

BORN UNCONVENTIONAL

THIS CONFIDENT INDIVIDUALIST ALWAYS MAKES A STATEMENT BY JOE SAGE

The entire greater vehicular realm has been downsizing during the Nissan Juke's time on the planet—which dates back to its 2010 introduction as a 2011 model. Thus the Juke doesn't feel quite as small today as it did at that time. This point is driven home as we pull up to a traffic light in north Scottsdale—home to many an Escalade or long-wheelbase 7 Series—and see we are sharing our space with a Prius, a Prius V, a Kia Soul and one other Juke.

There has also been considerable activity at the affordable end of the spectrum, though even that is starting to creep up a bit—while the high end ascends in bigger increments. Nissan has kept the starting point of the Juke under \$19,000—barely—at \$18,990 for a front-wheel-drive S model with CVT. Interestingly, you have to move up at least one level—to SV trim—to have the more affordable option of a manual transmission, meaning it's a \$3000 jump from S to SV, but only a \$2000 jump if you opt for a manual transmission. Normally, we'd consider the latter a win-win—

we like manuals, and it saves some dough—but we will be talking more about this in a bit.

There are three routine trim levels (S, SV, SL), plus a performance-oriented NISMO version (a hot item that's actually a couple of grand less than the top-trim SL). There are options of manual versus continuously variable transmission in some cases, and there's an option of all-wheel drive on all four trims (though only with the CVT).

Our test Juke (see sidebar) is not quite top trim—it's close. With AWD (and thus mandatory CVT) it would have a base of \$25,990. Add a couple of options plus delivery akin to our tester, and you're in the mid-28s, quickly within sight of \$30k on a car that started at \$18-something.

That's a 37-percent climb in base prices, across the range. For perspective, apply that to a \$65k car and you'd easily hit about \$90k. Or a base \$90k

car would hit almost \$125k. But for perspective, that's actually pretty much exactly what happens in those price ranges, as often as not. So despite the apparent ease of letting your Juke get expensive, you actually have a totally maxed-out version in your sights for just a few thousand dollars more—potentially.

Every one of these Juke models has the same engine, a 1.6-liter turbocharged four-cylinder. We would discover that this is a powerful little turbo—even moreso than its respectable 188 hp might suggest. But it does require premium fuel. That fuel stretches reasonably well, though, with EPA highway ratings of 30-32 MPG throughout the lineup.

The Juke does make a statement. We're not always sure exactly what that is—no doubt it's a little tongue in cheek—but it must be hitting the mark. It has been a huge and unexpected hit.

We've found that some people love its looks from the back but don't care for the front. Others, just the other way around. Clearly, a lot of people love it all. And a few aren't buying any of it.

Most people think it's small—it's considered a B-segment subcompact crossover—and while that can always be a study in relativity, this turns out to have a very spacious four-door cabin. Your correspondent is about six-two and actually scooted the seat up a notch or two for best pedal action. The rear hatch cargo area, despite its exterior swoops and curves, holds 10.5 cubic feet

with all seats up, 35.9 with back seats down.

Our test Juke's Graphite Blue—which struck us as more of a deep gunmetal than blue—is very attractive even when dirty. It balances against the car's various black and silver features (and grey gunmetal wheels) and looks very rich overall.

People ask which exactly are the headlights on this vehicle. Word had gotten around when it was first shown that the smaller units on top were the headlights, with a very concentrated beam, and the big round



KEEP RIGHT >>



NISSAN JUKE SL FWD M/T

ENGINE.....1.6L four-cylinder 16-valve turbo
 TRANSMISSION6-speed manual
 HORSEPOWER188 hp
 TORQUE.....177 lb-ft
 DRIVETRAINFWD
 PAINT/INTERIORGraphite Blue / Black
 WHEELS/TIRES ...7Jx17 / P215/55R17 all-season
 STEERINGelec power, speed-sensitive
 TURNING CIRCLE.....36.4 feet
 BRAKES (DISC) FR/R11.7 vent / 11.5 solid
 PASSENGERS5
 FUEL CAPACITY13.2 gal
 FUEL.....Premium unleaded
 MPG (EST)25/31/27 city/hwy/comb

BASE\$24,000
 • SPORT PACKAGE: rear roof spoiler, 17" gunmetal alloy wheels, stainless steel exhaust finisher\$1350
 • Carpeted floor mats, cargo mat.....\$180
 • Center armrest.....\$245
 • Destination\$780
 TOTAL\$26,555

ones were fog lights or driving lights. (Another pair of lights in this one's lower fascia are not on all models.) But it is the big round ones, regardless of their odd position (they all have odd positions) that are the headlights. The upper assembly comprises turn signals and various marker lights.

