



X flies

For four consecutive years, Nissan's X-Trail literally flew off the showroom floors, making it South Africa's bestselling SUV. Can the newest model keep up? Dieter Losskarn took his family on a trip through the Little Karoo and Garden Route to find out. Photos by Elke Losskarn.

Nissan's X-Trail is like

Derek Watts's hair. Looking at the other *Carte Blanche* presenters, you can clearly see that they have some talented stylists at M-Net, but they obviously decided not to update Derek's hair in any way. No short spikes, no gel, just a blow-dry fringe, which conveys confidence, continuity, honesty and reliability. Well, there you are: the exact qualities of an X-Trail.

For 2008, Nissan designers could have easily come up with an exciting new style. Just look at the sexy 350Z, the awesome Skyline GT-R

(apparently 150 of the Porsche-killing Japanese super sports cars are destined to hit our shores at the beginning of 2009), or the cool and trendy Qashqai, on whose platform the new X-Trail is built.

The X-Trail was the top-selling SUV in South Africa from 2004 to 2007, which echoes its global success story – over 800 000 units have been sold since 2001. Instead of using negative descriptions such as 'boring' or 'bland', let me rather remark that the practical soft-roader blended in so



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well that nobody realised how successful it was. So despite being hailed as an all-new car, at first glance the new one looks like the old one, but with a slightly more chunky appearance. Obviously Nissan wanted to retain what has been well tried.

The newest version of the mid-range sporty SUV is slightly longer (120mm) and wider (20mm) than its predecessor, with a more bulbous body that looks a bit too big for the standard 16-inch and even the 17-inch wheels of the range-topping LE model. But as soon as you climb inside, the perspective changes completely.

A major revamp has altered the whole interior ambience. It feels roomy, up-market and practical. A large, centrally-mounted dash-top storage box is deep enough to hold 10 CD cases or items the size of a tissue box.

There are six cup holders in the cabin, four of which can be chilled or heated. The leather seats (standard in the range-topping LE models) look and are very comfortable. Large windows offer driver and passengers panoramic views of their surroundings.

This proved to be the ideal vehicle for a long weekend trip into the Karoo. The trunk is another great improvement: there is a lot more space – 603 litres with the rear seats in place (193 litres more than the previous X-Trail). Another innovative addition is the double-deck trunk, where a sliding drawer under the floor can store smaller items out of sight. The drawer has partition walls that can be arranged in different positions or removed altogether.

The next surprise from the updated X-Trail was an unexpectedly comfortable ride and the responsiveness of the new 2,5 litre engine, delivering 125 kW. I was impressed by how

much driving pleasure the vehicle provided, especially when you are pushing the speed limits.

You can have either a six-speed manual gearbox or, in our case, the so-called CVT, meaning a continuously variable transmission. You basically accelerate all the way to top speed without any tangible gear changes, a bit like a turbine. Just in case you get bored, you can also shift gears yourself, thanks to a manual/sequential mode.

To see how the new X-Trail performs off the beaten track, I tried to find as much loose gravel as possible. We left the N2 in Botrivier, where a dusty farm road leads over Van der Stel Pass to Villiersdorp. Even in fast



turns over loose ground, ruts or cattle grids, the vehicle was stable, thanks to Nissan's All Mode 4x4 system. This is activated and controlled electronically, resulting in quicker operation and weight reduction.

The X-Trail offers three modes to choose from: 2WD, Auto and Lock. The 2WD is for normal driving conditions, great on-road performance and fuel economy. Auto engages 4x4 when necessary, using advanced technology developed for Nissan's sporty Skyline GT-R. It delivers great on-road stability during both cornering and straight-line driving, as well as added traction when driving on wet or gravel roads. Lock engages full-time 4WD

BELOW: There's space for Africa for your bike and other equipment.
OPPOSITE: In Lock mode and with hill descent on, the X-Trail is ready for some rough stuff.



