



LAUNCH | NISSAN X-TRAIL

Rounded performer

MOTORING
BRETT FLINTOFF



SOME mistakes are easily forgiven. One such mistake would be confusing this new X-Trail with the original; despite most of the car being new, the core styling themes remain unchanged. Apparently, customers still liked the look, so that boat wasn't about to get rocked.

With so little obvious change is the new X-Trail a worthwhile upgrade? Indeed it is. New gearboxes, a smarter four-wheel-drive system, better safety, a much larger boot and appreciably quieter travelling make a strong argument for the new deal.

The prices are good, too. Sticker prices have been dropped to a level more closely reflecting what people actually pay, ranging from a low of \$35,395 to a high of \$42,895. Admittedly, the entry price is for an ST model that has steel wheels and lacks both traction aids and stability control; just \$1500 takes you to the ST-L version and rectifies all of those omissions, making it \$1500 very well spent.

Four-wheel-drive systems can be difficult to write about because, well, the subject can get kind of technical and boring. It's easier to pretend that 4WD is 4WD and that they're all created equal. The truth is, of course, that they're not; something demonstrated very graphically a few years back by a Nissan Pathfinder that was able to stop and then restart on a steep bank coated in wet green grass. That same test completely flummoxed a pair of supposedly more serious 4WDs tested at about the same time.

Most of these lighter weight 4WDs run just the front wheels when things are good.



Then when grip is scarce they hook up the rear wheels, too. If that process takes too long, then you've already lost traction by the time all wheels are working, so there's a potentially ugly moment to fix before you get back to the job at hand.

Those ugly moments aren't so likely these days. This X-Trail for instance — provided you're not one of the cheapskates in an ST model — has a bunch of sensors measuring steering angle and the forces acting on the body, so it can figure out if the car is headed where the wheels are pointed or not. It also keeps an eye on the

throttle pedal, so that if you step on the gas sharpish it moves you into 4WD before the front wheels even get a chance to spin.

The electronics also take care of hill descent control and hill start assist. Once these were novelties but now they're becoming a must-have for this sector of the market — but still worthy of mention because they're useful.

To show all of this off, Nissan launched the X-Trail to New Zealand's media from Dunedin, taking us over Old Dunstan Rd to Alexandra. This is the road over the





SHORT TAKE

Price: \$35,395 to \$42,895
Engine: 2.5-litre 4-cylinder, 125 kW @ 6000 rpm, 226 Nm @ 4400 rpm
Safety: ABS, 6 airbags, plus ESP on most models
Weight: 1550kg
Economy: Official average 9.3 l/100km (auto)
Performance: 10sec 0-100kmh, 190kmh max
Strengths: Notably quiet ride, clever 4WD system, big boot
Weaknesses: Rear seat merely adequate
Overall: Very rounded performer

Lammermoor Range where now you can see the irrigation lakes and soon will be able to see the controversial new wind farm. This is one of those semi-maintained roads that you might be able to tackle in a two-wheel-drive car but not without some risk; just the sort of road that makes a fellow think he should do this more often and perhaps he'd better buy one of these to do it in.

The X-Trail romped happily up these Otago hills and down the Central dales. The 2.5-litre petrol engine is a mildly tweaked carryover from the last model.

There's no diesel option yet, but come this time next year, there's a good chance we'll see a 2-litre turbodiesel, although
Saturday, 17 November 2007, p. 1

it's likely to carry a price premium.

Gearboxes? They're new; the manual is now a six-speeder while the old conventional auto is replaced with a stepless CVT. The manual works nicely but the CVT is better to drive and narrowly beats the manual on fuel economy to boot.

Nissan claims to have put a lot of work into ride comfort and noise suppression. On the evidence of this launch, it's right; road noise is dramatically improved and almost certainly best in class. The ride is generally good but not at the cost of floppy suspension in corners; seemingly, the dampers are clever German jobbies with special valving. The idea is that they play it soft over small jiggly surface imperfections while taking a harder line when they need to.

Overall? Discussing the X-Trail with a colleague over the Lammermoors, we agreed that it makes a powerful case compared to conventional mid-size sedans. You gain much in versatility and resale values while losing surprisingly little in general driveability or fuel economy. That'll be why they're popular then.