



***By Steve Schaefer***

*San Leandro Times*

Lots of people want to carry five passengers in comfort, with decent trunk space and enough maneuverability to park without trauma. If they don't crave a trendy crossover or a workhorse SUV, and aren't seeking a super-economical commuter mobile, what better than a midsize Toyota Camry, Honda Accord, Hyundai Sonata or Nissan Altima?

The Altima that debuted in 1993 was situated right between a compact and midsize sedan. Lately, it's grown to take its place as a true contender in the midsize battle for buyers. The fifth-generation 2013 model is all-new from arrowhead headlamp to exuberant taillamp.

The front fenders have a rising wave that begins at the corner of the headlamp and then heads gradually upward to the tail. The chrome-rimmed grille looks forcibly pushed in by the pointed headlights. The sides bend in and out in homage to the esteemed BMWs.

For a while, Nissan interiors were using cheaper plastic and their designs appeared a little quirky. Today, they seem like the ones found in an Infiniti. The surfaces roll and weave across each other, with handsome silvery insets, bull-nosed corners and rich textures. From the forward-angled door grips to the rise and fall of the dash panels, there's constant motion — even when the car is stopped at a light.

The new seats are very comfortable. Turns out Nissan consulted with NASA engineers to design seats that support the body as if it's in zero gravity with a neutral position that eases tension on long trips. And there's no 17,000-mph reentry to worry about!

In the middle of the instrument panel is the Advanced Drive-Assist Display. Closer than normal displays, its three-dimensional effect is supposed to be restful on the eyes. You can customize

the information that's there to display fuel economy figures, individual tire pressure, navigation data and more.

The new Altima comes in roomy sedan or rakish coupe shapes. Typical for the midsize segment, it offers four- and six-cylinder engines. The 2.5-liter four is 11 pounds lighter this year and gains seven horsepower, to 182, along with 180 lb.-ft. of torque. It's rated at an impressive 38 mpg Highway by the EPA.

My tester, in warm Java Metallic (brown), had the mightier 3.5-liter V6. While I hardly raced the 3,355-pound vehicle around, it felt more than able to take on anything I gave it. It boasts 270 horsepower and 251 lb.-ft. of torque — (although it does weigh more than 200 pounds more than the 2.5-liter-equipped car). With EPA numbers of 22 City and 31 Highway (Average 25), it rates where some compact sedans do. I averaged 24.5 mpg.

Both engines get a continuously variable automatic transmission (CVT). Sorry... no manual. However, Nissan has developed some fine CVTs, uses them throughout its lineup, and has sold nine million CVT-equipped cars over the last two decades. The six-cylinder model gets steering-wheel-mounted blade-like paddles, so you can shift through some "gear ratios" if you want. This latest Next-generation Xtronic CVT has 70 percent revised parts and has lost weight.

CVTs create both improved fuel economy and some odd sounds from under the hood — when

you can even hear them.



The Altima's new Electronic Hydraulic Power-Assisted Steering system claims to give you the advantages of electric and hydraulic — a smoother feel with better fuel economy. Clever engineering makes it all work, and there is an abundance of it in the new Altima.

You can buy an Altima sedan in four levels. The base car comes with the 2.5-liter engine and a plain designation of just "Altima." Above that, each engine is available in the S, SV or SL. My tester was the top-level SL, which explains all the fancy goodies it contained. Leather seats always convey luxury, and the leather-wrapped steering wheel was heated, too. My car's fine nine-speaker Bose audio system was so good that my wife complained about the audio in the following test car.

The base car is kind of a deal. It runs just \$22,550, but you'll probably want to move up a bit for

more features. The mid-level SV with the four-cylinder engine should be a popular choice, and it starts at \$25,250. My six-cylinder SL, with no options, came to \$31,045. All prices include shipping.

Like so many Japanese-brand vehicles, the Altima is made in America, in this case, Smyrna, Tennessee. That means that lots of Americans are busy assembling cars in what has turned out to be a pretty good sales year in 2012.

The Altima isn't thrilling, but it is very nice, and will without a doubt deliver more than you need for as long as you own it. And with bounteous rear seat room, every passenger will feel well treated. The other brands' dealers are not going to like this.