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**VEHICLE TEST : 2007 NISSAN VERSA****Well versed and well packaged**

By Barbara and Bill Schaffer

From the minute we pulled away from the curb in the Nissan Versa, it obvious that this was not another typical small car. Moving through traffic down the city streets en route to the freeway, the Versa was unusually quiet and smooth, feeling more like a large sedan than a \$14,000 hatchback. We easily accelerated onto the freeway.

From the outside, the four-door hatchback looks small and European with low sculptured front end, steeply raked windshield and triangular-shaped C-pillar. The large windows and high ceiling give the cabin an airy feeling.

Inside, the large cloth-covered bucket seats reminded me of comfortable Volvo seats. The cabin is narrow, but with the front seats mounted nearly against the doors and the seat controls moved between the seats, it seemed spacious. Both front doors had wide storage areas with a place for drinks. The dash is simple with a typical instrument pod displaying a speedometer, tachometer and fuel gauge. Climate and audio controls are conveniently grouped just to the right of the steering wheel.

We sampled the rear seat with its class-leading legroom before we started, and found it to be roomy and comfortable for two adults with room enough to squeeze in an occasional third passenger. The total

interior room is about the same as the spacious Toyota Matrix. At 16.9 cubic foot the cargo area can hold four or five medium-size bags and can be expanded progressively when the split-back rear seat is folded.

The spacious cargo area is made possible by the compact rear independent suspension, which supports the rear of the company's B-platform. The front wheels are driven by a compact new aluminum four-cylinder engine developing 122 horsepower and 127 lb.ft. of torque. Currently the Versa is available with three transmission choices: a six-speed manual, four-speed automatic and Xtronic CVT (Continuously Variable Transmission). Later in the model year when CVT capacity is increased the automatic will be dropped. As the name implies the CVT uses a metal belts on variable pulleys to continuously change the drive ratios to optimize fuel economy and performance levels.

The Versa is available in the basic S model, which is priced near \$12,000 and the SL, which goes as high as \$15,000 or \$16,000, when purchased with all the options. The hatchback went on sale in July, and a sedan version should be out as you read this issue. The car has been sold in a luxury trim in Japan as the Tiida, and also has been sold in China. ■

