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## 2009 Nissan Frontier Revised midsize pickup with strong engine, good handling.

### Overview

The Nissan Frontier is a midsize pickup truck using a strong and proven 4.0-liter V6 engine, or a 2.5-liter inline four-cylinder, with a fully boxed ladder-type chassis.

For 2009, the grille, front fascia, instrument panel have been slightly changed. There's also a new off-road model called the PRO-4X. The four-wheel-drive system for this model and other Frontiers is part-time 4WD with an electronically controlled transfer case offering shift on the fly.

The V6 engine boasts 261 horsepower, best in class, along with best-in-class towing and payload; but the EPA-rated fuel mileage with 4WD is just 15 mpg City and 19 mpg Highway. Safety features such as electronic stability control, side-impact airbags and airbag curtains are optional, while being standard with some of the Frontier's competitors. The Frontier earned four of five stars for the driver and five stars for the passenger, in government head-on crash testing.

We found the interior comfortable and well laid out, with good rugged standard fabric upholstery. The King Cab has auxiliary doors opening to two small folding seats, while the Crew Cab is a four-door with a three-seat bench in the rear offering comfort although limited legroom. The Crew Cab comes with standard or long wheelbase providing a 6-foot-long bed, same size as the King Cab's.

The ride is good with all models, and we drove them all, including the PRO-4X Crew Cab with off-road shock absorbers and rugged trail tires. The handling is tight and fairly nimble. On gravel roads, we found the 4WD works well to straighten things out.

### Model Lineup

The 2009 Nissan Frontier comes in a King Cab or Crew Cab, 2WD or 4WD.

Frontier XE 2WD (\$17,460) comes with the 2.5-liter four-cylinder engine and five-speed manual transmission. The XE is the base model and has steel wheels, wind-up windows, no air conditioning. The Frontier SE (\$19,560) upgrades with alloy wheels and other features. An automatic transmission is optional (\$1050).

Frontier SE King Cab 2WD (\$22,210) and 4WD (\$24,910) come standard with the V6, mated to either a six-speed manual transmission or five-speed automatic. King Cab seats four. The Crew Cab (\$1050) has four doors and seats five, with a shorter bed; a longer wheelbase version (\$800) makes the bed the same length as in the King Cab.

The Frontier LE 2WD (\$26,540) and 4WD (\$29,190) come with the five-speed automatic, and add a leather-wrapped steering wheel, 18-inch alloy wheels, fog lights and auto headlights, power sideview mirror, tubular sidestep, moonroof, roof rack with crossbars, eight-way driver's and four-way front passenger's adjustable heated seats, cruise control, first aid kit, and power doors, windows and entry. Long wheelbase versions are about \$500 more.

The Frontier PRO-4X off-road model comes in crew cab and automatic transmission only, available in 2WD and 4WD. It has Bilstein off-road shocks, skid plates for the oil pan and transfer case, locking rear differential, and its own 16-inch alloy wheels with BFGoodrich P265/75R16 Rugged Trail tires. Also standard is a spray-on bedliner and tough fabric seats with red stitching, as well as cruise control, remote keyless entry, and power windows, door locks and sideview mirrors.

Option packages include the XE Preferred Package, SE Power Package, Value Truck Package, Moonroof Package (Crew Cab only), Side & Curtain Air Bag Package, Active Brake Limited Slip (ABLS), Technology Package and Traction Package (4WD automatic only).

Safety equipment on all Frontiers includes two-stage front airbags, a tire pressure monitor, anti-lock brakes with electronic brake force distribution. Crew Cab models have three-point seat belts for all rear-seat occupants, including the center position, plus the LATCH (Lower Anchors and Tethers for CHildren) child seat anchor system. Electronic stability control (VDC, for Vehicle Dynamic Control) is optional only on the LE and PRO-4X models. Front-seat side-impact airbags and airbag curtains are optional. Exterior Features There's a family resemblance between the midsize Nissan Frontier and full-size Titan, but the Frontier is two feet shorter and feels it. After climbing out of a Titan and into a Frontier, it seems right, unless you need an eight-foot bed for work or need to tow a big trailer.

The grille, headlights, front fascia and alloy wheels have been retouched for 2009, but not enough for anyone to notice. The fender flares are big and smooth. The front end is a bit cleaner and shinier, and the wheels, two types of 16-inch and one 18-inch alloys, have a bit more style. The Crew Cab looks cool with the optional tubular black aluminum roof rack, taken from the popular Xterra SUV.

King Cabs have rear-hinged auxiliary doors behind the front doors, for access to the two small forward-facing seats. Crew Cabs have four full doors and a roomy and comfortable rear passenger compartment that seats three. The King Cab bed is 73.3 inches Crew Cab bed is 59.5 inches, or almost exactly five feet. It takes a Crew Cab long wheelbase, another 14 inches, to get a bed the same length as King Cab.

A spray-on bed liner and Utili-track tie-down system are available. Using five rails (two on the floor and one on each side and forward bulkhead) and cleats that slide in the channels, all kinds of cargo can be held down.

The new PRO-4X is not totally new; it already existed under another name, the Frontier Nismo (Nissan Motor Sports), technically aftermarket but all Nissan, and available from dealers. It does away with a bunch of chrome, in particular the grille, bumpers, outside mirrors and door handles, making them body-colored. It's got its own 16-inch alloy wheels and big distinctive off-road tires.

## **Walkaround**

For 2009, parts of the instrument panel are new, in particular the HVAC control knobs and white-faced gauges. The standard seat fabric is also new, with perforated leather optional; the leather is excellent but the fabric is rugged and eminently livable, although we dropped a dollop of a Subway foot-long on it and it and the stain wouldn't go away with just a napkin and spit (upholstery cleaner got it later).

