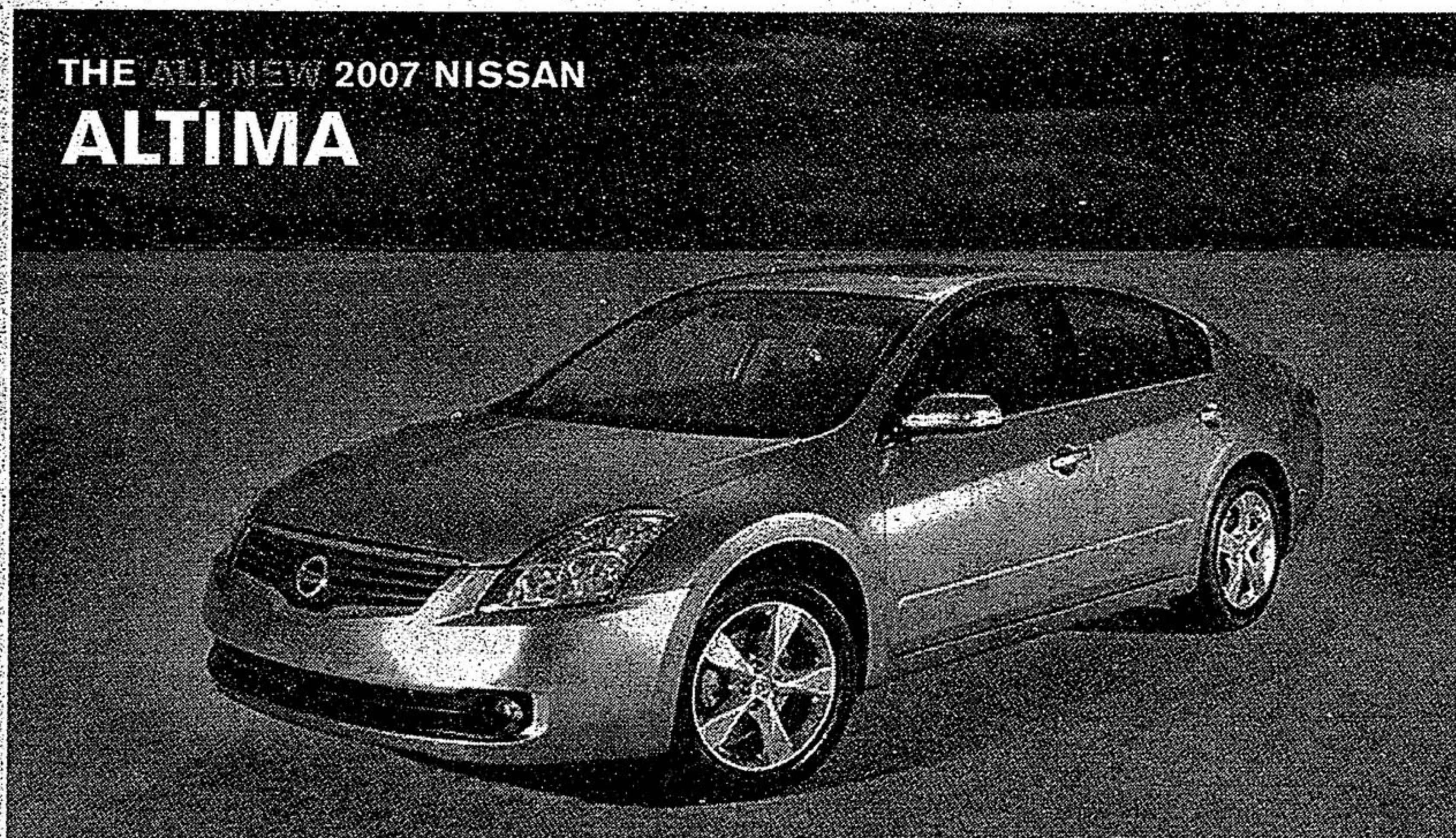


2008 Outback refines 'freedom of all-wheel-drive'

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Photo by Jim Robinson

The 2008 Subaru Outback builds on the success of the brand with a wide range of engines, transmissions and trim packages for every need. Outback now only comes in a wagon version because Canadians far prefer the added utility.

BY JIM ROBINSON
Metroland Media Group

Katsuhiko Yokoyama, president, chairman and CEO of Subaru Canada, told an interesting story at the recent launch of the 2008 Outback.

Seems he was coming back from Japan and at Canada Customs, the officer asked Yokoyama-san where he worked, he responded Subaru. To which the officer said, "Oh that's that Australian car company."

More than a decade after actor Paul (Crocodile Dundee) Hogan almost single-handedly planted Subaru and the Outback on the consciousness of North Americans, the Outback remains one of Subaru's bread and butter vehicles.

It arguably was also the first crossover utility vehicle.

The Outback is based on the Legacy, and in truth, all Subarus are centred on one engine, the horizontally opposed or "boxer" with four or six cylinders, several different transmissions and Subaru's cornerstone, the symmetrical full-time all-wheel-drive (AWD). Because of its design and shape, the boxer engine can be mounted further down in the engine bay for a lower centre of gravity. But the big plus is the driveshaft to the rear axle runs in a straight line from the engine and that means less parasitic power loss with prop shafts angling up or down through universal joints.

I owned a Subaru for almost 10 years and in that time I never had a mechanical problem other than the usual replacing of brake pads. I sold it to my friend and it soldiered on for six more years as a farm vehicle until it was finally donated to a high school.

What I'm trying to say here is the concept and execution of the drive train has been refined and improved over the decades much like Porsche and I mean that as a serious comparison. This is not surprising when you realize Subaru has, and is, a car company founded and run by engineers. That Subarus don't break is witnessed by the World Rally Championship team that has won three world titles. The drivers bend off wheels and crash but the vehicles rarely retire due to mechanical woes.

This is one company where the lessons learned by racing are directly applied to their road going products.

Because Subaru is so small compared to the likes of Honda and Toyota, it has to make the most of what they produce and have in the parts bins.

Using the same basic drivetrain, they spin out whole model lines like the Impreza, Legacy, WRX/STI and Forester in addition to the Outback. Then, depending on transmission and trim, they flesh out each model after that.

Now the next three paragraphs may go into the myriad of Outback variants, but it is interesting to see what Subaru does.

There are three engine choices with the Outback. The normally aspirated engine is a 2.5-litre four-cylinder producing 170 hp and 170 lb/ft of torque and is fitted to the 2.5i model. The next is a turbocharged version of the 2.5-litre making 243 hp and 241 lb/ft of torque found in the 2.5XT model. The third is a naturally aspirated six-cylinder (basically the four with two more cylinders) producing 250 hp and 219 lb/ft of torque found in the 3.0R model. The turbos and 3.0-litres have twin cams while the normally aspirated fours coming with an overhead single cam.

To confuse you even more there are three transmissions. A five-speed manual is offered on the 2.5i, Touring and 2.5XT. A four-speed automatic can be found on the 2.5i, Touring and Limited. Lastly there is a five-speed automatic on the 2.5Xt, 3.0R and 3.0R Premier.

And knowing Subaru as I do, it probably won't be long before the new 3.6-litre boxer six-cylinder just debuted in the 2008 Tribeca crossover works its way into the Legacy and Outback ranges.

While there are wagon and sedan versions of the near identical Legacy, the Outback is offered as a wagon only, the sedan being dropped for 2008.

Yet depending on engine, transmission and trim package, there are nine ways to order your Outback.

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