



Taking it to the Max

By **DAVE LEGGETT**

NISSAN joined the move to downsize with the launch of the new Maxima earlier this year.

It is a big shift from the traditional increase in the size and performance that usually comes with the release of a new model.

But, in doing so, Nissan has caught on to what is likely to be a continuing trend in the next few years.

And it also moves Nissan back into a market it hadn't been able to offer terribly much. It just didn't have a car in the 2 to 2.5-litre section of the market.

So the launch of a 2.5-litre version of the Maxima, while continuing with the bigger engine 3.5-litre model, couldn't come at a better time for Nissan.

The new Maxima might have entirely new panels but it is still very much an evolution of the old model, retaining the last car's quite distinctive designs but bringing the styling up to date. The changes are most obvious at the front with the clamshell bonnet and the more triangular headlights moving back into the front guards.

The Maxima is a distinguished-looking car and never more so than in darker colours when the highlights stand out more from the body.

The 2.5-litre Maxima 250-L competes with other 2.4 and 2.5-litre cars in the medium sector

of the market but it has a big feature the opposition doesn't – six cylinders rather than the four that are the norm in this segment.

The 2.5-litre engine is closely related to the bigger 3.5-litre unit. It's from the same VQ family and, like the larger engine, has electronically controlled continuously variable valve timing.

The VQ has been a highly successful engine series for Nissan since it first went into production in 3-litre form in 1994. It has won several engine-of-the-year awards since then and is produced several different sizes from 2-litre and above.

In 3 and 3.5-litre form it has always impressed as an exceptionally smooth unit giving excellent performance. Its ability to operate extremely quietly has also been one of its big features.

The 2.5-litre unit maintains that reputation. It is still a very quiet engine despite the fact it is probably going to be pushed along a little harder. But even when it does it's smooth through to the redline, showing the big advantage of six pots over four.

It isn't the performer that the bigger 3.5-litre engine is, but doesn't feel underpowered. It is still producing 134kW of power and 228Nm of torque.



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NISSAN says the Maxima 250-L, powered by this engine, will return economy figures of 9.5 litres per 100km in the combined cycle.

I'd say that's not far off it. In almost 300km of very varied driving recently I was returning a figure of 10.2 litres. And perhaps I would have got a bit more economy from it if I had kept closer to the 2000 rpm the engine maintains at the speed limit.

Like the previous model, the new Maxima also uses the tried and true CVT transmission that is also used in the Murano.

The beauty of this box is the lack of changes and the effortless acceleration, constantly matching revs, speed and power so that it always seems to be in the right position to make the most of the engine performance.

And now it doesn't feel a lot different from a conventional box except that it just never changes gear. But there is the ability to change the gears in a manual way with six set stages electronically programmed into the box.

The new car inherits the last Maxima's refinement in both ride and handling. It has a very sophisticated limousine style of ride yet, with a good steering feel, it also provides some enthusiasm for the driver to appreciate the

drive of the car.

The new Maxima also benefits from an intelligent key system that allows the driver to access and start the car with the key in his pocket.

The car "reads" the presence of the key and allows the driver to operate the vehicle just by pushing the start-stop button.

The 2.5-litre car doesn't miss out on much that the larger-engined Maxima gets.

It has leather trim although it doesn't have the heater and memory in the front seats. It doesn't get an electric sunroof or have a boot spoiler, virtually the only way, apart from the badge, that tells anyone this is only a 2.5-litre car.

And because it misses those items, and the bigger engine, it comes on to the market some \$3500 cheaper.

Is the buyer going to miss the 3.5 engine? In most cases probably not, especially if towing isn't a priority use for the car.

While the exterior of the new car has retained the flavour of the old model the interior has done the same, even though it has been completely changed.

Like the old model there is a certain simplicity and a lack of fussiness that it is appealing. And

it is very easy to use.

The fascia is now dominated by the centrally located controls for the air conditioning with a large screen for the display of climate control and audio information. The CD player and radio are below the centre line of the fascia while the gearshift sits in a flat centre console.

It is strictly functional and perhaps a little plain because of it.

The leather-bound steering wheel has controls for the audio system and the cruise control.

The Maxima still feels like a big car even if it has given away the larger engine. There is superb leg and foot room in the rear seats. The amount of available passenger space shows what a large vehicle it is. And that space hasn't been taken away from the boot area.

That's still as big as the old car and able to carry a very good amount of luggage. The lid is fixed on two struts outside the boot cavity. Safety features include six airbags and vehicle dynamic control (VDC), ABS with traction control, brake assist and electronic brake force distribution.

The Maxima is a sizeable package with a real luxury demeanour.

► NISSAN MAXIMA 250-L

- 2496cc, V6, fuel injected 134kW/ 6000rpm, 228Nm/ 4400rpm. 70-litre fuel tank.
- CVT transmission. MacPherson strut front suspension, multi-link at the rear.
- Four wheel disc brakes, front ventilated, ABS, EBD, BA, VDC and ESP. Speed sensitive power assisted rack and pinion steering. 215/55 R17 tyres on alloy wheels.
- Length 4850mm, width 1795mm, height 1485mm, wheelbase 2775mm. Kerb weight 1522kg ► Price: \$43,495
- Points out of ten: styling 7, performance 7, handling 7, comfort 8
- Pluses: Refined and functional with size where it counts
- Minuses: Styling lacks sparkle, too