The PRO-4X, our test model for one week, has cool red stitching on its own black fabric. The bucket seats fit well; hours could be spent in them pleasurably, presuming they're not all off-road hours, but even if they were, the PRO-4X would make the time bearable on the backbone.

The front seat layout is excellent, with a console having gauges that are attractive and easy to read, and controls that are easy to operate. The center console is deep, while there are cubbies forward of the shift lever, cupholders galore, good armrests and door handles, and a double glovebox that opens up and down. A nice steering wheel has optional controls and short sturdy stalks. Good grab handles on the A pillars. The vinyl dashboard is ugly in brown, but just fine in black.

Options include an eight-way power driver's seat, four-way power passenger's seat, heated front seats, dual heated outside mirrors, and more.

We spent some time in a regular Crew Cab as well. Passengers back there will have a good time, especially if they're under an optional moonroof. They'll have cupholders, map pockets, grab handles, and an optional folding center armrest, although not a lot of knee room.

Rear seats in both the King Cab and Crew Cab fold up, and the front passenger seat folds flat, to create cargo space.

### **Interior Features**

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### **Driving Impressions**

We got into the Nissan Frontier after stepping out of a full-size Titan, and we must say that the Frontier made the Titan feel huge. And for the week we were in the Frontier, it never felt too small. So we might suggest that the first things you should consider in choosing a Frontier (or any truck) are the size of the bed you need, and the seating capacity. (That's assuming you don't need the full-size Titan for towing.) Remember that tailgate extenders are available, if you occasionally need a longer bed to haul things.

On the road, the award-winning, all-aluminum DOHC V6 engine has very strong acceleration when you put your foot down. As it should, given 261 horsepower. At 4.0 liters, it's a stroked version of the award-winning 3.5-liter that's used in the 350Z sports car and other Nissans. It has all the right stuff: aluminum block and heads, Teflon-coated pistons, Continuous Valve Timing Control (CVTCS), Nissan variable Induction Control System (NICS), silent timing chain and micro finished camshaft and crankshaft surfaces, digital knock control system, and 105,000-mile spark plugs.

There's 281 pound-feet of torque, but it isn't fully there at lower rpm, so you do have to put your foot down to find all the power, and that doesn't come without a price in fuel efficiency. The PRO-4X gets 15 City and 19 Highway miles per gallon, which is no more than the full-size Dodge Ram pickup with a 390-horsepower Hemi V8 engine.

The four-cylinder engine with manual transmission gets an EPA-rated 19/23 mpg. It's available in a nicely equipped SE King Cab, so this might be an option.

The five-speed automatic transmission shifts in and out of fifth gear frequently, even at fairly low speeds during casual driving, but always smoothly and often invisibly. A manual mode would be useful, but isn't available.

On the highway, we drove Frontiers with both the short and long wheelbase, as well as our week in the PRO-4X with the off-road Bilstein gas-charged shock absorbers and big BFG trail tires, and we didn't encounter any bumps or situations that made us say: This thing rides like a truck.

The handling is also good, tight, never flabby or wallowy. In fact, it feels better than the Nissan Xterra SUV, which uses the Frontier chassis but has a higher center of gravity. The turning circle isn't nearly as tight as that of the Xterra, however. The chassis is a boxed-in steel ladder frame, with double wishbone front suspension and solid rear axle with leaf springs.

The part-time four-wheel-drive system, which can be easily shifted on the fly, is there to be used. Don't even think of driving off the pavement without engaging it, because it makes a world of difference. Even when you don't need it to keep from getting stuck, it transforms the Frontier; on gravel roads the Frontier is totally squirrely in 2WD, but in 4WD it's stable. Even the ride is improved using 4WD, because the tires remain more in contact with the ground.

On those gravel roads, riding as a passenger in a 4WD King Cab, we found things a bit rough. Later, driving the PRO-4X for a couple hours on fire trails in the Pacific Northwest, no problem. Lots of fun. The good seats were a relief. But that's when we most would have liked a manual mode in the five-speed automatic transmission.

We also got on a closed off-road course, with specific steep challenges. We used 4WD in its low range to get over some ridges and ruts, and found that it allowed higher speeds than some other systems; but also found that it wasn't really needed except in the most extreme situations, because 4WD in high range is good.

You have to get the optional Traction Package to make the PRO-4X capable off-road; it includes Vehicle Dynamic Control, Hill Descent Control, and Hill Start Assist. We tested the HDC that allows you to travel down a steep hill and rely on electronics to slow and keep the truck safe and steady at about 5 mph, with throttle control and ABS automatically applied, meaning all the driver has to do is steer. If you live in a place that has snowy and icy hills in winter, HDC could save your life or the life of another, for example a passenger on the sidewalk because it allows you to maintain steering control.

Hill Start Assist allows you to start moving forward on a steep uphill, without drifting back. It applies the brakes for two seconds after you lift your foot off the brake pedal. However with an automatic transmission, that's not really a problem, because you can use two feet on the two pedals.

## **Summary**

Nissan Frontier offers a lot for a midsize truck, namely best-in-class power, payload and towing capacity, though with a price in fuel mileage. And some safety features, such as stability control, side-impact airbags and airbag curtains, are either optional or unavailable on some models. The Frontier interior is

comfortable and laid out well, and the back seat of the Crew Cab offers good room for three passengers. Off-road, the Frontier is very capable, with its two-speed transfer case using part-time 4WD that can be shifted on the fly, plus Hill Descent Control on some models. It rides and steers well on gravel roads in 4WD, and on pavement, its ride is nice and handling tight.