It was another stretch in Auto mode – and for trailing one of those huge dust clouds behind us

operation. The driving mode is selected at any speed by a rotary knob on the centre console.

Just past Montagu, there was an even longer dirt road, running parallel to Route 62, via Langkloof and Ouberg Pass to Ladismith. It was another stretch in Auto mode – and for trailing one of those huge dust clouds behind us.

A couple of kilometres outside of Prince Albert, the X-Trail was finally in Lock mode. The last part of the dirt road to Gamkapoort Dam was in very poor condition: washed out, with deep ruts and steep embankments on both sides of a dry river bed. In Lock mode and with downhill drive support engaged, we crawled tortoise-like over the obstacles at a maximum 7km/h.

Leaving Prince Albert with enough gravel and dust behind us, we opted for Meiringspoort instead of Swartberg Pass. The road through the poort has a great tarred surface and a couple of nice, quick bends. Just in case you're having too much fun, the X-Trail's safety nets will hopefully catch you in time. There's not only ABS with brake assist (BA), but also electronic brake-force distribution (EBD), which constantly alters the front-rear balance to achieve optimum brake performance, automatically compensating for differing load conditions.

Active brake limited slip (ABLS) applies braking force, via the ABS, to any wheel that loses traction while directing torque to the opposite wheels with grip. Finally, to keep you firmly on the ground, there is the much appreciated vehicle dynamic control (VDC), which improves the vehicle's handling by detecting and preventing skids and slides, helping the driver maintain control of the vehicle. It does this by comparing the driver's intended direction to the vehicle's actual direction. If the vehicle is not going in the

direction you're steering, the VDC brakes individual front or rear wheels and/or reduces excess engine power as needed to help correct under-steer and over-steer. This system is similar to the one helping Murano and 350Z owners survive severe driving mistakes.

Just in case an accident becomes unavoidable, you're not doomed. The car boasts six airbags, including dual-stage driver and front passenger ones, as well as thorax, side and full-length curtain airbags on both sides. Active headrests limit head movement if you're hit from behind. They move forward, then return to their normal position as the impact subsides, helping reduce risk of whiplash injuries for the driver and front seat passenger. >



The low-down

Nissan X-Trail 2,5 LE AT

Price: R368 100 (entry level model: Nissan X-Trail 2,0 4x2 M/T XE R255 600). Available in three different trim levels: XE (entry level), SE (middle-specification) and LE (top specification).

Engine: 2,5 l 4 cyl. – 125 kW/168 hp

0–100 km/h: 10,8 secs

Top speed: 187 km/h

Consumption/100 km: 11,4 litres (average trip consumption)

Fuel tank: 65 litres

Range: 570 km

Weight: 1 700 kg

Approach angle: 28°

Departure angle: 24°

Ground clearance: 220 mm (203 mm with 16-inch wheels)

For more information: www.nissan.co.za

For the same amount of money (R368 100), you could buy:

Toyota RAV4 2,0 VX R329 800

Mitsubishi Outlander 2,4 LE AT R299 900

Honda CR-V 2,4 RVS i R330 500

Chevrolet Captiva 3,2 LTZ AT R336 600

footnotes

Where we stayed

\$\$\$ The Trossachs Guest Lodge

outside McGregor offers some rustic, natural stone cottages, decorated in a Scottish highlander theme in a peaceful setting. B&B rates are from R325 a person a night sharing. Tel 023-625-1881, e-mail info@trossachs.co.za, web www.trossachs.co.za.

\$\$\$\$\$ Bergkant Lodge is one of Prince Albert's most stylish overnight stays. The renovated parsonage recently enlarged two of the four suites and added another swimming pool for more private sunbathing. Rates start from R800 a person a night sharing B&B. Tel 023-541-1088, e-mail bergkant@iafrica.com, web www.debergkant.co.za.

