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RENAULT SPORT Clio V6

DRIVING THE WORLD'S SMALLEST SUPERCAR

30N

Small and immensely powerful, the Clio V6 will be here next year. With a mid-mounted V6, it could be quite a handful. Richard Meaden finds out what it's like to drive the world's smallest supercar

If looks could kill, the Clio V6 would be locked away for mass murder. It's the most insane piece of engineering since Group B rallying unleashed a batch of crazed, mid-engined, all-wheel-drive, composite-bodied hatchbacks into the forests in the mid-1980s, and it's coming to our roads next year.

A product of Renault Sport, the French manufacturing giant's motorsport division, the Clio V6 is proof that Renault still has a sense of humour. Just when we'd begun to think the former kings of the hot-hatch world had gone all Mégane Scenic on us, they come up with the crazy Clio. The last time Renault Sport gave us this much to smile about was when they unveiled the Espace F1, a truly mind-altering people-carrier with a full-house 3.5-litre, 750bhp F1 engine slung where the kids should be. For a bunch of engineers, these boys sure know how to party.

So it should come as no surprise to see that their latest baby is a chip off the old block. In fact it's almost as though Renault Sport locked the Espace F1 and a Renault 5 Turbo 2 in a darkened workshop and told them to get on with it. The result of this quick fumble under the dust-sheets is a superhatch of unparalleled menace and muscularity. The fact that the mechanicals have done to the Clio 2's bodyshell what the Incredible Hulk's biceps and pectorals do to his tailoring only adds to its visual impact.

What is surprising is how much of the sheet metal is standard Clio. The basic shell, roof and rear hatch are off the shelf. The bonnet is made from aluminium and comes from the yet-to-be-launched 2-litre 16v Clio, but everything from the hips down is bespoke. Wheelarches, wings, sills, rear valence and front spoiler are fashioned from lightweight composite materials by specialist company MOC. The doors also need a huge amount of reshaping to accommodate the mouths of the main engine air intakes.

The end result is that the Clio's track is some 4.25in wider at the front and 5in broader at the rear. The wheelbase has been extended by 1.5in too, presumably to try and improve the Clio's stability, but the overall length of the car remains the same, making the V6 look almost as broad as it is long. As you'd expect, the chassis bears little resemblance to the shopping trolley from which it takes its name. Front suspension is MacPherson strut, while at the rear a completely new subframe cradles the motor and provides mounting points for the radius arms, track control arms and struts.



[RENAULT SPORT CLIO V6]



'The Clio's performance is shattering. Guaranteed. Think 911 Carrera and you won't be far off the mark, with a top speed of around 160mph'

To keep the cost of the project down, some components are plundered from the corporate parts bin, such as the front subframe and wishbones, together with the rear hub carriers, but the brakes are completely new to the V6. With a 300mm vented disc at each corner, clamped by powerful four-pot calipers, the 2646lb Clio has the stoppers to cope with its performance. As you'd hope with a car that has more than half its weight behind the centre-line, the brakes will be equipped not only with ABS but also electronic brake force distribution, a system that helped tame the similarly pendulous Diablo under heavy braking. The Clio's four

contact patches have got bigger too, the V6 riding on dramatically-styled 17in alloys some 7.5in wide at the front and 8.5in wide at the rear, shod with 205/50s and 245/45s respectively.

The heart of the Clio is of course the mid-mounted V6. It seems an absurd and improbable challenge to squeeze such a powerplant into such a small car, so improbable in fact that, so the industry rumour goes, when Volkswagen got wind of Renault's plans to build a '3-litre Clio' VW went all-out to match it. Unfortunately the Germans got the wrong end of the stick, and threw all their technical might into building a Polo so economical that it too could drive 100km on 3 litres of fuel...

Fortunately for us, the Clio's 3 litres are located just behind the seats and pump out some 250bhp. The power output may be unusually healthy but the engine is familiar enough, being more commonly found in the front of the Laguna and Peugeot 406 V6 models. The 24-valve motor is a peach in standard tune: gloriously vocal, oily smooth and strong

throughout the rev range. In the Clio V6 both power and torque have been significantly boosted with the adoption of hotter cams, a higher compression ratio and a twin-plenum induction system. The final spec for the engine is as yet undecided, but the 250bhp and 220lb ft torque figures are unlikely to alter, and the energy is sure to be transmitted to the rear wheels only via a new but very conventional five-speed gearbox. Consequently the Clio's performance is shattering. Guaranteed. Think 911 Carrera and you won't be far off the mark, with a top speed of around 160mph, 0-60mph in 5.5secs and 0-100mph in under 12secs.

