This Rogue is no charlatan: Nissan's useful small crossover has broad appeal

by Mark_Maynard

Nissan has broadened its lineup and widened its appeal in the past year with several new four-cylinder offerings, including the compact Versa hatchback and sedan, a new Sentra sedan and Altima coupe. And now comes the five-passenger Rogue crossover.

NISSAN ROGUE ROAD - Nissan's new Rogue crossover is ideal for young families. Starting prices range from just less than $20,000 to about $22,000, but popular options can add up to $3,000 or more. CNS Photo courtesy of Nissan. Built from the company's Sentra platform, Rogue is in the class of small crossovers with five seats. This is a rapidly developing segment of new vehicles and is ideal for young families. It has more function than a sedan, has command-of-the-road presence and takes less effort to load and buckle toddlers into carriers and car seats, but there's plenty of room to haul all the trappings over the river and through the woods.

Competitors include the Honda CR-V, Mitsubishi Outlander, Saturn Vue, Toyota RAV4, Ford Escape and others.

Sold in two trim levels in front- or all-wheel drive, the Rogue has a starting price of just less than $20,000. All-wheel drive adds $1,200. It comes with a 2.5-liter, four-cylinder engine and continuously variable transmission. No manual is offered, or needed, really.

The base model is decently equipped, but it's limited to the available option packages. Standard equipment includes air conditioning, power side mirrors, remote locking, cruise control, dual map lights and cargo-area light, four-speaker audio with single CD (but no MP3 capability) and 16-inch tires with wheel covers.

Standard safety features include side-curtain air bags, front side bags and active front headrests. It has large, four-wheel disc brakes (11.8 inches) with ABS, brake assist and brake-force distribution. Electronic stability and traction controls also are standard on all models.

The test vehicle was an uplevel SL model with front-wheel drive, starting at $21,415. As tested, it was $22,520 with the $800 moonroof, $180 floor mats and cargo net (of good quality), and $125 splash guards, which are a pleasing accent but probably don't do much good.

The SL adds useful extras that include a better grade of seat fabric, a height-adjustable driver seat, six-speaker audio system with MP3, seat-back pocket, front console-armrest with storage, driver's visor with covered vanity mirror (but not lighted) and 17-inch alloy wheels.

The SL has a choice of option packages that can add such extras as seven-speaker audio wired for satellite radio, a fold-flat front passenger seat, a tonneau cover, lighted vanity mirrors, a navigation system and nighttime mood lighting.

But Nissan's Intelligent Key for keyless entry and start-up is only available in the Premium package ($2,200) on all-wheel-drive models. Not fair. I like the speedy access of these intelligent keys; it should be offered as a stand-alone option. However, Nissan includes the Intelligent Key among the standard features of its Altima coupe, which is priced about the same as Rogue.

With the height-adjustable driver's seat, there is a good view over the hood for all drivers. Tall front-seat passengers, however, may feel perched, or too high, in the seat. Sightlines are good in most directions, except over the shoulder through the swoopy, upswept rear corners and small windows.

The interior is smartly engineered, including 60/40 split rear seats that flip and fold with ease, a low exhaust/transmission tunnel for improved second-row foot room, and a variety of handy hooks, grab handles and storage areas, including space under the floor in the cargo area. Headroom is generous at 40.4 inches - subtract an inch or so for the moonroof - and rear legroom is good at 35.3 inches. But space is compact for adults.

The Rogue is wide, stable and sprung for comfort, but it seems under-tired; the stock tires seem inadequate when scooting around corners. An upgrade to a more premium tire might improve front-end grip for the more aggressive driver.

The horsepower has no issue motivating Rogue's almost 3,300 pounds of curb weight, or 3,460 pounds with all-wheel drive. Acceleration force is balanced for fuel economy, which the EPA rates as 22 mpg city and 27 highway, and 21/26 AWD, on 87 octane.

The engine is rated 167 horsepower and 170 foot-pounds of torque for California and Northeastern states with similar emissions laws. This engine scores very high at in the EPA's green vehicle guide (epa.gov/greenvehicles). It scores nine out 10 for air pollution and seven for greenhouse gases. Elsewhere, the engine is rated for 170 horsepower and 175 foot-pounds of torque, and 6/7 for emissions.

Nissan has aimed Rogue at young families with the hope of luring more males. Marketing and advertising were generated to reach the so-called "stealth dad." He's the career go-getter who remembers his once-active social life but has embraced marriage, diaper changing and sleep deprivation.

It is likely the Rogue probably could fit well with this demographic; however, it is so useful and stylish that I expect its buyers will come from all segments, particularly empty-nesters looking to downsize but retain grandkid cartability. SPECS

2008 Nissan Rogue SL 2WD

Body style: midsize, five-passenger crossover

Engine: aluminum, 167-horsepower, 2.5-liter four-cylinder with four valves per cylinder and continuously variable timing

Transmission: continuously variable automatic

EPA fuel economy estimates: 22 mpg city, 27 highway; 87 octane recommended

Length/wheelbase: 182.9/105.9 inches

Curb weight: 3,299 pounds

PRICING

Base: $21,415, including $745 freight charge; $22,520 as tested

Where assembled: Aguascalientes, Mexico

PLUSES: Small footprint, large interior; nimble to drive; well-engineered utility

MINUSES: Carrot-and-stick approach to options.

Filth be gone

I was in the process of cleaning up a grubby, 15-year-old Camry when I sampled a spray can of Prestone Interior Cleaner with Odor Neutralizer. The odor neutralizer was of particular interest.

This Camry wasn't just a little dirty - it was a litter bin of beach sand spackled with spilled soft drinks, candy and gum, years of dog hair and other grossness.

For this type of job, I have some thermonuclear spray cleaner that works well, but the Prestone Interior Cleaner was just as effective and not as caustic. I used the foaming spray on every surface - carpets, floor mats and all plastics - except the headliner and windows.

The layers of grime wiped off without frantic scrubbing, and the finish was clean and smooth. The spray also features a snap-on brush to work in the foam and break up the crusty stuff.

The price is $5 at Wal-Mart, Target and some auto parts stores. Details at www.prestone.com.

JEEP CRANK LIGHT

The Jeep Ultra Tough Crank Light is a modern survival tool.

The battery pack can be recharged by winding the crank, and it can be used to recharge a cell phone. The light won't break if driven over, at least by a Jeep, and it floats.

No worries about keeping this flashlight in the trunk and whether the batteries will have a charge when

needed.

The suggested retail price is $40, but it can be ordered at allthingsjeep.com/jeel.html for $30, which includes the rechargeable battery and recharge adapter to fit five phone types.

MATCHBOX AT 55

In honor of making die-cast cars for 55 years, Matchbox has introduced three 55th Anniversary Cars.

The 2006 Lexus GS430, 1965 Austin Mini and the 1972 Ford Bronco have special anniversary paint and deco design. Each is 99 cents, available on Matchbox.com.

Alas, no anniversary make or model that's 55 years old.

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