\$\$ Montana Guest Farm, off the R328 to Schoemanshoek 14 km from Oudtshoorn, is a renovated 18th



century farmhouse, offering German hospitality in seven suites, each with a private entrance, some with open fireplaces. It has a swimming pool, is child friendly and good value for money. Rates are from R300 a person a night sharing B&B. Tel 044-272-7774, e-mail dbeitz@mwweb.co.za, web www.montanaguestfarm.co.za

\$\$\$ The Singing Kettle Beach Lodge

in Keurboomstrand boasts a great position overlooking the beach with six airy, marine-themed rooms, including a family suite. Rates start from R550 a person a night sharing. Tel 044-535-9477, e-mail info@singingkettle.co.za, web www.singingkettle.co.za.

An added bonus is **Ristorante Enrico** on the downstairs terrace of the guesthouse. It's one of the country's best Italian restaurants (tel 044-535-9818).

Enough about safety, back to the fun part of the ride. Thanks to the huge tilt-and-slide sunroof (standard in the LE model), we marvelled at the enormous, twisted sandstone layers of Meiringspoort, resembling a giant lasagne.

Thinking of Italian food made us hungry and we just happened to be on route to one of the best Italian restaurants in the country. Ristorante Enrico has an unbeatable position in Keurboomstrand, near Plett, and serves genuine Italian fare with a view made in heaven. What makes it even better is that the Singing Kettle Lodge, above the restaurant, offers six tastefully furnished rooms.

No more driving meant I could sit back and enjoy a great bottle of chilled white wine. I threw a glance at the X-Trail. Its familiar outline didn't make my heart skip a beat, but apart from that, it's a perfect, very comfortable all-rounder, an everyday vehicle that performs well in the city, at weekends and on holiday trips with the occasional rough stuff thrown in.

Only one question remained. What'll change first: the next X-Trail's design or Derek's hairstyle? ■

Next month: Volkswagen's new Tiguan is the popular Touareg's affordable little brother. We take both the petrol and the diesel versions for a ride.

Boys' toys

Affordable workhorses

A bakkie is a boy's best friend. Nissan just introduced its 16th generation Hardbody, effectively having come out with a new design every five years since 1934. An aggressive price structure, about R20 000 to R30 000 lower than its competition, makes this particular bakkie an affordable workhorse for small businesses. But while it's predominantly commercial, there is also an overlap into the leisure market. Prices range from R109 950 for the SWB single cab 4x2 to R230 950 for the double cab 4x4. For more info, web www.nissan.co.za.



Fast and furious drifting

The ultimate boy racer dream is driving like one of those guys in the *Fast and Furious* movie franchise. At African Outdoor Group's drifting school, you can get one step closer to this goal. And what better car to go sideways with than the powerful Nissan 350Z. To make it worthwhile for the whole family, the adventure farm near Hartbeespoort Dam offers tons of other activities, from hot-air ballooning and kayaking to cheese and wine tasting. For more info, tel 012-244-1309 or web www.africanoutdoor.com.

Suzuki cars arrive in SA

We know the bikes quite well, now we finally get to drive the cars. Suzuki is starting off with two models, the snappy Swift and the compact 4x2 SUV SX4. Two interesting 4x4s will follow in September, the Jimny and the Grand Vitara. For more info, web www.suzukisa.co.za.



Stuck

Tackle the blistering hot Richtersveld sands without diff-lock and this will more than likely be the result. The Isuzu Trooper 4x4 got stuck while we were searching for a spot to camp along the Orange River near Richtersberg in March. We had to shovel quite a bit around the wheels before the Land Rover V8 could winch the Trooper free.

Hannelie Wattenbach, Vereniging

If you have photographs of a 4x4 getting stuck, e-mail them to wheels@getaway.co.za or post them to Getaway Wheels, PO Box 180, Howard Place, 7450 Cape Town. You could win a Nissan Secure Tech Survival Kit worth R1 000, comprising an Off-Road Tactix manual and DVD, as well as a recovery bag with pull strap, shackles and a pair of gloves. ■