With production of the V6 'Trophy' race-cars being handled by the old Alpine factory in Dieppe, chances are the road-going version will also be built there. Not only will it continue the factory's tradition for building the wildest Renault products, but it will neatly fill the space left by the Renault Sport Spider which ceased production last



Below: look closely and you can just about see the standard Clio under the V6's battledress. The basic bodyshell and bootlid are retained, but the rest is purpose-built. Advanced composites help keep the weight down, but the Clio V6 is no flyweight at well over a ton



Road car is fully trimmed inside. UK market could get right-hand drive. Gearbox is a conventional five-speeder, but specially designed for the Clio V6



[RENAULT SPORT CLIO V6]

month. Who takes management responsibility for the project is yet to be decided, as Renault Sport has put the job of readying the Clio V6 for series production out to tender. Front-runner is Matra, although a mystery British company – possibly the Creative Group which masterminded the Plymouth Prowler for Chrysler and is currently resurrecting Jensen – is also thought to be in the running.

The pressure will be on whoever wins the contract, for Renault is hoping the Clio V6 will be on the road in the summer of next year. Production is expected to be limited to 2500 in total, with around 400 cars, possibly in right-hand drive and priced at £30,000, being allocated for the UK. Sadly, if you haven't got a £250 deposit waiting at your local Renault

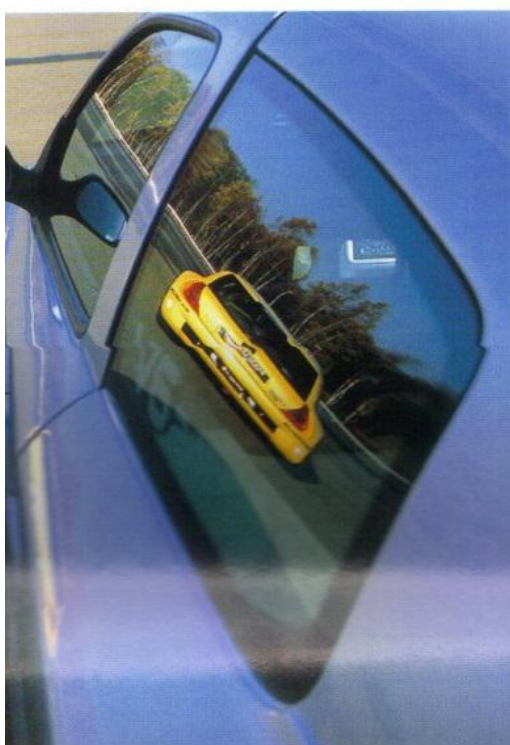
dealer, the chances are you're probably too late, as Renault UK closed the order book some time ago. Don't despair though. With a 240bhp Beetle RSi whipping up interest on the motor show circuit and AMG's awesome twin-engined A-class also set for limited production, the bonsai supercar looks like being the next big thing.

Clambering into the Clio Trophy race car, it's easy to see the attraction. It's tough to squeeze through the roll-cage but once clamped into the tight racing seat there's plenty of room up front. Ahead sits the moulded carbonfibre dash and a very simple LCD display panel. To your right sprouts a strangely bent gear lever, topped by a shiny alloy knob, and at your feet is a conventional three-pedal set-up,

Below: road and race cars share the same bodysheet and same basic mechanical layout. Racer has 18in wheels, bigger brakes, more power and a six-speed sequential gearbox. It's also about 150lb lighter, thanks to removal of trim. Engine is basically the same 3-litre V6 you'll find in the nose of Renault's Laguna (and others). Hotter cams, higher compression ratio and various other tweaks lift it from 194bhp to 250bhp in the road car, 285bhp in race trim

with cast alloy Sparco pedal flats quirkily fitted upside down for some reason best known to Renault Sport.

Reach down beside the seat for the ignition switch and starter button; let the fuel pumps whirr for a few seconds before nudging the V6 into life. It starts briskly, settling to a fast idle





that clatters the six sequential gears in their casing and sends zizzes and vibrations around the cockpit in true race-car style.

