

Shifting Gears

The Square Roots of Cute

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By Roger Witherspoon

The young man was just trying to be helpful.

He paused as he walked through the parking lot, pointed at the rear of the red box on wheels and said “Hey Mister. Someone has dented the back of your new car.”

Well, no. It just looks that way. On purpose. Really.

This is the Nissan Cube, a quirky, rolling box with nooks and crannies and personality touches that are intended to make it a lively counterpoint to the iconic rolling rectangles called the Honda Element and Toyota Scion. So the Cube is more box than rectangle. And not to be typecast, its sides undulate in odd places, there are suggested lines and angles and curves here and there and, as an option, one can even have a jaunty but perfectly useless spoiler to float at the end of the high hat of a roof.

And then there is that shag carpet.

No, the carpeting doesn't go wall to wall across the floor where it would be impossible to keep clean. There is just a round dinner plate of high, tufted, two-tone shag, about a foot in diameter, stuck with Velcro in the middle of the flat dashboard. It more or less serves the function of the flower holder in the VW Beetle – a little personal touch to remember the Cube by. In this case, instead of holding a floral display, the rug is a convenient to toss your keys because they won't roll or slide across the dash and onto the floor. It's not as sentimental as the vase but, then, this isn't the '60s era of flower power.



As a \$20,000, compact SUV, Nissan has packed a lot into its rolling box. The quirky-faced Cube with the smiley face is an eye catcher with a simple, 1.8-liter, four-cylinder engine chugging under its hood and cranking out just 122 horsepower. But that's more than enough to propel this light weight vehicle towards triple digits and a serious speeding ticket. The Cube even has traction and stability controls so it is nimble and stable at the higher speeds. And the little engine only drinks about 30 miles per gallon.

On a functional level, the decision to make this a high hat vehicle means there is more than enough room for a quartet of seven-footers – and they do not have to be contortionists for Cirque du Soleil. The seats are cloth and manually adjusted, but they are wide, thick and comfortable. The rear seats fold over, but do not form a flat line with the cargo area. It is, therefore, better at transporting tall or stackable items than large wide ones.

The interior décor is both quirky and functional. In addition to the shag on the dashboard, there are ambient lights in the trio of cup holders in the center console and multi-colored elastic bands on the doors and under the dash. Theoretically, these bands can be used to hold gloves or something else light. But they are mainly for show and, along with the shag, prompt the occasional smile. For convenience, there is also a cup holder to the left of the steering wheel and a handy shelf over the glove compartment.



Nissan equipped the Cube with an array of electronic gadgets. The Bluetooth is quick and easy to set up, with the sound coming out of the six speakers and the Rockford Fosgate subwoofer. For entertainment, there is AM/FM and XM satellite radio and a single disc CD player. It also has an iPod and USB port so you can bring 1,000 or so of your own favorite tunes. These are all accessible via fingertip controls on the three-spoke, leather wrapped steering wheel. Oddly, the Cube's entertainment and information center has a small, three-inch, sepia-toned screen for normal use. It shifts to full color clarity when the backup cameras are activated. In Nissan's continuing play with Cubic color schemes, the three instrument gauges behind the steering wheel are red, white, and blue, with the colors flowing from one curved gauge to another.

It's hard to use the word "cute" with regards to a box with wheels. But that term inescapably fits the Cube, which seems partly engineered to provide basic, comfortable transportation, and mostly designed to produce smiles as the miles roll by.



2010 Nissan Cube

MSRP: **\$20,170**

EPA Mileage: **27 MPG City** **31 MPG Highway**

Performance / Safety:

1.8-Liter DOHC, 4-cylinder engine producing 122 horsepower and 127 pound/feet of torque; front wheel drive; traction & stability controls; independent strut front suspension; torsion beam rear suspension; 16-inch 8-spoke wheels; power assisted, vented disc brakes; 4-wheel anti-lock brake system; backup camera with 4-inch color display; seat-mounted, driver & front passenger side impact airbags; roof mounted curtain airbags.

Interior / Comfort:

AM/FM/ XM Satellite radio; Rockford Fosgate sound system with 6 speakers and sub woofer; Bluetooth; CD and MP3 player; USB and iPod port; leather wrapped steering wheel with fingertip cruise command, Bluetooth and audio controls; manually adjusted front seats; fold flat rear seats.