

Few vices in Versa: Nissan's newest compact offers some cool touches

by Mark Maynard

It's a buyer's market for consumers looking to simplify their fuel budget with an economy car. This B-segment of compacts and subcompacts has been bumped up this model year with such entries as the Toyota Yaris, Honda Fit, Dodge Caliber, a new Hyundai Accent and now the Nissan Versa.

Most of these little cars are overachievers in their conveniences, attention to detail and do-all cargo capacity. And Versa is among them.

NISSAN VERSA - The Nissan Versa, both hatchback and sedan, has a \$13,055 starting price, and comes with power mirrors, 60/40 folding back seats, air conditioning, four-speaker audio system, intermittent wipers, side impact air bags and head curtain air bags. CNS Photo courtesy of Nissan. Named for the obvious "versatile," it is rolling into dealerships as five-door hatchback before the sedan arrives in November.

Both body styles will be sold in S and SL trim levels, with a 122-horsepower, 1.8-liter four-cylinder engine and standard six-speed manual transmission on the S or with an optional four-speed automatic. The SL has the option of continuously variable transmission, or CVT.

Both hatchback and sedan will have the same starting price, \$13,055 for the S, which comes with power mirrors, 60/40 folding back seats, air conditioning, four-speaker audio system, intermittent wipers, side impact air bags and head curtain air bags. Active head restraints and a tire pressure monitoring system are also part of the safety package. ABS is a \$250 option, but it must be ordered with the Sport package (\$700), which adds power windows and locks, remote keyless entry and a glove-compartment light.

The SL starts at \$15,165 and can cost as much as \$20,000 with every option.

Versa has a couple of significant differences from the competition. It is a luxury vehicle in Japan, so Nissan was able to give the SL model upscale features, such as the Intelligent Key (keyless starting), Bluetooth, a six-disc CD audio system and soft-touch surfaces inside. It is also larger than Fit and Yaris, and with the tall roof line, it has the spaciousness of a midsize.

It is still nimble to drive, but the long wheelbase gives it large-car smoothness on the road. And as a distance commuter, the CVT stretches fuel economy to 30 mpg around town and 36 on the highway, which is better than the manual or four-speed automatic, but not as good as Fit or Yaris.

The interior is well-done, with quality materials and fabrics, including sun visors with covered and lighted mirrors. The cabin is sound-isolated from harshness transmitted through the suspension and tires. It is well-soundproofed to quiet the environment for a fine-tuned audio experience. And, of course, there is a port to plug-and-play MP3 music.

The SL test car's black trim, dash top, steering wheel and seats were somewhat monotonous, and with the expansive glass, the air conditioner gets a workout on hot days. Gray is the only other choice.

Back seat legroom is exceptional and the seat bottom supportive, with a low exhaust tunnel for more foot room. A fold-down center armrest has cup holders, and there are door slots for storage but no seatback pockets. The rear cargo area integrates a deep well that corrals plastic grocery bags.

Nissan carried the soft-touch treatment to the armrests. It's a small thing - and one area where most automakers save a few pennies - but Versa's softly padded armrests set the mood to settle back and cruise.

Versa may be the best cruiser of these new Bs. The CVT has an unrecognized benefit for those living in hilly terrains: There is no seeking of the transmission on hills as it works to keep pace with the throttle position. Set the cruise control or hold the pedal steady and the CVT seamlessly adjusts to hold the set speed. It works the same way on downhills, without throttle or braking to control momentum. That's a good thing because fewer shifts cut down on exhaust emissions, and consistency in engine speed always helps fuel economy.

Put the pedal down and Nissan's CVT gives sharp acceleration, which is somewhat of a surprise from a 122-horsepower four-cylinder pulling a 2,779-pound five-door. The power rolls smoothly up to highway speeds and can be sharpened for the sluggish home commute by switching off the overdrive, which is similar to putting it into a lower gear. Some CVTs, such as that in the Dodge Caliber, don't have the snap that Versa does, but Versa doesn't offer the steering wheel shift paddles that Caliber does.

