

Compact Package of Gadgets and Versatility

By Roger Witherspoon

The night was clear, cold and custom made for Bambi and her numerous cousins who flocked to the winding highway through the Hudson Highlands just south of West Point to see if the dead grass was really greener and sweeter on the other side of the road.

The Bambi bimbos of New York are not that bright – they crash into one in every 186 cars each year in their sudden mad dashes across highways and byways. But they are always hungry, and I kept a wary lookout for any sudden movements among the white tailed menaces. Which was a good thing.

I rounded a curve in a hill near Bear Mountain when a deer which had been munching nonchalantly suddenly bolted onto the highway. Compact cars are not known for extreme versatility – \$17,000 vehicles with small engines usually do not come with traction control, all wheel drive, and the other expensive electronic stability programs which take the stress out of sudden, sharp maneuvers. The 2008 Nissan Versa with its little 122-horsepower engine was no exception to the compact rule. But it was built by Nissan's engineers with their tradition of crafting cars that go anywhere under any conditions – with or without computerized assistance – and dodging deer is part of the Versa design.

I jerked the steering wheel to the right to cut behind the darting deer, and though there were patches of frost on the road, followed by loose gravel on the shoulder, the Versa had no trouble responding crisply over the changing surfaces, sliding close enough past the bobbing white tail that it was almost within reach. Coltrane, who had been blowing "*A Love Supreme*" serenely from the six-disc, in-dash CD player, never missed a beat.

The Versa is a low end introduction to the Nissan line, particularly its popular Murano mid-sized crossover SUV, which offers a lot in a little package. Its four cylinder engine packs a surprising amount of power in the relatively light-weight car, enabling it to accelerate and handle as if the power plant were made by Audi or some other high performer. And while it lacks traction control, the car's low center of gravity, independent suspension and engineered balance allow it to hold the road in good weather, rain, or snow.

The four-door Versa is a small car, about the length and price of a Honda Fit or Civic Hatchback, or the Toyota Yaris, though it is designed along the lines of a car with a trunk. It is a four door model, with ample room in the back for average sized adults – six-footers need to sit up front or walk. In addition, the rear seats fold down to enlarge a surprisingly ample trunk area.

But Nissan is hoping to draw young and first time buyers away from the other brands by loading the Versa with the gadgets usually found in higher priced sets of wheels. For starters, the electronic key remains in the driver's pocket or purse. You can start the car as long as it is physically inside the vehicle when you turn the ignition switch. You can lock or unlock the door by touching a button on the door handle, as long as the key is within about five feet of the vehicle.

For entertainment, the Versa has the standard AM/FM radio, the CD player with a six-speaker audio system, and an auxiliary input for an MP3 player or iPod. Versa does offer XM satellite radio as an option, rather than including it with the standard system, on the assumption that price conscious buyers would rather take their iPod and play 1,000 or so of their own favorites than spend the monthly subscription fee for satellite service. In addition, the Versa has a Bluetooth communications system which is easy to pair with virtually any cell phone.

Like most compacts, the Versa is promoted as having great gas mileage, with EPA ratings of 27 miles per gallon in city driving, and up to 33 miles per gallon on the highway. EPA ratings are notoriously inflated. The test car drank gas at a 23 mile per gallon rate, which is respectable and on a par with some larger hybrid vehicles.

Versa is a new entry into the compact car segment. But it offers enough amenities and performance to give the established leaders a tough run for their money.

2008 Nissan Versa SL

MSRP:		\$17,285
EPA Mileage:	27 MPG City	33 MPG Highway
As Tested Mileage		23 MPG Mixed

Performance/ Safety:

1.8-Liter DOHC 4-cylinder engine producing 122 horsepower and 127 pound-feet of torque; 6-speed continuously variable transmission; independent strut front suspension; torsion beam rear suspension; Front wheel drive; front and rear stabilizer bars; power assisted front disc and rear drum brakes; anti-lock brakes; 15-inch alloy wheels; halogen headlights; driver & front passenger, seat mounted, side impact supplemental air bags; roof mounted curtain side impact air bags; child safety rear door locks.

Interior / Comfort:

AM/FM radio; 6-disc, in-dash CD MP3 player; Bluetooth phone system; keyless entry and ignition; leather-wrapped steering wheel; tilt steering wheel with fingertip cruise and audio controls; manually adjusted driver's seat; 60/40 fold down rear seats;