

## **2012 Nissan Maxima** **A four-door sedan with sports-car performance.**

### **Overview**

The Nissan Maxima is a sporty midsize sedan engineered for drivers. Sportier and more luxurious than the Nissan Altima, the Maxima is intended more for a couple or four adults on the town. A family of four or five would be better served by a Nissan Murano or Altima. The Maxima can seat five passengers, or four when ordered with rear bucket seats.

Maxima's 290-horsepower, 3.5-liter V6 engine drives the front wheels through a continuously variable transmission. Drivers who take driving seriously don't usually like CVTs for their lackluster performance and snowmobile-like behavior, but Nissan is particularly good at CVTs and this one allows the driver to switch into a manual mode with six pre-set ratios.

The Maxima shares its platform, its basic structure, with the Altima and Murano, but its major bits and pieces are stiffer, providing a firmer ride and more precise steering feel. The Maxima also features a notably wide track, which helps the car handle the corners on its wide tires.

The 2012 Nissan Maxima gets a freshened grille and taillights, as well as updated interior trim. A new Limited Edition package for the 2012 Maxima upgrades over the base model with sportier exterior trim and premium features.

The Maxima is a great looking, assertive sedan with high style and fine detailing. It doesn't look like anything else in the Nissan lineup.

Inside, the Maxima cabin is driver-focused and does a good job keeping its plethora of buttons in a logical, easy-to-use formation. Infotainment options include a Technology package with voice-activated navigation, real-time traffic and weather, DVD/CD player, Bluetooth audio streaming and 9.3GB of digital music storage.

Competitors to the 2012 Nissan Maxima include front-wheel-drive midsize family sedans such as the Honda Accord, Toyota Camry, and Hyundai Sonata, as well entry-level trims of near-luxury midsize cars such as the front-wheel-drive Acura TL and the rear-wheel-drive Cadillac CTS sedan and Infiniti G25. The Maxima's dimensions are snuggler than in some of the other cars in its class, most notably in trunk space and in rear headroom, the latter due to the car's low roofline.

Fuel economy for the 2012 Nissan Maxima is an EPA-estimated 19/26 mpg City/Highway or 22 mpg Combined. That's on the low end compared to V6 versions of the Camry and Accord, the Acura TL and the Infiniti G25.

However, for those who value driving dynamics over space, the Maxima is a solid choice.

## Model Lineup

The 2012 Nissan Maxima is available in two trim levels: Maxima S and Maxima SV, both with the 3.5-liter V6 and CVT.

Maxima S (\$32,420) comes standard with cloth upholstery, dual-zone automatic climate control, power front seats (eight-way driver and four-way passenger), 60/40-split-folding rear seat and a leather-wrapped tilt-and-telescoping steering wheel, auto-dimming mirror, trip computer, keyless ignition/entry, cruise control, automatic headlights, Bluetooth phone capability and an eight-speaker stereo with a six-CD changer and an auxiliary audio jack. It also comes with 18-inch alloy wheels and a sunroof.

The Maxima Limited Edition package for S models (\$710) includes a unique grille and 18-inch dark silver alloy wheels, HID xenon headlights with smoke-tinted lenses, foglights and a rear spoiler. (All prices are Manufacturer's Suggested Retail Prices, which do not include \$780 destination charge and may change at any time without notice.)

Maxima SV (\$35,120) adds to the base S equipment foglights, leather upholstery, a driver-seat manual thigh-support extender and power lumbar support, and a nine-speaker Bose audio system with satellite radio. The Monitor Package (\$700) adds a 7-inch touchscreen electronics interface, 2GB of digital music storage, an RCA auxiliary audio-video jack, a rearview camera and an iPod/USB audio interface. The Cold Package (\$400) adds heated front seats, a heated steering wheel and heated mirrors. Xenon high-intensity discharge headlights are also available (\$400). The Technology Package (\$1,850) includes a voice-activated navigation system with real-time traffic and weather, DVD playback and a single in-dash CD player (which replaces the six-disc version), Bluetooth streaming audio and 9.3GB of digital music storage.

Maxima SV Premium (\$3,300) package comes with upgraded leather upholstery, rear bucket seats with a center trunk pass-through for four-passenger seating, dual-panel sunroof, a rearview camera, the 7-inch touchscreen, a ventilated driver seat, rear-seat audio and climate controls, automatic up/down rear windows, a power rear sunshade, wood trim, RCA auxiliary audio-video jacks (replaces standard aux jack), an iPod interface, heated front seats and steering wheel, driver seat memory functions, a power tilt-and-telescoping steering wheel with paddle shifters, HID headlights, heated mirrors with driver-side auto-dimming.

Maxima SV Sport Package (\$2,100) features a sport-tuned suspension, 19-inch alloy wheels, smoked headlights, a dark chrome grille, a rear spoiler, gray metallic stitching accents, and metallic-look interior trim; high-performance summer tires are available with the Sport package.

Safety features on all models include dual-stage frontal, side-impact and side-curtain airbags; anti-lock brakes with brake assist; Vehicle Dynamic Control (electronic stability control); Traction Control; tire-pressure monitoring; and active front head restraints.

## Walkaround

The Nissan Maxima has an attractive, shapely look that fits with its sporty character. Brand styling themes are evident, but the look is unique in Nissan lineup.

