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## NISSAN X-TRAIL: Finding the X Factor

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new Model

NISSAN X-TRAIL

Finding the X Factor

Nissan calls it "X-TRAILness". The very essence of the company's first compact SUV. Now the all-new second generation X-Trail has landed in South Africa. But does it still have that same "X-TRAILness" that made the first model so popular? Mozambique, with its pockmarked roads, and challenging sand and dirt tracks, proved to be the perfect testing grounds for the latest Nissan X-Trail 2.5 4x4 CVT LE

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Mozambique. Land of spoilt beauty. Land of war. But also land of opportunity, of beautifully remote beaches and the warm Indian Ocean, of prawns and seafood, and of a new air of prosperity, especially in the capital, Maputo.

It's also a land of potholes. And big ones, that can damage a vehicle's wheels beyond repair. We didn't really expect it to be like this. After crossing the border at Komatipoort, all seemed fine, with the roads in good condition. And Maputo wasn't as shabby as it used to be, just after The War. But now, on our way to the coastal town of Inhambane, and just north of the town of Xai-Xai, we were playing Russian roulette with overloaded trucks, buses, rain... and more potholes per square metre than we ever thought possible. Driving at the legal limit of 100 km/h seemed insane. The overloaded trucks drove in the middle of the road, trying to avoid the potholes that line the extremities of the two-lane national road. Overtaking was precarious, at best.



It was challenging, but strangely enough, also rather fun, especially when there wasn't much other traffic around. It was all the X-Trail's fault, you see. Dodging potholes and occasionally taking to the shoulder of the road proved to be right up the Nissan's alley, so to speak. Although it is an SUV, it felt more like a nimble sports car, with the added benefit of 203mm worth of ground clearance. Instead of feeling cumbersome, wobbly and unsafe, we kind of looked forward

to testing the Nissan's emergency lane-changing abilities.

It was almost like watching a rugby game between the Springboks and the All Blacks at Ellis Park. The All Blacks are leading by 103-5... and you're still having fun watching the game. This is where the Nissan's so-called "X" factor comes in. You can't really put a finger on one particular quality that stands out above the rest, but it feels just right, fitting like a glove.



After about 150km of pothole dodging, the national EN1 highway was again in good condition, even excellent. Arriving later that afternoon at the town of Inhambane, and turning off towards Barra Lodge, situated next to the sea, we encountered a new challenge... sand.

The new X-Trail features the latest version of Nissan's All Mode "intelligent" all-wheel-drive system. It works via a rotary knob on the centre console, offering the driver the choice of front-wheel drive only, "automatic" mode or "lock mode".

In "automatic" mode the electronic system constantly monitors throttle opening, engine speed and torque at speeds of up to 80 km/h to anticipate wheelspin and to distribute torque between the front and rear axles as needed. Above 80 km/h the system reacts to wheelspin only, and will send power to the rear wheels when slip is detected.

In "lock" mode, which operates at speeds up to 40 km/h, the four-wheel drive system is locked in 50/50 configuration, for more challenging, low-speed off-road work.

With thick sand in the X-Trail's path, we selected the "automatic" option, and off we went. Coupled to the 203mm ground clearance, and Nissan's continuously variable transmission (CVT), the familiar but further refined 2,5-litre four-cylinder engine did battle with the treacherous twin-spool sand road. On one steep incline we ground to a halt, needing more momentum than we had anticipated. A turn of dial to "Lock" mode, however, proved sufficient to get the Nissan mobile again, albeit with the accelerator pinned to the floor.

But a lack of momentum around a tight, uphill turn with deep sand caused the Nissan to bog down again. Needing a fair bit of speed, and with the traction control throttling back the engine the moment the wheels start to spin, we disengaged the electronics. The second, quicker approach worked like a charm.

Later, as we headed towards a lagoon with a local guru to guide us, the Nissan X-Trail faced another challenge... water. But the Nissan hardly noticed, and like a motorboat, forged ahead -- with our guide acting as pilot.

The next day we decided to take the "long" road back towards the Maputo area, using a "4x4 only" track from Guinjata Bay, situated just south of Inhambane. Although we'd used this trail five years earlier on another excursion, the multitude of zigzagging tracks leading to new lodges and villages confused the plot somewhat.

Enter a South African working at a new development in the area, and his trusty Japanese 4x4 bakkie. He would lead us to the town of Jangama, where we could link up with the tar road again. Sounded easy enough, even though our impromptu guide looked at the Nissan X-Trail with a bemused frown.

Off we went. It was soon clear that our guide wasn't planning on sparing the horses, and instead seemed intent on showing us that we really shouldn't be doing this "4x4 only" route in a "soft-roading, city-slicking 4x4".