Distinctive styling continues inside, where a cool, curvy center console, reminiscent of a motorcycle cowl, comes in silver or red (matching on armrests and other details). Our top level SL also has leather seats and red stitching. It makes a classy package in this quirky funmobile.

We start to see the magic that sucks people in to this car: there's always something more to see.

Upon our first entry, we found the top trim did have keyless entry and start, but had a manual seat. And its steering wheel does tilt but does not telescope. The good news is that we adjusted all immediately, though we fiddled with the seat a couple of more times in search of optimum clutch action. Overall, comfy and purposeful.

Our only beef with the interior was an option—when the armrest is down, you have difficulty pulling the handbrake all the way up. This feature costs \$245, so we would skip it.

As usual, we appreciate Nissan's controls and instruments—thorough but clean, easy to comprehend, easy to use, not distracting. The Juke's backup camera is smaller than some—and we like this; it's clearly all that's needed. Climate control is simple and effective. The screen goes from dark-on-light to white-on-black when you turn the headlights on, regardless of whether it's dark yet, sometimes harder to read at dusk or in the rain.

Tuning and presetting the audio system was lightning fast and accurate, though sometimes oversensitive. Sound quality was so-so, even after optimizing its three-part equalizer for broadcast, satellite and iPod. We'd welcome an upgrade.

Ours had a Sport Package with gunmetal alloy wheels, rear roof spoiler and stainless exhaust tips—for \$1350. (The wheels alone are \$955.) An alternate option is a Midnight Edition, with black wheels, black rear roof spoiler and black mirror covers—for \$1200. (Those wheels are \$1050 à la carte.) If an edgy appearance is what you're after, we'd suggest also checking out the NISMO edition, \$1300 lower than SL and with its own bold touches. It's a solid set of choices.

We like the Juke from the back. And whereas we're hesitant to slap a spoiler on every car that comes along, this one adds a strong dynamic.

Driving was generally a pleasure. Its 188 horsepower go right to work. The vehicle is generally small and maneuverable, as you would expect, but one place it belies its subcompact size

is in a 36.4-foot turning circle (only about 8 inches smaller than a Jeep Grand Cherokee—though we do consider that very good for the Jeep's size).

All-wheel drive is only \$1700 more (and adds only 201 pounds), so that would be our inclination if buying. This tester was a front-driver, and it did exhibit one of the reasons we'd go all-wheel—occasionally noticeable torque steer.

A broad sweep through a complex, high-speed freeway interchange, though, mitigated our opinion about any torque steer—we didn't feel a thing. The Juke had confident handling and confident power. We decided it probably even has a confident attitude about its own distinctive looks.



It turns out the transmission might be a tough choice for us. We welcome any manual at face value, but this one had rough shifts at times. We started to suspect that more development effort has gone into the CVT automatic—that it may be a more optimized match to the drivetrain. That's only a guess. It's possible our legs are just too long or feet too big for smooth clutch operation.

Every day is competition day on the freeways of the north Valley, where we found our little four-banger Juke easily zipping up the freeway ramps in the company of BMWs and Cadillac V-Series as though we were just part of the club. Our logbook noted that "basically if you want to dominate the road in this thing, to a reasonable degree, you can. It's not lacking the power you need, and it's not lacking the maneuverability you need." At least it can hold its own.

As we decided to head back out on a very hot summer weekend with record temps above 120 degrees, this car delivered one of the best benchmarks any ever can, which is that we really wanted to go drive it some more—and so we did. ■

