

Maximum Altitude and High Altitude

APPROACHING INFINITI, AT SUBORBITAL PRICES

The Nissan Maxima full-size sedan looming on our test vehicle calendar hadn't captured our imagination the way, say, an Aston Martin might. But we soon learned what a great car this is. That, in turn, ensured higher anticipation when the Nissan Altima was scheduled a few weeks later: imagine the Maxima in an even more affordable package. In fact, imagine the offerings of an Infiniti in an even more affordable package, and you're on your way to appreciating both these Nissans.

Platform derivation and sharing sounds seductively simple—body swaps, badge engineering—but it seldom is. We expected to find the Maxima sharing with the Infiniti M and the Altima with the G. There is plenty of cross-pollination among all of them, but the Maxima and Altima, and the Infiniti M and G, share more with each other than across marques. This makes sense, given one factor that distinguishes the Nissans from the Infinitis: the Infinitis are rear-wheel- (or all-wheel-) drive, while the Nissans are front-wheel-drive. The other biggest difference is Nissan's use of CVTs.

We think we see more new Infinitis on the road in our area and more Maximas that are a few years old. Bad comparison. The new Nissans have progressed to where an aspiring Infiniti shopper with a lower budget would be remiss not to try these, too.

The Nissans are well equipped, have high fit and finish, horsepower that cost at least twice as much in high-end Europeans 10-15 years ago, and—espe-

cially in the case of the Maxima—a new level of high style. We're especially impressed with the dramatic "Liquid Motion" curves of the Maxima's hood, a far stronger application of shapes than a number of brands that apply so many effects to side panels that they start to look like shower curtains. This is one elegant beast. And once you have an appreciation of the more obvious Maxima styling, you realize how well executed the Altima body is, as well.

2011 NISSAN MAXIMA

The Nissan Maxima is billed as a Four-Door Sports Car (4DSC), a bit of a stretch, but not entirely inappropriate. This is a driver's car, if you want it to be (or just a very capable sedan if you don't). Does it compare with the German performance sedans? It's a rare vehicle that can be all things to all people. But drive it and decide. We were impressed.

Choosing your Maxima is a relatively easy process. There are two models (plus two packages on the higher SV model, including the SV Premium Package version we drove). Differences among the four are straightforward feature upgrades—25 pounds and \$2720 worth between the S and SV.

The base Maxima 3.5 S has a 290-hp V6, 18" aluminum-alloy wheels, power moonroof, smart key and push button start, multiple audio inputs and Bluetooth®, dual zone climate control, power front seats, piano-dot trim and Vehicle Dynamic Control (VDC) with Traction Control System (TCS), starting

barely out of the 20s, at \$30,810. The 3.5 SV is the same basic car but with fog lights, side mirror turn signal indicators, a 9-speaker Bose® digital audio system, XM® satellite radio, HomeLink® transceiver, leather-appointed seats with driver's thigh support extension and power lumbar support, even a digital compass in the rearview mirror, all of which bumps the price to \$33,530, a differential that the audio system alone more than justifies.

There are two available packages for the SV.

The Sport Package adds tuned suspension, 19" wheels with wider tires, rear spoiler, paddle shifters, HID xenon headlights, dark chrome grille, smoked headlights and interior metallic-link trim, all of which adds just about two grand, at \$35,610.

The Premium Package (as on our test vehicle) brings a dual-panel moonroof with power retractable sunshades, rear-window power sunshade, premium mood lighting, color display with rear monitor, a 2GB Music Box® (800 MB for music storage), USB connectivity and—echoing Infiniti—eucalyptus wood-tone trim, all at \$36,760. The Maxima, even maximally equipped, still comes in at 22 percent lower cost than an Infiniti G with nothing added. Or a base Maxima S comes in just under the base Infiniti G, but with significantly more power and presence.

OUR WEEK WITH THE MAXIMA

The Nissan Maxima has a 3.5-liter 290-hp V6, but it growls like a powerful V8.

