



New Car Test - Nissan X-Trail Ti

A highly competent and impressive car.

by Julian Edgar, photos by Julian Edgar and Georgina Cobbin



Next time you see a X-Trail pass you in the street, turn and take a long look at it. Cos hidden under the boxy lines of the Nissan is one of the most advanced four cylinder engine and driveline combinations around. And no, not just in off-road style four-wheel drives, but in **any** four-cylinder car!

Don't believe us? Think that we've suddenly become part of the Nissan payroll? Well, get this.

The new 2.5-litre QR25DE engine not only has the new century norms of direct-fire ignition and multipoint fuel injection, but it also has a variable intake manifold, steplessly variable intake camshaft timing - and electronic throttle control! Yep, this engine - which is also available in the base model \$31,990 X-Trail - runs an electronic throttle butterfly of the type previously found only in luxury and other mega-expensive cars. And did we mention the electronic variable four-wheel drive system? No? OK, we'll come back to that in a minute.



And there's another pretty damn good thing about the X-Trail. Not only does it have a superb engine with cutting-edge technology, as a package the whole car also stacks up very well.

On test here is the \$35,990 Ti manual 5-speed. In the broader 'crossover' car scheme of things it's a bit more of a serious off-roader than, say, a Subaru Forester. While it lacks an ultra-low range gearbox and there's no sump guard, with a ground clearance of 150mm and approach and departure angles of 28 and 25 degrees respectively, it's still quite capable of clambering up a rough track, bowling along a sandy beach or pulling a small boat up a slippery ramp.

But how does it work on normal bitumen - where the vast majority of delivered X-Trails will spend nearly all of their time? The short answer is: very well.



The seating position is high and upright, and you look past a sweet leather-bound wheel at... a glovebox. As is currently becoming fashionable, the instrument cluster is in the middle of the dash, rather than being in front of the driver. While this has the (nominal) advantage of allowing the steering wheel height to be changed without obscuring any instruments, it also places much further from the driver's line of sight the important things that need to be seen. Interestingly, even the warning lights are way over there. But when you do turn your eyes, you'll find the normal range of instruments easy to read, with a black-on-silver colour scheme.

Look around a bit further and you'll see an unusual range of plastic finishes - silver flat, silver striated, black, grey, grey with a criss-cross pattern. It looks kind of, well, different. But whether it works any better than traditional materials is a little open to question - the test car (with 8,000km on it) had lots of scratches on the driver's door upper and around the seatbelt - presumably where drivers wearing watches and rings had come into contact with the plastic. The seats were also stained - very unusual on a press car and perhaps indicative of cleaning difficulties with the fabrics.



But there are some interior features which are quite innovative. Two drink bottle holders are built into the dash - you open little doors to slide the whole bottle into the face of the panel. Contained in this way, the drinks can be optionally heated or cooled by the climate control system. Additionally, at each end of the dash, further cup holders swing out. There is also a removable drinks holder for rear passengers - it straddles the transmission tunnel. There are the normal door pockets and centre console box, but the passenger side glovebox is small - a little odd, since there seems to be a heap of wasted space directly above it. Another oddity is no matter how hard we looked, we couldn't find the clock... (Or was it buried in the LCD tripmeter display? It is in the Patrol.)

Otherwise, the equipment level of the Ti is high - there're twin airbags, cruise control (with steering wheel control buttons), and an in-dash 6-CD stacker. The latter two items are straight out of the much more expensive Maxima Ti - but both work better in the X-Trail! The CD radio system has improved bass response from the four door-mounted speakers, with the two dash tweeters providing the highs. The cruise control lacks the on/off surging that we found in the Maxima - one of the benefits of electronic throttle control is that the cruise control system can be made to work very smoothly. The climate control system is simple and largely effective (the air con takes quite a while to begin cooling after the car is started), but the control panel is located very low on the dash - like the main instruments, a long way from the driver's line of sight.



The seats in the test Ti used a dimpled fabric which we found rather slippery. Both the front seat passenger and driver tend to slide forward, even with the driver's seat base lowered at its rear as far as possible. Otherwise the large front seats are good, with plenty of comfort and side support. Rear occupants are well looked after, too. The rear backrest can be set at a number of angles, while rear footroom is exemplary and knee-room is also pretty good. Both front and rear doors open wide, allowing easy entrances and exits.

