

Off-Road Specialist - 2009 Nissan Frontier PRO-4X

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I'll be honest - I miss the days of the true mini-pickup. Growing up in the 70s and early 80s, my friends and I spent countless hours bouncing around on the bench seats of Ford Couriers, Datsun 620s, and even a much-abused Plymouth Arrow pickup. My college ride was a Mazda B2000 "Sundowner" - which retailed for \$4200 in 1984.

But as time went on, the mini-truck swelled until it was almost indistinguishable from a full-size. It started with the Dodge Dakota and eventually seeped into the import truck market as well. Nowadays, the smallest pickup truck is the size of that original Dakota, and the true mini-trucks are becoming harder to find.

So it's with that sense of nostalgia that I evaluate the Nissan Frontier - a direct descendant of my favorite mini-truck of all time, the Datsun 620.

The Frontier starts at \$17,460 for a 2WD, 2.5-liter 4-cylinder configuration. That's an attractive price on the closest thing going to a true mini-truck, and you even get extra-cab. But most buyers, especially in the Northwest, prefer 4WD and a good percentage will also get the very nice four-door crew cab as well. And once you've gone that far, you're into Nissan's 4.0-liter V6 engine for your truck. The truck I tested was the PRO-4X crew cab, which retails at \$28,980.

I think there are really three kinds of truck buyers - the kind who just like driving a truck around, the kind who expect to haul lumber and dirty stuff, and those who spend a lot of time off-road. The load-hauler is likely to buy Nissan's 2WD 4-banger basic Frontier. The Frontier PRO-4X is definitely made for the off-road market.

The Frontier is a good-looking truck with all modern conveniences included. You get fancy leather seats, shifter and steering wheel. You get chrome accent rings, a trip computer, a Bluetooth hands-free phone system, and a nice 6-disc CD changer with satellite radio, air conditioning, heated power-adjustable seats, and stereo/cruise controls on the steering wheel. In the back, you get these nifty clamps that help tie down the stuff in the truckbed and a factory-applied urethane bedliner, which is a really nice feature.

One thing I like about the Nissan Frontier and Nissan products generally is that they offer a real 4WD system. With Nissan, you get your choice of 2WD, 4WD high range, 4WD low range, and a rear differential lock and 4-wheel limited slip. If you are serious about off-road driving, this is the kind of 4 Wheel Drive system you need.

I had the chance in September to try the Frontier PRO-4X on an off-road proving course, and it ate up the landscape and never even worried me on the steepest grades. The Frontier is an excellent off-road vehicle.

But unless you're a hard-core off-roader, I don't think you'll go crazy for the Frontier. With the crew cab, you trade off the truck bed space. The bed is about 4 feet wide and 5 feet long - not big enough to haul lumber or other useful stuff. If you need the four-door, five-passenger capacity, you'd probably be happier in the Nissan XTerra SUV, and you'd probably find it more useful for hauling stuff.

I found the Frontier's weak point to be the brakes. I expected the light truck bouncy ride and the 4WD handling - I can't fault the Frontier for being what it is. But the truck was under-braked generally and the brake pedal felt soft and unresponsive. I left a big following distance on the freeway even after giving the brakes a good test.

The bottom line is that the Frontier is a real true truck. So it should come as no surprise that as a driver's vehicle the Frontier is less attractive than other models. If you're not going off-road and you're not hauling stuff around, you can get a much better driving experience in a Nissan SUV like the XTerra or a Nissan CUV like the Murano or the Rogue.