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For 2000, however, more than 20 refinements were made to lessen noise, vibration and harshness.

In fact, the 2000 Altima has 70 upgrades in total. Much work, incidentally, went into revising the four-wheel independent suspension. The rear, for instance, is coil springs over gas struts to which is added a stabilizer bar and Nissan's own Super Toe Control that keeps the tire planted even under hard cornering and rear lift.

But what makes the difference is the auto industry's first factory-installed acceleration sensitive suspension struts. It has been two years since I last drove an Altima, which impressed me at the time with its abilities. This car, however, was one that wanted to be flung about.

There are not less than four models of the front-engine, front-drive Altima based primarily on trim. It starts with the XE (\$19,998-\$20,998) which Nissan calls basic but hardly is with that engine and suspension combo. Next up is the GXE (\$22,698-\$27,098). The third model is the SE (\$25,998-\$29,598) as tested here that is aimed at the more sporting driver. At the top is the GLE at \$28,598 that includes just about everything Nissan can build into the car including leather seating, front seat side airbags, and HomeLink garage door system.

The Nissan people know I still have a soft spot (with the exception for the hole in my wallet) for the pair of BMW 320i sedans I once owned. Crisp handling and the ability to use all the power the engine has is the hallmark of a great sports sedan, at least to me. The SE qualifies.

Adding to the positive feeling of the engine and steering, was the near ideal placing of the controls vis-a-vis the driver's seat. No waving your right hand out in space trying to find the shifter, it was right where I wanted it. The multi-adjustable seat and placement of the rear mirrors were also ideal. I had so much fun with this car, I often drove back and forth on super highways with the radio off so I could hear the engine and time my shifts to the "feel" coming through the steering wheel and shifter.

With the SE sport turned suspension and that engine/five-speed package comes four-wheel disc brakes. The eight-way sport seat for the driver is augmented by leather-wrapped steering wheel, cruise control and tilt wheel. The SE also comes with titanium faced gauges with black numbers that reverse at night. Air conditioning is standard along with power on the locks, windows and mirrors. A six-speaker stereo is part of the SE package. You also get remote entry and HomeLink garage door system.

In terms of safety, there are dual airbags, anti-lock brakes, anti-theft system with immobilizer key, front seatbelt pretensioners, three-point centre seat belts at the rear and doors with anti-lockout feature. The only extra was \$915 for shipping for a grand total of \$26,913.

Fuel economy was also an agreeable story with a Transport Canada listed 10.2L/100 km (28 mpg) city, and 7.1L/100 km (40 mpg) highway. Operating this car for a year will cost an average driver \$969 according to Transport Canada.

Notice I haven't touched styling, which while very much in the current Nissan vein is improved with a new grille reminiscent of the 200 Maxima. The 16-inch wheels make a big difference, allowing the SE (at least) to show it is a four-door sedan with a dash of attitude. Having seen what 2001 is bringing, the Altima, because of the many improvements, is actually the first of this new breed of Nissans coming in the millennium.

NISSAN ALTIMA SE 2000 AT A GLANCE:
BODY STYLE: four-door compact sedan, front engine/front drive. Four trim levels as tested: XE, GXE, SE and GLE.
ENGINE: 2.4-litre DOHC in-line four-cylinder (155 hp, 156 ft/lb)
FUEL ECONOMY: Five-speed as tested 10.2L/100 km (28 mpg) city, 7.1L/100 km (40 mpg) hwy
PRICE: List \$25,998, as tested \$26,913 including \$915 shipping charge.

Being efficient can be fun

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Braking is via vented discs at front, drums at the rear. Standard tire is a Bridgestone 13-inch but 14-inch Michelins are available with option packages.

While the Echo looks very 21st century from the outside, the interior lets you know it for sure. Right in the top centre of the dashboard is the instrument cluster. It contains the speedo, trip odo, fuel gauge and warning lights for things like coolant temperature. Having grown up on gauges viewed through the steering wheel, the centre cluster is something you adapt to in seconds. Better, because it is set higher, you don't have to avert your eyes as low to check your speed while driving.

The centre console houses the controls for air conditioning, audio system and digital clock. Three round knobs make heating/cooling easy to select and four round vent/exhaust ports on the dash flood the cabin with air movement.

There are storage bins on either side of the central console, beneath the dash board for the driver and there is even a little hidden tray under the passenger seat. There are not one but two glove boxes for odds and sods plus a centre slot above the radio for your 407 transponder, assuming you are one of the few who still haven't handed it back in now that the rates are being raised. There is a large, easy-lift trunk lid and 60/40 split back seats that open up a reasonable trunk of 13.6 cu. ft. I drove both the two-door with

automatic and four-door sedan with five-speed and was immediately impressed by the willingness of the car to get going. Credit the light weight, the wind cheating shape and the sheer cheekiness of the entire package, but it was fun to drive this car.

The view, thanks to tall windows, a proper seating position and the higher viewpoint of the road made for clear sailing without a noticeable blind spot.

But what seals the deal on the Echo is price. The Echo two-door is \$13,835 for the manual, \$14,835 for the automatic. The four-door is \$14,175 for the five-speed, \$15,175 for the automatic. There is a Style Package for the two door that raises the five-speed to \$15,245, and the automatic to \$16,245. It includes 14-inch Michelin tires and well covers, fender flares, colored bumpers, rear spoiler, intermittent wipers, color door handles, remote outside mirrors, bodyside cladding and CD player. Is that a bargain or what?

On the four-door, the Style Package raises the price of the five speed to \$15,585 and the automatic is \$16,585. Air conditioning is a dealer-installed extra at \$1,230. I cannot forget to mention the quality of the paint that one would expect on a topline Lexus instead of a price-point leading subcompact. I spent a week with the automatic four-door with the air conditioning and CD player (price as tested \$17,070) and was mostly impressed that it had lots of power to spare on superhighway stretches. The amount of glass and the high roofline

make you feel like you're driving in an observation car. It first it's a bit unreal, but after a few days, the extra eye sweep afforded is a blessing, especially downtown fighting for parking spots. Incidentally, the tight turning circle and short length means you can zip into a spot in one pass.

The Echo shows what can be done when a carmaker makes a determined effort to put everything it has into establishing a new benchmark. Agreeing with me are Canada's World of Wheels Magazine that gave Echo an Editor's Choice Award, and the gang at TSN's Motoring 2000 that named Echo their Car of the Year.

Like you, I'm concerned about the environment and not happy with 90-cent plus per litre prices. But the thought that a little cube with a two-stroke canola-powered diesel is my next car is not the kind of future I want to live in.

With the Echo, Toyota has reset the mark for subcompact carmakers who will have to focus their attention on the trend being set. Being efficient can be fun and Echo proves it.

TOYOTA ECHO 2000 AT A GLANCE:
BODY STYLE: two-door and four-door sedan front engine / front drive
ENGINE: 1.5-litre DOHC inline four-cylinder (108 hp, 105 ft/lb)
FUEL ECONOMY: 7.4L/100 km (38 mpg) city, 5.6L/100 km (50 mpg) highway
PRICE: two-door manual \$13,835, two-door automatic \$14,835, four-door manual \$14,175 and four-door automatic \$15,175. As tested, \$17,070.

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