

Two for the Road

The Altima Cousins

By Roger Witherspoon

The weak winter sunlight glistened off of the jagged, two-foot-high mounds of ice which 50 mile per hour gusts of wind had polished to high, slippery, sheen. The Altima Hybrid was left on the lawn overnight, leaving the street clear for the city's snow plows – which had dutifully piled a street-full ice in front of the house.

I pushed the ignition button and the dashboard lit up. You never have to worry about an engine struggling to ignite in freezing temperatures because the battery pack running the hybrid is always ready. Just turn it on, look at the lights, listen to the silence, and go.

In this case, the seats were very cold, so I turned on the heater, pushed the button to warm the seats, and left the car. The electronic key remained in my pocket, and by touching the button on the door latch, the car was locked. Ten minutes later, I returned to a warm car, shifted the silent machine into drive, and let the front wheel drive Altima roll forward over the ice mounds, into the street, and took off for a trip through icy New England.

At times during the jagged journey, not all wheels were touching the same ground, with one side of the car on pavement and the other set of wheels on ice. But the condition of the terrain is never a problem in an Altima – hybrid or gas powered – since there is a dedicated computer system which runs its traction and stability control network. Sensors in the wheels and axels report the turning rate of each wheel in microsecond increments, and the computer selectively applies brakes or power to individual wheels to keep the car travelling smoothly. It is a system which lets the car do the hard work, while the driver relaxes and enjoys the beauty of a fresh winter snow day through the hills and dales along the Hudson River Valley.

With the Altima, Nissan has long had a standout among mid sized sedans. The regular Altima, a four-door, mid sized family sedan, has a 270-horsepower V-6 engine which is both powerful and reliable enough to run all day long with the best of the sport sedans. It comes with an automatic transmission, but for sport fans, there is an electronic manual mode which is instantly responsive.

The Altima is a car built for all sizes. The tilt and telescoping steering wheel and the power adjustable seats means any driver between five feet and seven feet tall will fit easily in the padded, leather command chair. There is enough leg and head room in the back seat for three average adults or a pair of NBA forwards. In addition, the rear seats fold down to enlarge a trunk which is already big enough for a couple of Tony Soprano's enemies.

In terms of design, the interior is comfortable, though not outstanding, but it does feature a host of amenities. There is an easy to use Bluetooth communications system, and the entertainment center features AM/FM and XM satellite radio, as well as a six disc CD and MP3 player. And whether you are crooning to country music or bouncing to R&B the sounds emanate from nine Bose speakers which can easily lull you to sleep or deafen you, depending on your musical pleasure. There is also a navigation system which

includes XM's satellite traffic control service which can spot highway bottlenecks and steer you around them.

The enjoyment one gets from an Altima Hybrid, on the other hand, depends on the choices one is willing to pay for. There is a premium for the melded gasoline and battery motor system which comes to about \$4,500. Toyota promotes its hybrids as engine enhancement systems so motorists expect to pay more. Nissan takes the more common approach among auto makers by trying to keep the price down by offering less. In this case, the fully loaded regular Altima cost about \$32,000, while the tested Altima Hybrid was just a bit more than \$30,000. But the differences are not minor.

Under the hood, the Hybrid has a small, 2.5-liter, four cylinder engine providing just 158 horsepower – which is relatively puny for a family sedan. The electric motor provides only about 40 horsepower, but pushes 199 pound feet of torque directly to the drive wheels. As a result, there is a noticeable boost in power as you accelerate and have the benefit of both power plants.

But unlike the Toyota hybrid line, Nissan's is a partial hybrid which is not designed to drive the car by itself. You can start the car with the electric motor, but after about five miles per hour the gasoline engine takes over. Savings come from a system which shuts off the gasoline engine whenever you stop – as you do in city rush hour traffic – or when you take your foot off the accelerator. As a result, there is no wasted gasoline when the car is idling or coasting.

In practice, that means the Hybrid has an EPA rating of 35 miles per gallon in city driving, and the standard Altima gets just 19 miles per gallon. EPA ratings are inflated, but the 16 mile per gallon difference is what you pay \$4,500 for. According to the EPA, the average motorist drives 15,000 miles per year. At that rate, the owner of a regular Altima would pay for 789 gallons of gasoline annually, while the hybrid city dweller would buy 428 gallons. That is an annual savings of 361 gallons – or about a gallon per day. At \$3 per gallon, the hybrid system would theoretically save the owner about \$1,000 annually – which means it would take nearly five years before the hybrid premium was paid for and the hybrid system began saving the owner any money.

To cut down on the impact of the cost of the hybrid system, the test car had the smaller engine and lacked amenities such as the satellite based navigation system. In addition, there was a loss of trunk space and the rear seats did not fold down because that area was reserved for the hybrid's battery pack.

In either case, whether you are riding sedately through the snow, or racing in triple digits across the western plains, the Altima provides a comfortable way to travel.

2008 Nissan Altima Hybrid

MSRP:		\$30,205
EPA Mileage:	35 MPG City	33 MPG Highway

Performance/ Safety:

2.5-Liter aluminum 4-cylinder engine producing 158 horsepower and 162 pound-feet of torque; front wheel drive; permanent magnet synchronous electric motor, producing 40

horsepower and 199 pound-feet of torque; sealed nickel metal hydride, 244-volt battery; automatic, continuously variable transmission; vented front disc brakes; solid disc rear brakes; antilock braking system; independent front and rear suspension; vehicle dynamic control; traction control system; power rack & pinion steering; 16-inch aluminum alloy wheels; halogen headlights; driver & front passenger side impact air bags; roof mounted curtain side impact air bags.

Interior/ Comfort:

AM/FM XM satellite radio; 6-disc in-dash CD and MP3 player; Bose sound system w. 9 speakers; Bluetooth cell phone connection; leather wrapped tilt & telescope steering wheel with fingertip audio controls; remote key with push button ignition; driver & front passenger power adjustable and heated seats.

2008 Nissan Altima

MSRP:		\$32,615
EPA Mileage:	19 MPG City	26 MPG Highway

Performance/ Safety:

3.5-Liter aluminum V-6 engine producing 270 horsepower and 258 pound-feet of torque; front wheel drive; continuously variable transmission; vented disc front brakes; solid disc rear brakes; antilock braking system independent front and rear suspension; vehicle dynamic control; traction control system; power rack & pinion steering; Xenon high intensity headlights and fog lights; driver & front passenger side impact air bags; roof mounted curtain side impact air bags; 17-inch aluminum alloy wheels.

Interior/ Comfort:

AM/FM XM satellite radio; 6-disc in-dash CD and MP3 player; Bose sound system w. 9 speakers; Bluetooth cell phone connection; power sunroof; navigation system with XM satellite traffic control; backup camera; power adjusted driver seats w/ lumbar support; leather seats and leather wrapped, tilt & telescoping steering wheel w/ fingertip audio controls; heated front seats; fold-flat rear seats w/ 60/40 split.