

ter? Whether you're comparing comfort, speed, vehicle dynamics, refinement, design, or quantity of luxury appointments, the Infiniti delivers as much or more than the German superstars for tens of thousands less.

In terms of size and bulk, the Q45 (the Q designates the big sedan in the Infiniti line, the 45 refers to its 4.5-liters of engine displacement) is every bit the equal of its European rivals. Available only as a four-door, it is about two inches longer than the 750iL and eight inches shorter than the 560SEL. And at roughly 3850 pounds, it's no lightweight. The Q45's interior dimensions are in the same league as well, meaning that the cabin has enough room to bring a smile to an NBA player's face.

The Infiniti's front-engine-rear-drive layout follows the accepted European luxosedan blueprint (only Audi's new V8 model deviates with four-wheel drive), and its powerplant rivals the best from the West. Under the Q45's smooth hood lives an engine any BMW or Mercedes would be proud to call its own: an all-aluminum 4.5-liter V-8 muscled-up with two overhead cams per cylinder bank, four valves per cylinder, variable intake-valve timing, and electronic port fuel injection.

The engine's oversquare design and robust construction allow plenty of revs; the redline is set at an eye-popping 6900 rpm, and the power curve peaks as high as the Matterhorn. Does 278 hp at 6000 rpm sound like enough brawn to you? If not, consider that the 296-hp 750iL is the only German rival with more power than the Q45.

Top-end power, however, won't do the job alone. A big, heavy sedan needs ample low-end torque to move its bulk effectively from stoplight to stoplight. The Q45 grunts out plenty—292 pound-feet—but at a high 4000 rpm, a figure that would indicate lethargy at low speeds. Not so, responds chief engine engineer Takatoshi Hirai. "Ninety percent of the torque is available at 2000 rpm," he crows. "And because of the variable valve timing, we develop 30 pound-feet more torque in the middle range than without it."

There were no shortcuts in the development of the chassis, either. The front end deals with the road surface through unequal-length control arms coupled with two-piece articulated hubs. The rear setup is the latest in multilink designs, consisting of one diagonal link, two lateral links, and one control arm per side. There are coil springs all around and anti-roll bars front and rear. You steer through a rack-and-pinion mechanism,

stop with four disc brakes and standard ABS, and roll along on a set of 215/65VR-15 Michelin MXV tires mounted on alloy wheels.

If you absolutely must have some sort of electronic suspension enhancement, the Q45 will offer a version of Nissan's Super HICAS four-wheel-steering system as an expensive (about \$3000) option. The big claim for Super HICAS is improved stability in transitional maneuvers, especially in violent accident-avoidance swerves. Super HICAS is intended solely to improve vehicle dynamics; it does nothing to tighten the turning circle for easier parking. Because Super HICAS will also be offered on the upcoming 300ZX Turbo, we'll investigate its pros and cons in depth when we have production models to test.

Just looking at the Q45's mechanical menu tells you that it will be blood-sucking fast. But speed is the easy part. The legends in the luxury-sedan business are all about poise and elegance and presence. We think that the Q45 will measure up on those important points as well. The cars we drove all over Arizona during the press preview were early prototypes, but you could have fooled us. And because the production models are bound to be even better, we believe that our initial impressions will hold when the cars go on sale in early November.

Speaking of first impressions, the Q45 comes across like a bright light when you first make its acquaintance. In person it doesn't have quite the impact of a big Bimmer or Benz—actually, a tad more brightwork might help—but the shape is fluid, fresh, and expensively tailored. The proportions are just right. The chrome, oval doorhandles invite touching. The snub nose looks purposeful. This is a designer's car, so well done it could have come from any number of European design studios.

The only controversial detail is the gross Infiniti plaque bolted to the nose. We think it looks like a cross between a paper doily and a state trooper's badge, neither of which give us warm fuzzy feelings. It's as out of character on this classy sedan as a pair of raccoon-tail antennas would be.

Inside, the European sense of simple-is-best pervades every crisp detail. The power-seat controls and the shift quadrant for the standard four-speed automatic transmission are unabashed copies of Mercedes pieces—which work better than any others in the world. Little else is borrowed. The dash is a single, uncluttered sweep. Chrome and wood trim are conspicuously absent. Leather is the

standard seat covering, wool is a no-cost option. Every control is logically placed, every gauge easily readable.

No detail has been ignored. The leather on the steering wheel and the shifter is from the same hide, so as not to shock your tactile sense. The typeface on the gauges is pleasingly antique—something you might find in a 1930s car. The thick moldings around the windows fit as tightly as the pieces in a Chinese jigsaw puzzle. And once you've adjusted the seats, the mirrors, and the steering column—it tilts and telescopes electrically—to your liking, you can program their positions into the seating computer for retrieval if anything gets moved.

By now it's clear that the Q45 looks after your every whim, so you'll hardly be surprised at what you hear when the engine fires off. It's as silky sounding and vibration-free as a 560SEL V-8. But it is *not* dead silent. Nissan didn't want to eliminate engine noise entirely, explains Mr. Oka. The aim was a pleasing mechanical sound. Mission accomplished.

The Q45 moves off elegantly, the transmission starting in second—like a Mercedes automatic. ("It was the only way to get a smooth-enough takeoff," says Oka.) Flooring the throttle from rest drops the four-speed back into first for quicker launches, but even then the Q45 doesn't lunge. Potent as it is, the engine is always dignified. It makes wonderful noises as it revs, but at anything less than full throttle the sound is nothing more than a murmur.

The ride is equally graceful, neither floaty nor stiff—we wouldn't have tuned it any differently ourselves. The suspension takes the sting out of sharp bumps and pavement blemishes, but still manages to keep you well connected to the road surface. And the steering is a perfect match—accurate and progressive and with just the right amount of heft.

As you steer down the boulevard, gazing out over the wide hood, you . . . hey, wait a minute. From the driver's seat the soft folds in the hood are virtually identical to an SEL's. If a three-pointed star were perched at the leading edge, you'd be convinced. Oka laughs when confronted by this revelation. In consumer clinics, he says, Nissan tried a sloping hood that was barely visible from the driver's seat. "Luxury-car buyers want to see the hood," he says firmly. Apparently, they want to see a Daimler-Benz hood.

Not that the Q45 isn't worthy. Even in prototype form it drove with the quality of a Benz—the seamlessness of the controls, the direct responses, the muted thump of the tires over bumps. In our es-