

CROSSING BACK AND FORTH

BY JOE SAGE

VETERAN SUV EVOLVES BACK INTO UNIBODY TERRITORY

The Nissan Pathfinder came to life in the dawning era of the SUV, the mid 1980s, a solid box based on Nissan's smaller pickup truck frame, competing with the Toyota 4Runner, as well as the early Jeep Cherokee and Chevy S10 Blazer. It stayed much the same through the mid '90s. Its second generation, straddling the turn of the new millennium, took the crossover approach—the Pathfinder was now based on a unibody car chassis. By the mid-0ughts, it was back to its truck-frame basis and stayed that way till now.

This 2013 model is the Pathfinder's fourth generation, and it has gone back to a unibody structure. Body style has evolved back and forth, mostly in sync with chassis changes (see photos at left).

The new Pathfinder arguably takes on more of a station wagon appearance. Yet Nissan does not call it a crossover—they say this is "the Pathfinder re-imagined—a next-gen SUV with an unparalleled balance of capability, premium comfort and advanced, user-friendly technology."

The second-gen foray into unibody had maintained rear-wheel drive for its 4x2 option, as did both the truck-based



At top is a first-gen truck-based Pathfinder SUV from the early '90s. Second and third are both second-gen unibodies (1997 and 2001), though the red one suggests a yearning for its trucklike roots. By the third generation (2012, fourth photo above), it had gone back to body-on-frame construction. At right is the current fourth-gen unibody Pathfinder.



generations. This new Pathfinder is the first one that, when ordered as a 4x2, is front-wheel-drive.

The Pathfinder falls between the Xterra and Armada, which are most closely related to the Nissan Frontier and Titan pickups, respectively. In raw personality, the Xterra is probably most likely to be picked for rougher outdoor use, and the Armada for comfortable, capable country club and soccer team duty. All three are SUVs capable of any and all duty. The Pathfinder is at home in town or wilderness—and can also tow 5000 pounds. (For maximum utility, of course you'll likely want the 4x4, not the 4x2 as our sample here.)

Our first revelatory experience came as soon as we opened the rear hatch. The third-gen Pathfinder had already added a third row. But we tended to still have the earlier Pathfinders in mind, with the big Armada good for crowds. So the huge cargo area came as a surprise, followed by our discovery of an extremely roomy second row. Yet outside, the impression is that it's trimmer and tamer than its predecessor.

In round numbers, the three Nissan SUVs—Xterra, Pathfinder, Armada—are priced at about \$23-, \$29- and \$37,000, base. Their three crossovers—Juke, Rogue, Murano—are about \$19-, \$20- and \$28,000. This spread seems to explain why Nissan would prefer to keep the Pathfinder in its SUV list, without disrupting the pecking order of its crossovers. In fact, once you compare it with those, the Pathfinder does seem more utilitarian—unibody chassis or not. The midrange Pathfinder comes in five trim levels, up to \$39,600 base.

Our Pathfinder SL falls in the middle of the model range and comes very well equipped. Keyless entry and start, 8-way lumbar power seat, and a rich leather shifter and wheel greet you, although its mechanical parking brake and mechanical tilt/telescope wheel seem out of place next

to those. Overhead is a dual panorama moonroof—a front power sliding tinted glass panel with one-touch open/close and tilt feature, and a fixed rear pane with sliding sunshade.

True to form, Nissan's simple, clean and complete approach to ergonomics and controls pleases us. Window switches with an intuitive tactile emphasis on the front pair are a master stroke. Contoured metallic switches against the leather outer corners of the binnacle—a place you usually don't see controls—help differentiate in an era of feature overload, reducing clutter or confusion.

Weight is about 4200 pounds, which the V6's 260 horses handle fine—as does the CVT. Continuously variable transmissions have their fans and a few detractors, but most people will never know or care which tranny they have, and Nissan is way ahead of the curve on perfecting these.

If you're used to the prior 27 years' worth of Pathfinders—or any other rear-driver—you will notice some front-drive torque behavior at times. We stayed focused, on the freeway, to avoid any characteristic dart toward the neighboring lane. Seasoned front-drive fans won't notice it.

SUV, crossover, unibody or truck, this newest Nissan Pathfinder strikes us as more conventional than its forebears. This doesn't imply any reduction in abilities—it's more about an intended broadening of appeal. At least that's their gamble. In some ways, the entire industry has been through three decades of utility vehicles, only to rediscover the station wagon. But your granddad's wagon was never like this—ultra-tech, ultra-safe and ready for rocks or road.

We were somewhat surprised to realize how much the Pathfinder had become functionally like, say, the GMC Acadia, one of our recent favorites. At about \$13-14,000 lower cost, the Pathfinder deserves a good, long look. ■

NISSAN PATHFINDER SL 4X2

ENGINE	3.5L V6
TRANSMISSION	Xtronic CVT
HORSEPOWER	260 hp
TORQUE	240 lb-ft
DRIVETRAIN	FWD
WHEELS/TIRES...18" alloy / 235/65R18 all-season	
BRAKES FR/R	12.6/12.13 vented disc
PASSENGERS	7
INTERIOR VOLUME.....	173.8 cu.ft. total
CARGO VOLUME (all seats up)	16.0 cu.ft.
CARGO VOLUME (2nd/3rd rows down) ..	79.8 cu.ft.
TURNING CIRCLE.....	38.7 feet
TOWING CAPACITY.....	5000 lb
FUEL CAPACITY	19.5 gal
FUEL.....	Regular unleaded
MPG (4x2).....	20/26/22 city/hwy/comb
(FYI MPG 4x4).....	19/25/21 city/hwy/comb

INCLUDED: Leather seats, latch/glide EZ Flex seating, 8-way power driver's seat w/ power lumbar, 4-way power front passenger, heated seats front and 2nd row, memory mirrors, leather-wrapped steering wheel w/ illuminated controls, leather-wrapped shifter, power locks and smart key, pushbutton start, remote start, tri-zone climate w/ 2-row controls and 3-row vents, rear monitor and sonar, easy fill tire alert, smart headlights, vehicle dynamic control, traction control, electronic brake distribution and ABS.

BASE (SL).....	\$34,470
• SL PREMIUM PACKAGE: 13-speaker Bose audio, dual panorama moonroof, tow hitch receiver and trailer harness (\$3050 with \$400 package savings)	\$2650
• Splash guards	\$150
• Roof rail cross bars	\$300
• Carpeted floor mats	\$200
• Illuminated kick plates	\$275
• Destination	\$825
TOTAL	\$38,870