



Smaller engine not an issue

Nissan is achieving some success with its new strategy of using a smaller-engined big car to break back into the medium-sized market. **Rob Maetzig** says it is easy to understand why.

I've got an admission to make. Recently, I wasn't sure which car I was driving.

The vehicle felt different, you see. It was supposed to be the latest Nissan Maxima with the smaller 2.5-litre engine, but it didn't exactly feel like it.

As I drove down the road, I began to suspect my Maxima was actually a larger-engined 3.5-litre version. Certainly, at first glance it was impossible to distinguish between the two, because their specification is identical right down to the leather seats. My car felt solid and powerful, too.

So I stopped the car to check. And there, on the rego sticker, was proof that the car was, indeed, the new Maxima 250-L, with the smaller 2.5-litre V6 engine.

Now as far as I'm concerned, this speaks volumes about the quality of the smaller-engined version of the new J32 Nissan Maxima.

It really does drive well, and it is instantly a strong contender in that segment of the new-vehicle market that features such cars as the Mazda6, Toyota Camry, Honda Accord Euro and Ford Mondeo, despite the fact the

car's dimensions are bigger than all of those, and that it has a V6 instead of a four-cylinder engine.

Of course, Nissan isn't the first company to use a single body style to compete in the medium and large segments of the new-car market.

Toyota does it with the Camry and the Aurion, for instance, and Hyundai does it with the Sonata.

But what is different is that Nissan has installed the smaller-capacity engine in its large sedan, while the others have fitted larger-capacity engines into medium sedans.

With that in mind, one would expect the Maxima 250-L to have to work harder than the larger 350-L to get decent performance.

Not so. The 250-L's 2.5-litre engine generates 134kW of power, and the top torque is 228Nm, and that's sufficient for the sedan to offer a sound drive.

The engine is a development of the highly regarded VQ series V6 that, in 3.5-litre form, powers the 350-L, and which produces 185kW of power and 326Nm of torque.

Like the 3.5-litre unit, it produces 80 per cent of its torque at 1600rpm,





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which means it is flexible. And again like the bigger unit, the engine sits on six-point engine mounts to reduce torque-induced vibration.

If the two Maximas were compared head to head, the 350-L would emerge the clear leader in terms of power and performance capability. But under normal motoring circumstances, I don't think the 250-L will be criticised for lacking in anything.

The thing that helps is a new X-Tronic continuously variable automatic transmission. It's a beauty that works well with the engine, and it also features a six-speed electronically controlled manual mode.

All of that contributes to a good fuel consumption figure of 9.5 litres per 100km for this model.

This new Maxima is built on the same D platform as the new-generation Murano SUV that has also been released in New Zealand this year, and its dimensions that are about the same as those of the previous J31 Maxima.

It's a good-looking sedan that, at

first glance, is similar in appearance to the previous model, but which in fact has a host of exterior design improvements. The front is bold in its design, and the rear features sculpted combination tail-lights that project slightly from the body.

I suppose you could say that it all looks a bit American, but it's a look that works.

The interior is very comfortable, and a strong feature is seating that incorporates vibration-absorbing urethane cushion material that is shaped to provide uniform support to the occupant's body.

The equipment level is high: standard specification includes keyless entry and push-button start, leather upholstery, dual-zone air conditioning, six-stacker CD stereo, and eight-way power seat adjustability for the driver.

The only things the 250-L doesn't have, which the 350-L has, are a rear boot spoiler, tilt-and-slide sunroof, and heated front seats. However, my test car had the heated seats, thanks to some quirk of specification in what

was obviously a pre-release model.

Mind you, the 250-L should have that level of specification, because its asking price of \$43,495 is only \$3000 off the price for the 350-L. But Nissan New Zealand is happy with that pricing, and claims it places the car smack in the middle of the medium-large sedan market.

Maxima's drive leans towards luxury.

There have been numerous changes to the suspension, including a high-caster front strut layout and revisions to the multilink set-up at the rear. And although all this contributes to secure handling characteristics, the ride remains fairly soft.

But in my opinion, that's how it should be in the case of this new, large sedan from Nissan. It's an appealing combination of spacious interior, excellent comfort, and comfortable driving characteristics.

The 250-L's only potential downside is that smaller engine. But as far as I'm concerned, that's not an issue.