So we speeded up accordingly, with the four-wheel-drive system in "automatic" mode and slightly deflated tyres providing ample grip in the thick sand. He went faster still, so we upped the pace again.

We reached the town of Jangama in record time (for the bakkie, anyway). The bemused frown on our guide's face was replaced by a look of admiration.

On our way to our next overnight stop at the lovely little town of Praia do Bilene, about 140 km north of Maputo, we took stock of our journey up till then. Lots of sand, water, potholes, open road cruising... the X-Trail had it all covered. Only two tests remained: rough and tough gravel, and a good old tarred mountain pass (which we were not going to find in Mozambique).

That night we had a look at a map, and found an interesting detour that would solve the gravel issue -- a 150km dirt road, leading from just outside the town of Macia all the way next to the Rio Incomati river to Moamba. From there it's a short 25km drive to the Komati border post. We located the little dirt road easily enough with the help of the brilliant TomTom GO 720 GPS navigation system. The going was rough in places, but the road mostly offered a relaxing and scenic drive. You won't find any elephants or lions here, but the area is so wild and untouched that it's truly beautiful.

The Nissan X-Trail loved the dirt too, providing excellent insulation against the bumps and ruts. And that "X" factor was still there, egging one on to go faster, faster and faster. In these conditions few compact SUVs feel as lively, and as composed. Another test passed with flying colours.

Back in South Africa, our winding road came in the form of the Schoemanskloof Pass, just outside Nelspruit. With the 2,5-litre engine's 125 kW of power, 226 Nm of torque and slick CVT gearbox, working in harmony with that "X"-factored ride, the X-Trail stuck to its guns through the corners, never complaining, or feeling even mildly stressed. It was as enjoyable and composed as a compact SUV can be through the twisties.

Simon Cowell from television's Pop Idols coined the so-called "X" factor -- the one quality that cannot really be put into words. It's a quality that sets a person or thing apart from the opposition, and makes it stand out in a crowd.

Nissan's new X-Trail has that quality.

"X" marks the spot

Nissan's X-Trail has been an international sales hit since the model was first introduced in 2001. More than 800 000 units have been sold worldwide since then, with the Nissan building up a fiercely loyal following.

So the all-new X-Trail has a lot to live up to. But how does one improve on such a successful recipe? You go to the people who know the X-Trail best. The owners. Then you ask them to tell the engineers and designers what they would like to see improved in the new model.

But this methodology also posed a unique challenge for Nissan's product engineering gurus.

According to the feedback from owners, they loved the X-Trail as it was. It already had enough "X". So instead of adopting the softer, rounded styling of its competitors, Nissan's designers chose to retain the X-Trail's authentic 4x4 styling.

Yet the latest X-Trail is indeed all new, boasting a new chassis, stylish new interior and the fresh exterior design, which subtly reinforces its 4x4 authenticity.

The new X-Trail is also bigger than the model it replaces. The wheelbase has increased by 5mm, while overall length has risen by 175mm.

The X-Trail is based on the same platform as the popular Nissan Qashqai. It features strut-type suspension at the front and a multi-link system at the rear, both ends being mounted on separate rubber insulated sub-frames, which provide enhanced refinement and isolation from vibrations. The interior also boasts some interesting developments. Most notable is the instrument cluster, which is now situated more conventionally directly in front of the driver, instead of the middle of the centre console. According to Nissan, this move allows for more space in the console for a superb six-CD sound system, and the fitment of an optional navigation screen. Although the original, centrally mounted instrument cluster was interesting and novel, we must admit we prefer the more conventional approach.

A large centrally mounted dash-top storage box is now deep enough to house no fewer than 10 CD jewel cases, while a vast 15,7-litre glove box also provides ample storing space. Soft-feel material is used for all touch points, which greatly enhances the air of quality in the cabin.

As before the rear seat backrests can recline through seven degrees, and can also fold flat to increase load space. Unlike the first generation X-Trail's 60/40-split fold, the new model has a 40/20/20 system for increased versatility.

But the biggest advance is in the luggage area. Most of the extra 175mm overall length can be found here. Where the first-generation X-Trail had 410 litres of luggage space the new version has 603 litres -- a massive increase of 193 litres.

The exhaust silencer has been moved to a "north-south" location alongside the rear wheel well. This allowed the creation of an innovative double deck luggage area, with space for a sliding drawer under the floor where valuable items can be stored.

This drawer has partition walls that can be arranged in a number of different positions, or completely removed. The floor and drawer can also be removed to increase load space even further. Luxury and technological advancements are also plentiful in the X-Trail cabin. All versions have air-conditioning, power steering, electrically operated windows all round, and a drive computer as standard. You also get front airbags, while ABS brakes with electronic brake-force distribution and brake assist are standard.