Push the moderately heavy clutch pedal to the floor, pull back on the gearlever to *crunch-jolt* into first. Control the adrenalin-fuelled knee-tremble, ease the clutch home as the revs climb, and away we go.

We're at the Pont L'Eveque circuit about 60 miles from the Clio V6's Dieppe birthplace. It's very, very tight and awkwardly narrow. Hairpins outnumber fast corners six to one, and from earlier experience strapped alongside Jean Ragnotti, factory rally hero in the Renault 5 Turbo 2 era and guiding hand in the set-up of the Clio V6 racer, it doesn't suit the Clio's high-power, short-wheelbase characteristics. »





[RENAULT SPORT CLIO V6]



Clio V6 race car follows in the wheeltracks of its great-grand-daddy, the mid-engined Renault 5 Turbo – which means that if you get it even slightly wrong, those wheeltracks are likely to lead straight into the nearest gravel trap. This is one tricky car to drive at the limit

A pretty spectacular peddler, Ragnotti still has to be right on the ball if he's to keep the Clio on the rug. He's always nudging at the wheel – short, darty inputs, reacting to the car almost before it has started to slide. Of course, being a rally man at heart, he can't resist hanging the tail out exiting a couple of the hairpins, but through the two quick corners on the circuit his eyes take on a steely glint, and the seriousness of his body language suggests my turn at the wheel could possibly involve looking out of the back window if I'm not very careful.

I've got six laps to try and get to grips with the Clio. Not many, especially in a car with such a short wheelbase and wide track. The mechanics of driving the thing are pretty foolproof, though. The sequential 'box is easy to use: pull back on the lever for upshifts, push forward for downshifts. There's no need to use the clutch on upshifts, and an electronically-controlled throttle not only allows full-throttle upshifts, but blips the throttle for you on downshifts. Easy.

