

Altima two-door is a good ride in a small package

by Jerry Garrett

The new Nissan Altima coupe is a good example of how less can be more.

This sexy coupe, which went on sale May 27, is based on the Altima sedan, but the coupe is less car. It rides on a new, shortened platform. Its wheelbase is 4 inches shorter than that of the sedan. The coupe's overall length is 7.3 inches shorter, and its height has been shaved by 2.6 inches. Nissan says the coupe's curb weight is lighter than the sedan's - 3,055 pounds in base configuration, which would make it significantly lighter than anything else in the segment, such as the Toyota Solara or Honda Accord.

NISSAN ALTIMA COUPE - The Altima coupe's overall length is 7.3 inches shorter than the sedan and its height has been shaved by 2.6 inches. CNS Photo courtesy of Nissan Motors. Because the coupe is that much smaller, lighter and lower than the sedan, it hugs the road that much better. Its fully independent suspension, with struts and coil springs up front and a multilink rear, loves to caress the road. Front and rear stabilizer bars help make it corner as if on rails. The V-6 models get additional rear suspension tweaks. Unfortunately, traction control comes standard only with the V-6. ABS, however, is standard on all versions.

Tossing the Altima coupe around corners, and tromping on the accelerator away from slow curves or stoplights, I was pleasantly surprised how little torque-steer was evident in this front-wheel-drive package - even in the highest-powered model.

The Altima coupe comes with two engine choices, both of which are also shared with the Altima sedan. The base 170-horsepower, 2.5-liter four-cylinder engine is rated 23 miles per gallon city, 32 highway. Cars sold outside California and those states with strict emissions standards are rated 175 hp. Even the uprated 270-horsepower, 3.5-liter V-6 gets a 19/27 fuel economy rating. Both engines may be fueled with regular unleaded, although Nissan recommends premium for the V-6.

Unlike coupes from competitors, either Altima engine can be ordered with either a six-speed manual transmission or a CVT automatic. Enthusiasts, rejoice.

If, however, you prefer a more environmentally and economically viable driving style to Boy Racer burnouts, the four-cylinder engine mated to the six-speed manual is a solid choice; it will give you almost hybrid-caliber fuel economy (the Altima Hybrid is rated just 1 mpg better in highway driving, although it is rated at 42 mpg in the city). Coupled with a 20-gallon tank, the Altima coupe can cruise well beyond bladder range.

And on those long trips, occupants will find the cabin amenities comfortable, if not plush. Again, the coupe uses many of the sedan's interior components. I believe this includes the front bucket seats, which seemed very sedan-like - conservative, as far as fit and bolstering were concerned.

The back seat was quite cramped, as might be expected, but far from uninhabitable. To hold four people, the coupe's front seat passengers must be considerate enough, or short enough, to move the seats a couple of clicks farther forward to create a reasonable amount of legroom for those confined to the rear.

Rear seat backs fold to expand trunk space for larger items such as golf clubs.

Oddly, though the coupe and sedan share so many things and look so similar, all the coupe's exterior body panels are different - except for the hood.

The 2.5 S base model starts at \$21,010 (including \$615 destination shipping); the 3.5 SE is about \$4,400 more, and includes features such as a moonroof and an updated audio system. Stability control, a must-have feature, is a \$600 option. A \$2,000 "technology package" adds a navigation system and a backing-up camera. The "premium package" is overkill, especially at \$3,200, for mostly fluff.

Nissan considers the Altima line's recent makeover a hit. The sedan went on sale in November, and it has already driven a sales increase of about 18 percent over the same period in 2006. The coupe is expected to add about a 10 percent bump to Altima's overall sales totals.

The coupe is meant to compete with other two-door models such as the Honda Accord, Toyota Camry Solara and Pontiac G6. From a styling standpoint, the Altima easily establishes the segment's new standard. The coupe market is not a big one, but it's an important one - as General Motors found soon after abandoning it (by discontinuing the Chevrolet Camaro and Pontiac Firebird); GM can now hardly move fast enough to get back in.

"The coupe category is still viable," Nissan spokesman John Curl said. "It just needs 'breakthrough' vehicles."

The Altima coupe would certainly qualify as one.

Jerry Garrett is a freelance motorjournalist. SPECS

Nissan Altima Coupe

Base pricing: \$21,000 to \$25,400

Base engine: 175-horsepower, 2.5-liter four-cylinder; 23 mpg city/32 mpg highway (23/31 CVT); 87 octane recommended with four-cylinder engine, premium for V-6

Curb weight: 3,055 pounds

Wheelbase/length: 105.3/182.5 inches

Competition: Honda Accord, Pontiac G6, Ford Mustang, Toyota Solara

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