It also has a CVT (continuously variable transmission). It's not completely seamless, with slight stages electronically set for mental comfort. Yet it's very smooth. We notice at some speeds, we feel a shift point but the RPMs don't change, and vice versa. We experiment with the paddles. We're in



DRIVE	LENGTH (IN)	INT. VOL. (CU FT)	WEIGHT (LB)	ENGINE	HP	BASE PRICE	
INFINITI M : 7-speed automatic w/ manual mode							
M37	RWD	194.7	103.6	3858	3.7L V6	330	\$47,050
	AWD	"	"	4063	"	"	\$49,200
M56	RWD	"	"	4028	5.6L V8	420	\$58,450
	AWD	"	"	4224	"	"	\$60,950
NISSAN MAXIMA : CVT w/ manual mode and DS mode							
3.5 S	FWD	190.6	95.8	3540	3.5L V6	290	\$30,810
3.5 SV	"	"	"	3565	"	"	\$33,530
INFINITI G : 7-speed automatic w/ DS mode							
G25	RWD	187.9	96.5-99.0	3534-3552	2.5L V6	218	\$31,400
	AWD	"	"	3746	"	"	\$34,400
G37	RWD	"	"	3618-3701	3.7L V6	328	\$35,400
	AWD	"	"	3812	"	"	\$37,000
NISSAN ALTIMA : CVT							
2.5	FWD	190.7	100.7	3180	2.5L I4	175	\$19,910
2.5 S	"	"	"	3192	"	"	\$22,070
3.5 SR	"	"	"	3357	3.5L V6	270	\$24,750

4th, going 60mph, just under 4000rpm. We shift up, the sound changes, it drops to 3000, shift again it drops to 2000. We slow from 60 to 40, but are still in 6th. When you come to a stop, it goes back to 1st, but meanwhile you're lugging along at 1500rpm. Economical, but low on engine braking. Ultimately, we enjoy this CVT. We use it most for the first four gears or so, then knock it over into D and forget about it.

The brakes are strong and quick. At lower speeds, the big Nissan gave us a slight feeling of yaw, but minimal for a front-driver. Aside from any absolute preference for rear- or all-wheel drive, we found that any front-wheel-drive torquiness in the Maxima is largely eliminated.

Audio is well above average. We noted that its nine speakers put out such clarity and strength, it seemed like a 12-channel system.

The backup camera has a delay we wish it didn't, making it too easy to ignore. And the door locks' details needed some mastering.

The Maxima feels large, but as you can see from lengths and volumes in our chart, it has an efficient size. Maneuverability and nimbleness in traffic are outstanding. In our logbook, we noted it reminded us of an Audi A8, without as much bulk and certainly at a third of the cost. Is it a "Four-Door Sports Car"? This is basically a positioning statement against dowdier sedans. But it's potent and fun.

We kept coming back to the Infiniti (or other luxury brand) comparison. What the Nissan Maxima delivers for \$30-35 grand is unbelievable. We actually found joy in the relative simplicity of the controls and electronics of the plainer-jane Nissan. Our Crimson Black test car was a visual knockout. Check it out. You'll find the Nissan Maxima delivers an extremely high-end experience at a very reasonable price. ■

2011 NISSAN ALTIMA

We received the Nissan Altima at night, noting it didn't seem as sexy as the Maxima outside, although the hood has an elegant compound shape. Keyless entry and pushbutton start. Inside it was very nice. As with the Maxima, controls and instruments were refreshingly straightforward: one-touch lights, separate climate controls, intuitive pushbuttons, a small and useful screen, three vents in the center and vents on the sides, three main instrument dials (tach, speedo, fuel/temp and a couple of digital readouts). Steering wheel controls on the right are cruise control, on the left audio and phone. Off we go.

The Bose system is light on channel separation but very good. Separate HVAC couldn't be easier: dual on or off, and numbers in the center of both knobs display temps. The glove box is huge and uncluttered. The trunk is sizable, but audio components seem vulnerable in its upper reaches. For iPod connectivity, bring your own cable and plug into USB way in the bottom of the center console, a weak detail. Another ergonomic point: even with the arms of someone over 6 feet tall, reaching for the fully-open door grab to close the door is an extreme stretch.

An MPG digital bar readout below the speedo ranges 20-40-60—optimistic and spurting up to 60 every time we let off the gas. (Note: there is also an Altima Hybrid, which we've had twice as a rental elsewhere, very transparent to operate and very economical.) The Altima is front-wheel-drive, but we feel no torque steering at all. As with the Maxima, we find the CVT delivers perfectly normal performance, and if you need to downshift, slide it over and do so.

If this is what Nissan can do in an inexpensive car with CVT and FWD, we're impressed. Check the prices in our chart to the left. We don't know about your ego, but it's all the car your id will ever need. The Altima has more than adequate power, more than adequate performance, all the capability you need to get the job done ... a perfectly good daily driver... well beyond that, in fact. ■



JOE SAGE