For the middle and high specification models (LE and XE) a magnitude of extras is available, but side and curtain airbags, Bluetooth cellphone connectivity, leather-covered seats, a massive electrically operated moon roof, unique roof-rails with built-in spotlights, and privacy glass are all standard features.

Although our test unit was powered by the familiar 2,5-litre 16-valve unit, it now features upgrades

to make it more efficient. It delivers 125 kW of power and 226 Nm of torque, and can be had with a six-speed manual or the continuously variable transmission (CVT).

The entry-level petrol engine is a new 2,0-litre unit featuring a lightweight, all-alloy 16-valve design. This powerplant produces 102 kW and 198 Nm of torque. Up to 90% of the maximum torque is already available from as low as 2400 r/min, which is unusual for a petrol engine. This model comes standard with a six-speed manual gearbox, and is available in two-wheel drive only. A brand new turbodiesel derivative will join the X-Trail line-up later this year. The new 2,0-litre turbodiesel engine combining high outputs and good economy with class-leading refinement, delivers 110 kW of power and 320 Nm of torque (90% of this torque is available from 1750 r/min). For the first time a six-speed automatic gearbox will be available for this engine too, while a six-speed manual box will be offered as standard.

The latest X-Trail builds on the core values that have made it such an international hit -- affordability, good build quality, a healthy dose of 4x4 ability, being fun to drive, and embodying the heart and spirit of a much bigger, hard-core 4x4.

In the compact SUV market segment, it's got its rivals covered.

#### The Range

2.0 4x2 XE R255 600

2.5 4x4 SE R325 200

2.5 4x4 LE R352 800

2.5 4x4 CVT SE R342 600

2.5 4x4 CVT LE R368 100

All models have a three-year/100 000km Service Plan

#### X-TRAILing in the land of Aus

Australia boasts one of the most active Nissan X-Trail communities in the world. According to Jalal Al Hariri, founder and owner of the Australian X-Trail Forum, an internet-based fan club, the X-Trail has upstaged many a hard-core 4x4 on the club's extensive off-roading excursions.

The club has more than 800 members from 21 countries (including South Africa). Jalal says the X-Trail is hugely popular in Australia, where off-roading is a favourite pastime. The Nissan has won numerous awards there, and is said to be the most "awarded" compact SUV on that market.

"I believe Nissan listened carefully to what the owners wanted in an SUV, and have greatly enhanced the off-road abilities of the new model," says Jalal.

Australian X-Trail Forum: <http://www.australianxtrail.com.au>

#### Fast Facts:

\* The Nissan X-Trail GT is sold only in Japan, and features a 2,0-litre turbocharged petrol engine. It delivers 206 kW of power at 6 400 r/min and 309 Nm of torque at 3 200 r/min.

\* The Nissan X-Trail FCV is a hydrogen fuel cell model, leased only to businesses in Japan. Its high-pressure, hydrogen-powered fuel cell powerplant delivers 58 kW of power -- enough for a claimed top speed of 125 km/h.

\* The Nissan X-Trail Adventure is for sale only in Iceland, and features some special additions to cope with conditions there. It comes standard with 29-inch tyres, the lowest part of the Nissan is raised for increased ground clearance, it has reverse sensors, side steps and a towbar.

#### SPECIFICATIONS

Name: Nissan X-Trail 2.5 4x4 CVT LE

Engine: 2488cc, four-cylinder, 16-valve,

Power: 125 kW @ 6 000 r/min

Torque: 226 Nm @ 4 400 r/min

Transmission: CVT six-speed gearbox

4x4 system: All Mode "intelligent" electronic four-wheel-drive system

Ground clearance: 203mm

Fuel consumption: 12,9 litres/100km (actual achieved)

Combined cycle: 9,6 litres/100km (claimed)

Price: R368 100 (includes three-year/90 000km Service Plan)

#### Polana: the Grande Dame of Maputo

The Hotel Polana, part of the international Serena Group, is one of Maputo's best-known landmarks. Situated in the cultural hub of the city, among embassies, the presidency of Mozambique, government ministries and popular restaurants, the hotel recalls the elegance and splendour of colonial times.

The five-star hotel overlooks the Bay of Maputo, and offers visitors a wide variety of activities. These include a health spa, gymnasium, conference centre, a full range of sporting activities, a vibrant entertainment schedule, an art gallery, a colourful selection of bars and a full a la carte restaurant.

A wide variety of rooms is available, to suit different clients' needs. Prices range from around R1400 per person for a "studio" room to around R10 000 per person for the presidential suite.

Polana Hotel: 011 465-0808; [www.serenahotels.com/mozambique/polana/home.asp](http://www.serenahotels.com/mozambique/polana/home.asp)

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