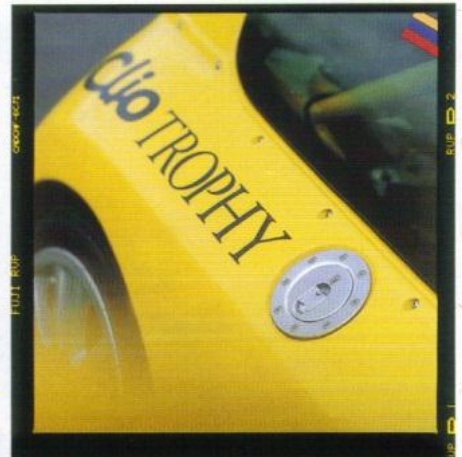
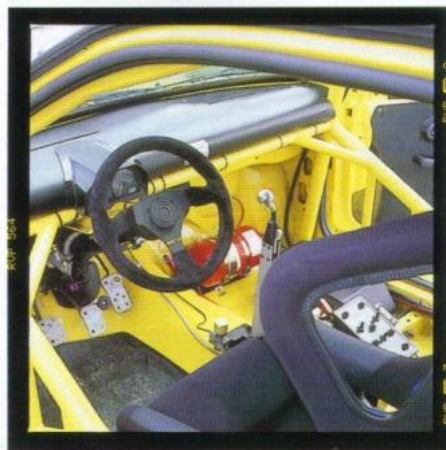
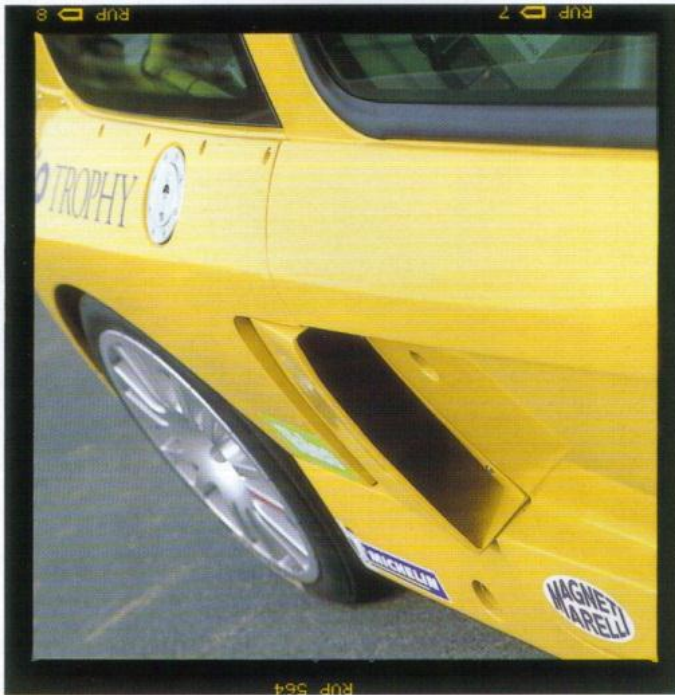
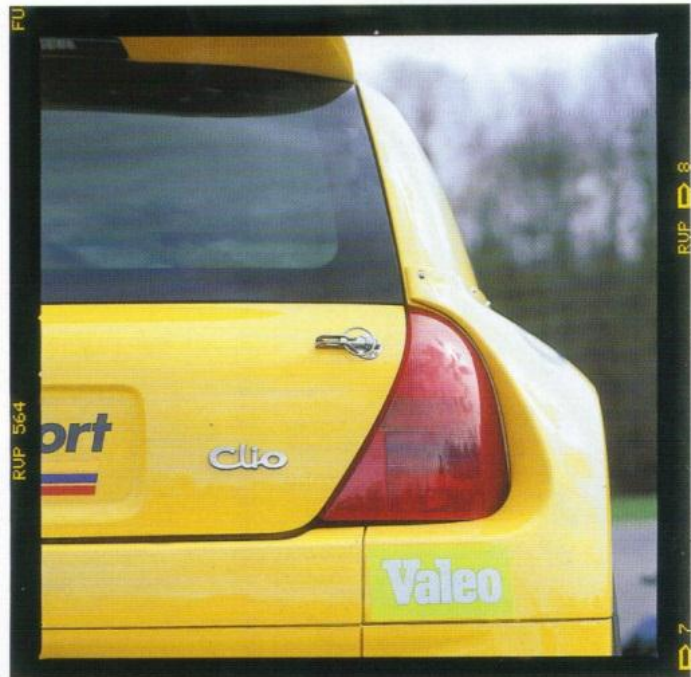
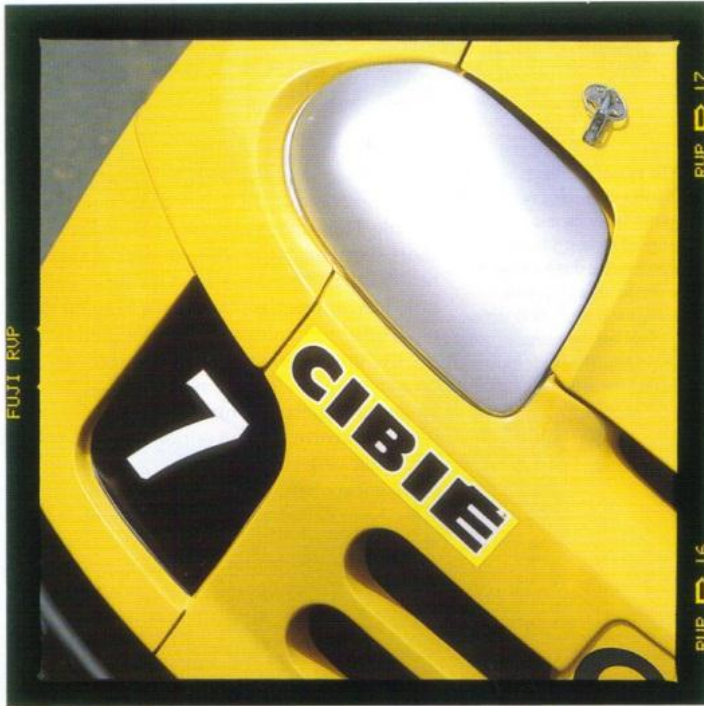
Accelerating hard out of the paddock through the first three gears is entertaining, in an arcade game kind of way. Right foot buried on the throttle, right hand pulling through the gears,



'I've got six laps to try and get to grips with the Clio. Not many, especially in a car with such a short wheelbase and wide track'

285bhp-worth of race-tuned V6 blaring away behind you. It's quite a lazy engine actually, with plenty of torque between 5000 and 7000rpm. There's no on-cam explosion like you'd get in a SuperTouring car, just a strong, steady stream of kidney-squeezing g-force. Remember that you're in a hatchback and it's an absolute riot. Until you come to the corners.

