

Rambling Rogue

By Roger Witherspoon

The sky was dark grey, the rain was steady and hard and the potholes in the roadway were like land mines planted at scattered intervals waiting to blow out the unexpected tire or bend the errant axle.

There was little traffic, which was a good thing because the road conditions did not give one a lot of time to spot the potholes, and some were difficult to avoid without swerving outside the designated driving lane. For many cars, SUVs or trucks, this would be the kind of road to either avoid entirely or drive at 20 miles per hour with the flashers on.

But this wasn't just any vehicle. I was rambling through the countryside in a Rogue, the smaller version of Nissan's popular Murano SUV which was intended to offer some of the amenities of an SUV and some of the fun of a roving Jeep Wrangler while coming closest to providing the feel of a sedan. And while the Rogue is not going to chase a Jeep off road, it is designed for moderate rough riding – like swerving and maneuvering around a slalom course composed of potholes. Which made the trip over the pothole-riddled, New York roadway interesting instead of nerve wracking since the combination of traction control and balance makes the Rogue maneuverable and sure on virtually any surface.

The Rogue, which Nissan bills as a “whole new crossover,” is stylish, compact, efficient, comfortable crossover which could provide some competition for the revamped Toyota Rav 4 and lure a younger set of buyers into Nissan showrooms. In styling, it is similar to its popular big brother, the Murano. Both feature a broad, rounded front – though the Rogue's grill is far less aggressive than the Murano's – and a looping, curving profile accentuated by exaggerated wheel wells which, in this case, feature 17-inch aluminum alloy wheels. But, like a good little brother, the Rogue is shorter and smaller than the Murano, and its price tag, around \$26,000, is a good \$10,000 less.

It also has a smaller engine. The Rogue sports only a four-cylinder, 170-horsepower engine. But on a vehicle this small, that is more than enough to rev it up to triple digits if you've a mind to. While the pickup in automatic mode is adequate, shifting into manual mode and using the paddle shifts on the steering wheel to boost the torque makes the Rogue much more responsive and quick, acting more like an Audi 4 than a typical, small SUV.

Inside, the Rogue offers a lot for a car on the starter end of a performance line, particularly in its electronics. The steering wheel, which tilts but does not telescope, features fingertip controls for the phone, audio system and cruise control – as well as housing the paddle shifts. But Bluetooth system is easy to pair with any cell phone. There is no navigation system, which is not uncommon for a vehicle costing under \$30,000.

But Nissan did not cut corners with the entertainment system. There is AM/FM and XM satellite radio, as well as an in-dash, six-disc, CD and MP3 player producing sounds over a Bose surround-sound system featuring seven speakers and a sub woofer capable of lulling you to sleep to soft 'Trane or waking up the neighborhood with Usher.

The seats are cloth rather than leather – which is typical in cars in this price range – and the front pair are manually adjusted. But the seats are wide, well padded, and comfortable, and there is enough leg and head room in the rear for a passenger pushing

six and a half feet to ride cross country comfortably. In addition, the rear and front passenger seats fold flat to enlarge the storage area, which has a set of sunken bins designed to hold packages such as groceries or potted plants upright, even when swerving around potholes.

Nissan's ads may exaggerate a bit when billing the Rogue as a whole new breed of SUV. But in the category of crossovers packing a lot of performance and goodies into a small package, the Rogue may race to the front of pack.

2008 Nissan Rogue SL

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| MSRP: | | \$25,725 |
| EPA Mileage: | 21 MPG City | 26 MPG Highway |
| As Tested Mileage: | | 19 MPG Mixed |
| Towing Capacity: | | 1,500 Pounds |

Performance/ Safety:

2.5-Liter, 4-cylinder aluminum DOHC engine producing 170 horsepower and 175 pound/feet of torque; continuously variable transmission; all wheel drive; automatic with electronic manual mode using gear or paddle shift; 4-wheel disc brakes; anti-lock brakes; independent front and rear suspensions; xenon headlights and halogen fog lamps; traction control; dual-stage front airbags; front seat-mounted, side impact airbags; roof mounted curtain airbags for front and rear with rollover detection; 17-inch alloy wheels.

Interior/ Comfort:

AM/FM/ XM satellite radio; Bose premium audio system with 7 speakers; 6-disc, in-dash CD and MP3 player; roof rails; power moon roof; cloth, manually operated front seats; fold flat rear and front passenger seats; steering wheel mounted audio, telephone, and cruise controls; Bluetooth connection; tilt steering wheel; foldable cargo organizer.