Every exterior body panel on the car shows adventurous and modern design and shaping. The fenders bulge at the wheelwells front and rear, accented by character lines along those bulges. The hood has similar bulges, and they all lend a sporty appearance. On each side, the door skins are pulled in from the fenders and flattened out so that the whole body has a Coke-bottle shape, with a short nose, a short deck, a long, sloping roof and a BMW-style C-pillar curvature. The grille, headlamps, and LED taillamps are large and fit well into the whole exterior design.

## **Interior Features**

The Maxima's place at the top of the Nissan lineup is most evident from the driver's seat. The design, materials, and execution of the interior are top-notch. Buyers have a choice of four- or five-passenger seating.

The interior features of the Maxima are all about concentration of controls and information around the driver. The interior includes a few items right out of the Nissan parts bin. The radio and navigation control panel sit at the top of the center stack, backed up by lower controls with large, very readable labels and markings. The instruments are black with white numbers that are lit even during daytime driving. The hefty three-spoke steering wheel has redundant controls for the audio system, and is available with huge paddle shifters that will never be out of reach for a quick shift. The floor shifter is located to the left of the center console, for those who want to shift via the stick instead of the paddles.

The available Music Box hard-drive radio holds thousands of songs, and drivers can plug their iPods and MP3 players into the available USB port to listen to songs that way. Nissan also offers a smaller two-gig hard drive in the Monitor package to hold a few hundred songs.

Front and rear comfort is quite good, though not class leading. The driver's seat is multi-adjustable, especially in the Sport package version that we drove, and very huggy and comfortable. Headroom and legroom are generous for most drivers, though the very tall will want more of both.

The rear seat doesn't have as much space as we would expect for a car of this size. Legroom is decent. So is headroom for those of average height. However, taller occupants will want for more headroom due to the car's coupe-like roofline. The seats themselves are fairly supportive, though. Nissan designed the Maxima primarily with two people in mind, with the back seat designed for occasional use. The Altima is better suited for a family of three or four.

The trunk is small for the class, offering 14.2 cubic feet. The rear seat that comes standard folds 60/40, which adds considerable space. The Sport and Premium packages have a fixed rear seat with a cargo pass-through in the center for occasional hauling or ski trips. That reduces cargo capacity, but the metal plate behind the rear seat improves chassis rigidity, which is the key to sharp handling and a smooth ride.

## **Driving Impressions**

Nissan markets the Maxima as a four-door sports car. While that may be going a bit far, it certainly is a sports sedan. Front-wheel drive means it isn't as naturally balanced as rear-wheel-drive cars such as the Infiniti G or BMW 3 Series or Cadillac CTS. However, the Maxima has six engine mounts, and the engine is mounted quite low in the chassis for a lower center of gravity and better handling. The suspension uses aluminum components and a geometry chosen for handling capabilities. We found the front-wheel-drive generates virtually no torque-steer, even under full throttle, an impressive bit of tuning on Nissan's part.

We found the Nissan Maxima SV Sport felt agile, glued to the road and ready to play, with no hint of harshness in the ride.

The speed-sensitive power rack-and-pinion steering system is shared with the 370Z sports car, and it makes the driver feel connected, truly part of the steering and driving process, and it's never over-boosted.

The brakes have vented rotors both front and rear, for superior fade-resistance and added braking power under severe conditions.

The Maxima comes with a strong, responsive 3.5-liter V6 engine. With 290 horsepower at 6400 rpm and 261 pound-feet of torque at 4400 rpm, the V6 is at the top of the class in terms of power development for its size, but it's not peaky or cranky because the valve and intake systems keep it optimized for just about any gear and rev range. It has both variable valve timing and a variable intake system. The latter opens wide at about 4500 rpm, wide enough that you can hear the engine sound change dramatically, adding to the driving enjoyment. The Maxima is EPA-rated at 19 mpg City, 26 mpg Highway.

The engine is smooth right up to the 6200 rpm redline. The only time it gets loud is when the engine intake system switches over into high-flow mode above 4500 rpm. The rest of the time, the car is very quiet inside, with very little intrusion from the outside world. We are reminded once again Nissan builds superb V6s. Power is plentiful throughout the rev range. This makes the car enjoyable to drive, and if you can keep your foot out of it, you can get better mileage than the 26 mpg EPA Highway label. If you keep your foot in it, expect 0-60 mph times of 5.8 seconds or less.

Much to the chagrin of some critics, the continuously variable transmission, or CVT, is the only transmission available. As with a traditional automatic, the driver need do nothing to change ratios except step on the gas pedal. While the transmission is, indeed, continuously variable, the CVT includes a manual mode with six preset drive ratios that the driver can select for sportier driving. We found the CVT a joy to use in either mode. According to Nissan, the Xtronic CVT software contains more than 700 shifting algorithms to cope with every driving situation in every gear from idle to full-throttle, and the transmission can shift 30 percent faster than a human can manually. In the Sport Drive mode, the shifts are lightning quick, and Nissan has programmed it to include a very sporty throttle blip on every downshift.

## **Summary**

From its quick, accurate steering to the ready power to the nimble handling, the Nissan Maxima is one of the most fun-to-drive midsize sedans. It isn't the roomiest car in the class, and it isn't the least expensive. It isn't meant to be. Instead, it is designed as a premium car for drivers who want a sporty four-door but don't want to spend the money for full-on luxury.

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