The brake discs are huge, 330mm vented items, clamped by equally serious Brembo four-piston calipers, and are more than powerful enough to have you falling into the restraining clutches of the four-point harness. The trouble is, the brake pedal seems to operate an on/off switch, not a progressive, feelsome hydraulic system. Consequently it's hard to avoid locking the brakes untidily into the faster corners. The steering seems to have had a sensory bypass too. It's power-assisted and very light, so it's hard to



Renault Sport plans UK and European race series for the Clio; already 85 racers have been ordered. Two side-scoops feed air to mid-mounted engine; radiators for cooling are mounted in the nose. Racer's cockpit is completely stripped-out. Note full roll-cage, which makes getting in tricky; brake-bias knob on centre-tunnel; gear lever angled towards driver. It's a sequential six-speed gearbox – pull for up-shifts, push for down – and the management system allows full-throttle upshifts. Driver has a choice of two throttle settings – one for a dry track and another, more progressive setting for slippery conditions

tell what's going on at the pointy end. It makes life tricky into the hairpins, and when you need to be able to feel the onset of understeer through the quicker corners, it's hard to feel anything at all. There's also a curious, unnerving tendency for the back-end to twitch round at anything more than half a turn of lock. It's as though the rear is rolling into oversteer, which leaves you with the option of riding it out on the throttle, or easing off the power and unwinding some lock. Either way, the Clio's stubby wheelbase means it can and will get nasty.

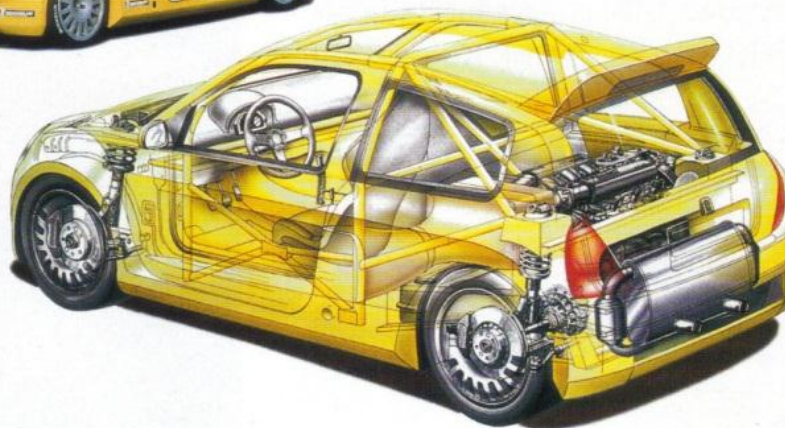
Judging by the number of journos, none of them race-car novices, who gyrated wildly during their stints at the wheel, it would seem I'm not alone in my difficulty getting to grips with the Clio's handling. One thing's for sure, the one-make Clio Trophy Championship is going to be one of the most spectacular race series for years. With 85 cars already ordered and a race calendar that includes supporting the Monaco GP, Le Mans and the Spa 24 Hours, the potential for mayhem is enormous. Buy shares in body suppliers MOC now!

To be fair, the circuit layout and surface ensured the slicks probably didn't hit their optimum temperature, which in turn reduces steering feel, roadholding and traction, but it still came as a shock to discover how uninvolved the Clio Trophy's chassis is. I hope the road car is a

lot more tactile when it eventually goes on sale, although if its dynamics are anywhere near as close to the Renault 5 Turbo 2 as its looks, it will remain a complete and utter handful. If you've got your name on the waiting list for the road car, I suggest you invest a further £10,000 in a Turbo 2 and start practising. ■



Rarer even than the race car is the special see-through version of the Clio (right). It's a clear winner



CLIO V6 TROPHY

Engine	V6, 24 valves, 2946cc
Max power	285bhp @ 7400rpm
Max torque	226lb ft @ 5800rpm
Weight	2470lb
Power/weight	258bhp/ton
Transmission	Six-speed sequential, rear-wheel drive
Suspension	Front and rear: MacPherson struts
Tyres	Front 21x65x18 Rear 24x65x18 Michelin slicks
0-60mph	4.5secs*
Top speed	160mph*

*estimated