But Versa mechanicals are well-refined for balance and ease of handling, from the electric steering to throttle and brake response. And the brakes - front discs and rear drums - have the poise and power of a four-wheel disc setup.

It is a competent driver, but not a sport hatch. The tires will squawk when pushed in hard cornering, but there is no loss of composure or sloppy handling. The tall shape is ideal for "versatility," but that doesn't always work for hot-foot driving.

It's also a better people mover than a cargo mule. The rear seatbacks fold, but don't fold and tumble to further expand cargo space with a flat floor. You won't be stretching out for a nap back there, and it would take effort to stow a bike. The Honda Fit is more, well, versatile for this.

Base models come with 15-inch steel wheels and wheel covers; the SL has attractive alloy wheels. Aftermarket accessories will be offered through NISMO, such as different wheels, shifter knob, floor mats, etc. And a Sport package (\$700), which is not available at the start of production, will add a rear roof spoiler, side sill spoilers, front and rear chin spoilers and fog lights.

A handy feature of the Convenience package (\$700) is the Intelligent Key or keyless starting - something typically offered only on luxury cars. Just keep the key fob in your pocket and the transmitter takes care of unlocking doors when you press the handle. Climb inside, twist the ignition to start and go.

Nissan should take it a step further and move the starter from the steering column to a trendy, red button on the instrument panel or on the gearshift knob, as does Mercedes-Benz. Versa isn't exactly drab, but why not emphasize the cool factor?

Copley News Service SPECS2007 Nissan Versa SL
Body style: compact 5-passenger hatchback; front engine, front-wheel drive
Engine: 1.8-liter DOHC inline 4-cylinder
Horsepower: 122 at 5,200 rpm
Torque: 127 at 4,800 rpm
Transmission: 6-speed manual; optional 4-speed automatic or continuously variable
EPA fuel economy estimates: CVT, 30 mpg city, 36 highway; six-speed manual, 30/34; four-speed auto, 28/35
Fuel capacity: 13.2 gallons; 87 octane

DIMENSIONS
Cargo space: 17.8 cubic feet
Front head/leg/shoulder room: 40.6/41.4/53.5 inches
Rear head/leg/shoulder room: 38.3/38/53.5 inches
Length/wheelbase: 169.1/102.4 inches
Curb weight: 2,779 pounds

FEATURES
Standard SL equipment includes: remote keyless entry, air conditioning with micro filter, 6-speaker 6-disc CD audio system with MP3 adapter, power locks-windows-mirrors, overhead console, map lights, cruise control, tilt steering column, rear window defroster, rear center armrest with cup holders.
Safety equipment includes: dual-stage front air bags, front side-impact air bags, roof-mounted curtain air bags, driver's seat height adjuster, tire pressure monitor system, and front seat active head restraints.

CHASSIS
Brakes: power-assisted front vented discs, rear drum; optional ABS with Electronic Brake Force Distribution and Brake Assist
Steering: electric power assisted; turning circle, 34.2 feet
Suspension: independent front strut with coil springs, stabilizer bar; rear, torsion beam with stabilizer bar
Tires and wheels: Continental P185/65R 15-inch on alloy wheels (steel wheels and wheel covers on S model)

PRICING
Base: \$15,165 for manual transmission with \$605 freight charge; \$16,165 with CVT and freight; price as tested, \$18,055
Options on test car: Convenience package, \$700, adds Intelligent Key entry system, Bluetooth, steering wheel audio and cruise-control switches and leather-wrapped steering wheel; audio package, \$300; ABS, \$250; sunroof package, \$600, includes lighted vanity mirrors; floor mats, \$150
The competition: Honda Fit, Toyota Yaris, Scion xB, Dodge Caliber, Chevy Aveo and HHR, Ford Focus
Where assembled: Aguascalientes, Mexico

PLUSES: Nissan refinement and drivability in a small package that drives with the presence of a large car.
MINUSES: Black interior and expansive glass keeps the A.C. working on hot days. No fold-flat cargo area.

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