

Grads have a smart choice in Nissan's Sentra

by Mark_Maynard

Nissan youth-anized its compact Sentra for 2007, creating an economy sedan with so much interior space the EPA considers it a midsize. The last-generation Sentra languished for years in a dowdy body style. But no more. The new model has more shapely legs if it has to go that life cycle distance again.

ATTENTION SENTRA - Sold in three trim levels, new Sentra prices start at \$16,425, with continuously variable automatic transmission. CNS Photo courtesy of Nissan. Sold in three trim levels, Sentra prices start at \$16,425, with continuously variable automatic transmission. The topline SL is \$19,025 and includes the CVT. The midlevel Sentra S I tested had a starting price of \$16,605, but "popularly equipped" ran \$18,775.

Two sporty and more powerful SE-R models are \$20,305 and \$20,805.

Sentra's exterior design of angles, arcs and creases is modern, but the body seems large for the 15-inch tires, though upgrades to 16 and 17 inches are available.

Small tires are affordable to replace, however, and this car makes a good choice for graduates and young drivers who have more stuff than common sense.

Split folding back seats expand the trunk space, which isn't bad at 13.1 cubic feet. The nifty Divide-N-Hide trunk system with hidden storage is part of the \$650 convenience package, which also includes cruise control, Bluetooth phone connectivity, leather-wrapped steering wheel, cargo net and hooks. Also part of that package - clearly devised for young drivers - is an integrated CD sleeve behind the sun visor. But as my 17-year-old, iPod-connected son said, "Gee, who still carries CDs anymore?" A lot of people, son.

Interior design is clean and uncluttered with reserved emphasis on flash - no Mazda3 influence here. Interior quality is OK with some rough plastic edges and slight alignment issues.

The test car also had a glitch in the trunk. When I loaded the cargo net with bags of groceries the trunk lid wouldn't latch no matter how gently or hard I tried closing it - until I removed the groceries from the net.

The cabin is upright, not stretched out, with comfortable ease of entry, abundant storage areas and much appreciated padded armrests on the door and center console. The glove box locks and the front cup holders can be adjusted. The back seat has no center head restraint but plenty of foot room.

Despite the tall roof line, there are space restrictions. Front-seat travel is limited for a passenger taller than 6 feet 2 inches, and it is likely that person's views out the front will be restricted by the top of the windshield frame. And the wide base where the windshield pillar joins the outside mirror is broad and can block views of pedestrians in crosswalks.

Electronic stability control - the in-demand safety feature this year - is not available, but anti-lock brakes with electronic brake force distribution are standard on all but the base model. Six air bags and tire-pressure monitoring are also standard.

Ride quality is soft and compliant, and maybe too much so for some, who can try the stiffer SE-R experience.

The 140-horsepower, 2.0-liter four-cylinder is rated 24 mpg city and 31 highway for the six-speed manual transmission. The continuously variable automatic transmission beats that with 25/33, on 87 octane. All engine versions - including the SE-Rs - rate the EPA's SmartWay title for vehicles that score 6 or better for Air Pollution and Greenhouse Gas Scores. Details at www.epa.gov/greenvehicles.

Sentra can't linger long in the limelight of its redesign. It was reborn the middle child among Nissan's two other fuel-efficient four-cylinder sedans - the slightly smaller Versa and slightly larger Altima. These cars have price separations of \$2,000 to \$4,000, but interior space is just 3 cubic feet more from Versa to Sentra or Sentra to Altima. And tougher than family competition are the more than 20 other compacts in the class, and that can mean some flexibility in pricing.

Transaction prices are running about \$400 below sticker and there are finance incentives and a \$500 college-grad rebate.

Mark Maynard is driving in cyberspace at mark.maynard@uniontrib.com SPECS: 2008 Nissan Sentra 2.0 S

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

Engine: 140-horsepower, 2.0-liter, four-cylinder

Transmission: six-speed manual or optional CVT

EPA fuel economy estimates: 24 mpg city, 31 highway (25/33 CVT); 87 octane

Cargo space: 13.1 cubic feet

Front head/leg/shoulder room: 40.6/42.4/56.9 inches

Rear head/leg/shoulder room: 37.3/34.3/55.1 inches

Length/wheelbase: 179.8/105.7 inches

Curb weight: 2,907 pounds (2,951 CVT)

FEATURES

Standard equipment: remote locking; air conditioning with micro filter; power locks-mirrors-windows; six-speaker audio system with CD and radio data system; 60/40 split folding back seat; tilt steering; six-way adjustable driver seat; locking glove box with light, door pocket storage; center console with cup holders; trip computer; steering wheel audio controls; visor mirrors; rear-center armrest with cup holders

Safety equipment: front, side and curtain air bags; tire pressure monitoring system; active head restraints; front belt pretensioners and load limiters

PRICING

Base: \$16,605, including \$625 freight charge; price as tested, \$18,775

Options on test car: XM satellite radio, \$150; convenience package, \$650, includes Bluetooth phone system, leather-wrapped steering wheel, overhead CD holder, Divide-N-Hide trunk system, cargo net and hooks, cruise control with steering-wheel controls; Rockford Fosgate audio package, \$750, adds eight-speaker, six-disc audio system with MP3 capability; fog lights, \$270; alloy wheels, \$350

The competition: Honda Civic, Mazda3 and Toyota Corolla, among 17 other models

Where assembled: Aguascalientes, Mexico

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