duty truck, codenamed "K151," began at the Isesaki Plant in 1959, the year following the release of the Subaru 360. It was a light four-wheel truck, launched as the "Sambar" in February of 1961, aimed at replacing the declining sales of light three-wheel trucks. It adopted a rear-engine, rear-drive configuration, which had been well-established through the Subaru 360, and its engine and drivetrain mechanisms were also modified versions of those used in the Subaru 360. To secure sufficient cargo space, the cab-over style was employed, and a ladder frame with a box-shaped cross-section was used to keep the cargo bed floor low. The body types included a two-seater truck and a light van that could accommodate four people. The cargo bed, at 1400mm, was the largest

among light four-wheel trucks, and the cargo floor height, at 350mm, was the lowest. The air-cooled two-stroke, inline two-cylinder EK31 engine mounted in the rear was shared with the Subaru 360, with a total displacement of 356cc. It produced 18 horsepower at 4700 rpm and 3.2 kg-m of torque at 3200 rpm, with a top speed of 80 km/h.

The Sambar, highly praised for its climbing ability due to the RR configuration and comfortable ride inherited from the Subaru 360, also had some weaknesses, such as instability in straight-line driving when unloaded. As a result, like the Subaru 360, it was improved annually to enhance its product quality. Subaru eventually withdrew from the production of Kei cars, and after 51 years, ended in-house production of the Sambar, but it remains

renowned as a masterpiece of commercial vehicles.



The Subaru Sambar was initially released as a truck and light van. Later, a four-door model and left-hand drive versions for overseas markets were also produced.