

Altima Hybrid puts premium on performance

by Mark_Maynard

The Altima Hybrid is a roomy and attractive sedan sold in one well-equipped model with a base price of \$25,015, which includes conveniences such as Intelligent Key push-button starting and six air bags. The test car included the Connection Package, \$5,250, which created a comfortable environment featuring leather upholstery and other weighty things such as power, heated seats and a trunk-lid spoiler.

NISSAN ALTIMA HYBRID - The Altima Hybrid still has a government credit of up to \$2,300. CNS Photo courtesy of Nissan Motors. There are premiums involved when buying a hybrid. The Altima Hybrid costs almost \$4,700 more than a comparably equipped gasoline-engine Altima, which is rated for 34 miles per gallon on the highway. But consumers are now adding up the miles-per-gallon benefits and their driving habits to figure out the payback, said Mark Perry, Nissan's director of product planning.

But Altima Hybrid has a government credit of up to \$2,300, Perry said, which sweetens the price.

While the Altima Hybrid doesn't qualify for the high-occupancy-vehicle-lane, the payback may be in its use as a commuter vehicle. Trunk space is compromised by the battery pack, which sits behind the rear seat. Space is reduced from 15.1 cubic feet to 9.1. That's small if the family is packing up for vacation, but is of no consequence for the weekly commute, grocery shopping, etc.

Nissan buys the hybridization hardware from Toyota and adapts it to its 2.5-liter, four-cylinder engine and continuously variable automatic transmission. The 40-horsepower electric motor and nickel metal hydride batteries boost output to 198 horsepower. Nissan puts more emphasis on performance than extreme fuel economy, which makes the Altima Hybrid an enjoyable and responsive car to drive.

There's strong, battery-boosted acceleration when needed or pure battery power at speeds up to 30 mph to almost 35 mph, depending on how flat the road is.

The EPA reports fuel mileage ratings of 42 mpg city and 36 highway, but the best I could manage was 33.1. It's almost impossible to get maximum fuel economy because of hills, the inconsistent driving patterns of other drivers and gridlock.

But the benefit of a hybrid is in stop-and-go driving using the battery mode. There's no exhaust or engine heat - until the charge runs low and the engine fires up to keep me comfortable with air conditioning, radio, etc.

And all this from a car that weighs almost 300 pounds more than the gasoline Altima.

The Altima Hybrid is somewhat of an experiment for Nissan. The car is sold in eight states that have strict emissions standards: California, Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Rhode Island and Vermont.

Nissan is at work on its own hybrid system, which should be online by 2010, when more stringent government emission standards go into effect, Perry said. The hybrid system in development also is likely to use lithium-ion batteries, which weigh less and go longer on a charge than nickel metal hydride batteries.

This upcoming change in batteries may be a good reason to lease this hybrid - or any other.

In three years, the advancements in battery and engine efficiency will lead to hybrid vehicles that are lighter, cleaner and, possibly, will cost less. And the next hybrid vehicles could have plug-in electric capability and a longer driving range on battery power, Perry said.

"We're waiting for battery-technology breakthrough that says, 'Why do you need the gasoline engine at all?' " Perry said. "Hybrids are here because we haven't had the battery breakthrough for charging time and range."

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2007 Nissan Altima Hybrid

Body style: midsize, five-passenger, front-wheel-drive sedan

Drive system: front-wheel drive, gasoline-electric hybrid system

Powertrain: 2.5-liter, DOHC, 16-valve four-cylinder plus permanent magnet AC synchronous motor with electronic continuously variable transmission

Horsepower: 198 combined

EPA estimated fuel mileage: 42 mpg city, 36 highway; 87 octane recommended

Fuel tank: 20 gallons

PRICING

MSRP: \$25,015 including \$615 freight; as tested, \$30,535

Options on test car: Connection package with XM satellite radio, \$5,250, includes leather-trimmed seats and doors, heated front seats, eight-way power-adjusted driver seat with lumbar support, power tilt-sliding glass moonroof, rear spoiler, Bluetooth phone system, XM satellite radio, heated side mirrors with integrated turn signals, Homelink garage/gate opener, auto-dimming rearview mirror and compass, rear seat AC vents, automatic headlights, dual sun visors with extenders and lighted mirrors, leather-wrapped steering wheel and

gearshift knob, steering wheel mounted audio controls, key fob operated front windows up/down; floor mats, \$100; aluminum sill plates, \$170

Where assembled: Smyrna, Tenn.

Hybrid competition: Saturn Aura, Toyota Camry, Honda Accord

PLUSES: Efficient power.

MINUSES: Small trunk. Nickel metal hydride batteries, which will be upgraded to lithium-ion in two years. Lease don't buy.

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