Moving back to the last third of the vehicle, the rear door lifts on twin gas struts, revealing a removable floor panel made up of dimpled-look plastic with built-in rubbing strips. However, the plastic rubbing strips scratch easily(!), the panel rattles on rough roads, and many of the other interior finishes also look like they could easily show signs of wear and tear. The size of the rear compartment is quite good, there are tie-down hooks, and child restraint anchorages are positioned under small lift-up panels in the floor. If more room is required, the rear seat squabs lift up (60:40 split) and then the backrest can be placed flat, again on a 60/40 split. The head restraints need to be removed first, but they fit easily under the lowered seat.



Some of the cabin design comes across more as concept car than practical, but it is generally a comfortable and practical place to be.

But how does it drive? Very well!

The highlight is the wonderful new engine. Not only does it develop 132kW at 6000 rpm, but it also has a very flat torque curve, peaking with 245Nm at 4000 rpm. As a result of all that mechanical and electronic wizardry - not to mention that at 2.5 litres, it's a pretty big four cylinder - the engine is always tractable, forgiving of driver mistakes, and unexpectedly strong. It will cope happily if you creep around in first gear, clutch out and just idle revs on board. Or you can short-change on the flat at 2000 rpm and it will be unfazed. Or, if you're in a hurry, you can run to just shy of the rev-cut (an indicated 6400 rpm in the test car) and find yourself giving a good few other road users something of a shock.

Paper performance gives a 0-100 of 10.2 seconds, but on the road its seamless tractability makes it feel stronger than that number suggests.



The engine is also a sweet-sounding device, the two balance shafts making it a little busy to the ear at times but also doing an excellent job in reducing the intrinsic throbbiness of a big four. Fuel consumption on test reflected the enthusiastic way in which we drove the car, with a poor figure of 13.3 litres/100 km recorded.

And showing off the engine to be best effect is one helluva slick transmission. Using double-cone synchros, the 5-speed has a great shift feel and is light and easy to use, hot or cold. In fact shift effort has been dropped considerably over the previous Nissan 5-speed.

Handling, as you might expect, is dependent on the setting of the four-wheel drive system. Left in 'auto', the X-Trail is normally front-wheel drive, changing to four-wheel drive as it feels the need. Importantly, it doesn't have to wait for wheelspin before it starts moving into four-wheel drive - it's an intelligent system. Other selectable modes include front-wheel drive and locked, with the latter being usable only in difficult slippery conditions.



Left in auto four-wheel drive, the X-Trail handles with aplomb. Outright grip levels from the off-road-style Bridgestone Dueller 215/65 tyres aren't high, but the handling is very sweet - starting with a touch of understeer then progressing through into a neutral four-wheel drive stance under power. If you wish, a sharp throttle-lift will bring out the tail. At all times it is reassuring and very carlike. However, at high speeds the X-Trail can be blown around a bit - in this respect it is not as aerodynamically stable as a conventional car. (And in two-wheel drive? Just understeer....)

Over poor roads the X-Trail handles and rides very well, with the damping a fine match for the sophisticated suspension that feels to boast a very low unsprung weight. At the front the MacPherson struts use forged alloy lower control arms (only a few years ago this sort of thing was found only on exotics) with the rear suspension comprising independent parallel link struts. The 4-channel ABS brakes boasts brake assist and electronic brake force distribution, and the front 280mm ventilated discs are hauled down by hefty twin-pot calipers. The rear 292mm brakes discs are also ventilated - a first in the class.



While some aspects of the interior weren't really to our taste, the X-Trail is a damn' good car. And more than anything else, it's because of the superb new 2.5-litre QR25DE four cylinder and electronically controlled four-wheel drive. Just as it is, this complete driveline transplanted into a Pulsar-sized car would make for a great performer; with a factory turbo this would potentially be one of best four cylinder powerplants available at normal prices.

But while it was the engine and that had the most impact on us, even someone completely disinterested in the mechanicals would find the X-Trail a highly competent and impressive car.

In fact we were so impressed by the technology of the X-Trail - technology which gives stronger pointers to the shape of the next decade of Nissan four-cylinder performance - that we've decided to cover the tech aspects of the X-Trail driveline in another, more detailed article, appearing next week.

The X-Trail Ti was provided for this test by Nissan Australia.

TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF USE:

**This material is licensed for the sole personal use of
the AutoSpeed Registered User identified as:
davidlittle**

- The user identified above, and within this document, acknowledges that all text and graphics herein are the intellectual property of Web Publications Pty Ltd and are the subject of international copyright law.
Reproduction or redistribution of this material in any form is prohibited without the express written permission of Web Publications Pty Ltd.
- Any breach of these terms and conditions may result in suspension or cancellation of the users AutoSpeed account and legal action.

www.autospeed.com