

WHEELS

Nissan Altima maintains driving edge in style and comfort

By JIM ROBINSON
Metroland Car Critic

A welcome surprise for Nissan has been the way North Americans have taken to the Altima sedan — no less than 450,000 having been sold since its introduction in 1993.

So it shouldn't come as a surprise that only detail changes are being made for 1996.

"It's foolhardy to tamper with success," said Nissan Canada executive vice-president Yves Boyer, "and Altima

has been a huge success in the marketplace since Day 1. Altima found its niche with North Americans who were eager for a modestly priced five-seat luxury sedan that offers the quality, comfort, performance, plus ride and handling of cars costing a great deal more.

To cater to all these tastes the Altima comes in no less than four variants — the base XE, mid-range GXE, sporting SE and the hi-lux GLE with few options left unfitted.

The heart of the Altima is its lusty 2.4-litre, four-cylinder engine which produces 150 hp and 154 ft/lb of torque. This is the same horsepower rating as the 3.0-litre Nissan V6, so you see where the sporting part of the Altima's appeal comes from. But it's also quite thrifty according to Transport Canada which has recorded fuel consumption figures of 9.9L/100 km (29 mpg) city and 7.1L/100 km (40 mpg) highway.

Altima is one of the first vehicles to go to a super rigid unibody frame which uses computer-designed suspensions of amazing suppleness to

soak up all the shocks before they can be transmitted to the body structure and eventually the passengers.

"Our engineers achieved their goal of creating a car that even inexperienced drivers can keep in full control even under severe road, weather, and driving conditions," Boyer said.

It's all accomplished by North America's first Intelligent Body Assembly System (IBAS) a grouping of 51 robots

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which mate, weld, and laser check Altima's body panels to tolerances within 0.1 mm or less than the thickness of a sheet of paper.

Even though it's at the econo-end of the scale, the XE comes with dual air bags and height-adjustable three-point seatbelts. Also included is a tilt steering wheel, power rack and pinion steering, four-speaker stereo, dual

power door mirrors, remote releases for trunk and fuel door, dual cup holders, dual vanity mirrors, and that's only a partial list.

Antilock brakes and viscous limited-slip differential are standard on the SE and GLE and optional on GXE. The top three models also come with CRC-free air conditioning, power locks/windows/antenna, trunk-through bag for skis, and what I think is a nice touch, woodgrain accents.

Opt for the SE and the MacPherson strut suspension system is beefed up. There's a rear deck spoiler to go with the special alloy wheels and special sports buckets. It also has discs standard at all four corners as does the GLE. The XE and GXE have discs at the front, drums rear but four-wheels discs are optional on the GXE.

Thanks to an intelligent placing of the B and C pillars and the thin A pillar, the Altima provides a joyous view along any axis. You notice the door mirrors are placed just a hair below direct line of sight which provides the driver with significantly more information about what's going on behind.

Considering the power, Nissan's warranty, its frugal nature, plus the ability to select one of four permutations and add options to fine tune it to your driving needs, it's easy to see why, for 1996, Altima doesn't really need any changes.

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