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2009 Nissan Cube New vehicle blends design practicality, frugality.

Overview

The Nissan Cube is a new entry to the U.S., a small crossover SUV sporting a boxy, whimsical body design housing a practical cabin. Small on the outside, it's easy to maneuver, easy to park, and it's EPA-rated at 30 miles per gallon Highway. Yet it's big on the inside. It seats five people, with miles of headroom and acres of cargo space.

Nissan refers to the Cube as a mobile hub, instead of a car, because it is meant as an affordable, moveable gathering place for young people, their friends, and their music. Its back seat reclines for comfort or can be deleted for van-like cargo space. Nissan markets its cube in fashionable lower case, like iPhone and smart fortwo.

The Cube is a newcomer to the U.S. market, but it has been on sale for 10 years in Japan, and this version is actually the third generation of this product. The Cube predates the Chrysler PT Cruiser, Scion xB, Kia Soul, Toyota Yaris, and Honda Fit, all of which Nissan counts as the Cube's direct competitors. The Cube is built on the same Nissan B platform as the Versa, a roomy subcompact that also competes with those cars.

The Nissan Cube is powered by a 1.8-liter inline four-cylinder engine, the same engine that powers the Nissan Versa in this market. Buyers can choose between a six-speed manual transmission or the Nissan-built Xtronic continuously variable transmission, or CVT.

We found the Cube perky in the big city and able to keep up with the traffic on the highway. Easy to park, it can make a U-turn in the tiniest of spaces. It made us smile, it's cute, it holds a lot of people and cargo, it's zippy, and it can be easily customized with accessories.

The Cube is the latest addition to an increasingly crowded segment of cute little cars aimed at younger drivers, but it can certainly be appreciated by older drivers who need a second car as a runabout or weekender, or those in between who are looking to downsize their car payment and fuel bills.

Nissan says its designers had in mind a bulldog wearing sunglasses when they were working on the Cube. Whereas most four-door cars have four visible pillars to hold up the roof, the Cube's deliberately asymmetrical design has only three visible pillars, the fourth one at the right rear covered by dark glass. That feature plus the concave, rounded corners on each of the four side windows, short windows in the front doors and longer windows in the rear give the Cube a unique appearance.

Model Lineup

The 2009 Nissan Cube comes in a choice of four models: Cube (\$13,990), Cube S (\$14,690), Cube SL (\$16,790), and Cube Krom (\$19,630).

The Cube comes standard with manual air conditioning, cruise control, a multi-function steering wheel, power windows, power mirrors and locks, an AM/FM/CD sound system with AUX plug and four speakers. Cube and Cube S come with a six-speed manual or optional CVT (\$1000).

The Cube S upgrades from the base model with premium grade fabric, body-colored outside mirrors, cruise control, and a cargo area cover, among other features.

The Cube SL comes standard with the CVT, 16-inch aluminum-alloy wheels, auto on/off headlights, automatic temperature control A/C, the interface system for the Apple iPod, and six speakers.

The Cube Krom includes an exclusive integrated body design, 16-inch aluminum-alloy wheels, a sporty interior treatment, Rockford Fosgate subwoofer, and the Xtronic CVT.

Options include XM satellite radio, Bluetooth connectivity, an iPod interface system, and an intelligent key system with starter button. More than 40 accessory items are available from the factory or installed at the Nissan dealership, everything from plush pile carpet to bungee cords for storage to a navigation system and an interior illumination system that offers a choice of 20 colors or a display mode that changes colors continuously.

Safety equipment standard on all models includes six front, side and curtain air bags, anti-lock brakes, traction control, yaw control.

Walkaround

The Cube's deliberately asymmetrical design has only three visible pillars, the fourth one at the right rear covered by dark glass. That feature plus the concave, rounded corners on each of the four side windows, short windows in the front doors and longer windows in the rear give the Cube a design that is unique, to say the least.



The Cube's exterior features three different front grille areas, top, middle and bottom, four sets of front lamps, a long, flat roof with built-in ridges for strength and quietness, a tall windshield, tall side windows and large doors, including the left-hinged, right-opening refrigerator rear cargo door.

The Krom version features its own chrome grille design, side sills, a different rear roof spoiler, and a rear diffuser under the bumper.

The Cube is built close to the ground, so it is very easy to get into and out of, and the cargo sill is low enough for a child to load groceries over.

Interior Features

What the Cube has more than anything else remotely in its class is its huge interior size, just under 110 cubic feet overall, in a car that's only 157 inches long.

We found a 6-foot, 4-inch driver has about eight inches of headroom, and leg, hip and shoulder room is equally generous. A six-way manual adjuster provides for all types of driver physiques.

The reclining rear seat slides fore and aft more than six inches, enabling moms to deal with backseat kids or babies easily at arm's length or large adults to sit comfortably behind large adults in the front seat. An optional cargo package deletes the rear seats to provide enough space for a rock band's gear. Multi-functional hooks can be detached and moved around the car as needed, and there six cupholders.

Although the Cube's design is quirky on the outside, it's all business and quite normal on the inside, with a conventional gauge package, a slightly stylized center area with the radio and environmental controls, and a large glovebox, with storage cubbies all over the doors and interior.

Interior design licks include a ripple-effect headliner with concentric circles around the dome light, a theme repeated on the speaker cones (and on the Rockford Fosgate subwoofer when ordered). The waveform dashboard and instrument panel are delightful to look at and very easy to use.

The Krom comes with that Rockford Fosgate six-speaker stereo system with the subwoofer mounted in the center of the cargo door.

Driving Impressions

Weighing just 2800 pounds in its basic form, the Cube doesn't tax the 122-horsepower engine at all, and it feels reasonably quick getting away from stoplights and stop signs in urban and suburban settings.

The Cube SL test car we drove had the CVT transmission as standard equipment, and it worked very well with the engine's 127 foot-pounds of torque without a lot of waiting around for the revs to catch up to the ratios, a common problem with other CVTs that tend to make driving noisy and clunky. Not in the Cube CVT. It's not a rocket ship, but it more than keeps up with the traffic, and it isn't buzzy or whiny at freeway speeds.



EPA-rated at 22/30 mpg City/Highway, Cube runs on Regular gas.

The suspension under the Cube is entirely conventional, with MacPherson struts, coil springs and a stabilizer bar up front, and a torsion beam setup with coil springs and a stabilizer bar at the

rear, simple, cheap and effective, and a system that has tuned out almost all of the usual body roll in corners, so the Cube feels stable and planted on its relatively skinny, tall tires.

The steering is light and easy, but not ropey, and the driver's seating position is nice and high, with really excellent outward vision in all directions. It rides on P195 16-inch tires and wheels, and there are no larger tire options.

One of the driving dynamics that distinguishes the Cube is its 33.4-foot turning circle, the shortest in the class, and more than six feet shorter than some of its competitors, a factor that just makes the Cube more maneuverable in more tight places than the other cute little cars.

We found the brakes worked just fine in the busy, crazy downtown Miami traffic, defending the Cube against tourists, pedestrians, scooters and cabbies, with good power and good pedal modulation, without the added expense of rear discs. The brakes are discs front and drums rear, but with ABS, electronic brake force distribution, Brake Assist, traction and yaw control built into the system.

Summary

The Nissan Cube is cute, practical, and fuel-efficient, whether used as a primary car or as a runabout or weekender. It holds a lot of people and cargo, it's zippy, and it can be easily customized.



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