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A 4-Day Test Drive of the Tesla S —...

A Sedan for Straightening Up and Flying Right

By [Eric Tegler](#) October 5, 2012 | 6:30 am | Categories: [Automotive](#)Nissan 2013 Altima S 2.5 · \$22,500 base · [Nissan](#)RATING
7

The 2013 Altima sedan. Photo courtesy Nissan North America

You should go ahead and believe Nissan's hype about the 2013 Altima. The Japanese auto-maker is fond of boasting that the new Altima is the most innovative iteration of its midsize offering yet. And that is definitely true.

But this isn't some Batmobile, it's a dad-mobile. It also comes in a coupe, but no matter which model you're talking about, the Altima badge still signals a certain staid buttoned-down-ness. This will lead many to dismiss it on sight as plain vanilla, even though there's a stack of tech goodies hiding inside.

The suspension is surprisingly advanced, and the zippy four-cylinder has been tuned to deliver high numbers in both performance and fuel efficiency. As is becoming *de rigueur* in flagship sedans, you get the showy hands-free features, like the ability to manage your incoming and outgoing text messages using voice commands and speech-to-text conversion. Choose the add-on "Technology Package," and you get even more: an eye that watches your blind spots for you, a lane-departure warning system, a moving-object detector. It even tells you when it's time to put air in the tires. All of these features are just as easy to access as the Altima's standard infotainment and driver-assist systems. Compared to the fully touch-enabled interfaces out there, the Altima's more traditional combination of buttons, knobs, and a touchscreen is refreshing. There's less drilling through pages, and more direct access to the functions you wish to actuate.

While we're on the subject of refreshing design, Nissan deserves kudos for the Altima's relatively low beltline, rear deck and thin A, B and C pillars. I can actually see out of this thing. Hallelujah! In case you'd forgotten, seeing is safety. But seeing is also recognizing that the new Altima looks a lot like Nissan's Maxima. How much? Go to Google Images, search for [2013 Altima](#) or [2013 Maxima](#) and you'll get results showing both cars.

Though its dimensions haven't increased tremendously since the last model, the Altima is within an inch or two of the Maxima (or larger) in headroom, legroom, hip-room and overall interior volume. Outside, the two cars share practically the same measurements, including front and rear track. One difference: The Altima is 451 pounds lighter (3,115 pounds total), disproving the theory that sedans inevitably get heavier with each successive generation. And it proves the notion that a lighter-weight car is better at accelerating, turning and sipping fuel.

The 2.5-liter 16-valve four-cylinder puts 182 horsepower and 180 pound-feet to the front wheels. That's enough to pull the Altima from 0 to 60 mph in around seven seconds, making it about the quickest four-cylinder sedan in its class. Lightness pays dividends in handling, aided by a revised multi-link rear suspension and new ZF shock absorbers. The Altima gets standard "Active Understeer Control," which brakes the inside front wheel during cornering. The result of all this is crisp turn-in and a moderate amount of body lean through each corner. In fact, the suspension and chassis far outperform the 215/55R17 all-season tires my tester rode on. Throw some more aggressive rubber on the Altima and it will surely stick impressively.

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The 2013 Altima sedan. Photo courtesy Nissan North America

Less impressive is the hybrid electronic-hydraulic power-assisted steering, which is progressive, but numb. The Altima comes with but one transmission, a substantially overhauled continuously variable transmission (CVT) that contributes to fuel efficiency with a 40 percent reduction in friction. I'm still not a fan of CVTs, and in the Altima, selecting "Sport mode" doesn't produce a discernible performance increase. But its effect on the Altima's mileage numbers (27 city, 38 highway) in concert with the weight reduction generates some very good fuel efficiency.

The interior is pleasingly clean without being too spare, though there are some quirks. I appreciated the facility of the tuning knob beside the center-stack display, but I would have liked it more if it were moved to the left of the display. For whatever reason, once paired over Bluetooth, my BlackBerry would periodically de-couple. Nissan's connected-car system — ingeniously named NissanConnect — offers Pandora and, when equipped with navigation, real-time Google points-of-interest search. The aforementioned hands-free text messaging assistant allows Altima owners to send, reply to and manage incoming text messages via spoken commands. You get an alert on the central display when a text comes in, and after initiating the system, you can hear it read to you, then respond via dictation. I didn't find it particularly intuitive or effective, and I'm unconvinced many drivers will actually get use out of it.

Nissan loves to tout the NASA research it used to design the Altima's less-fatiguing front bucket seats. I'm all for science, but it's just a seat. The bottom line is that after 30 minutes or so of adjustment, I found the seats to be very comfortable. In fact, the Altima is a satisfying ride for all the passengers, with appropriate room in the rear seats and ample trunk space.

And when you want to hoon it a bit, the Nissan will play along, CVT notwithstanding. On several jaunts back and forth from Annapolis, Maryland to Washington, D.C. the Altima was in its element — whether in stop-and-go traffic or high-speed freeway running. It turns out "straight-up" is a pretty pleasant place to be.

WIRED Spirited handling and class-topping fuel efficiency in a package that people will routinely mistake for the more expensive Maxima. Great visibility and strong acceleration, even in four-cylinder trim.

TIRED The moaning CVT doesn't really match the sporty character of the chassis and suspension. Numb steering, despite the hybrid electro-hydraulic system. Hands-free texting doesn't work as advertised.

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