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AUTOFOCUS

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SECTION 9

AutoSunday

Infiniti M45x keeps rolling in high style

BY FRANK A. AUKOFR

Scripps Howard News Service

Four-wheel drive has been around almost as long as the automobile. But until the sport utility and crossover revolution, it was confined mainly to Jeeps, Land Rovers and the occasional truck.

Early systems were mechanical, heavy and required some involvement and effort to operate. Owners of older four-wheelers remember shifting a beefy floor lever followed by getting down and dirty to manually lock hubs on the front wheels.

But with the advent of new all-wheel drive systems that were unobtrusive and nearly invisible to the driver except in nasty conditions, there has been an explosion of cars, crossovers, sport utility vehicles and trucks capable of seamlessly putting the power to the ground with all four wheels.

Now there are many different variations, ranging from sophisticated to simple. What they have in common is that they all add cost and weight to the car, although the difference in fuel economy between an all-wheel drive and two-wheel drive vehicle usually is negligible.

Some manufacturers start with rear drive and make the front wheels drive as well; others start with front-drive. Infiniti of Japan, the luxury division of Nissan, has a lineup that is based on rear-drive platforms. But it has been adding all-wheel drive steadily, to the point where every model except the G37 coupe can be ordered with all-wheel drive.

For about \$40,000, the mid-size all-wheel-drive Infiniti G35x four-door sedan comes with all the bells and whistles, including a 306-horsepower V-6 engine, navigation and a sport package. Though not the quickest off the line, it delivers taut handling, a balanced feel and comfortable, long-distance cruising.

But the back seat is tight for anybody over about 5-feet, 10-inches tall, and the center-rear position is impossible. With its six-speed automatic transmission, paddle shifters for the manual mode and adjustable thigh bolsters, the G35x has a specific sports-sedan personality.

If you want more luxury and interior space, the tested M45x AWD sedan, the flagship of the Infiniti line, could fill the bill. It is classified as a large car by the government, though just barely, and has all the accouterments of a top-hat luxury car, including an interior with perforated leather upholstery and oiled wood trim that could easily be used for the stock of an expensive shotgun or rifle.

Other equipment on the test car included a navigation system, Bose surround-sound audio with XM satellite radio and a 9.3-gigabyte music hard drive, automatic cruise control, lane-departure warning and prevention system, heated and reclining back seats and a DVD rear-seat entertainment system.

But for all of its luxury, the M45x still exhibits a sports-sedan personality. The ride is tight and controlled, handling around corners is flat, with little body lean, and there are paddle shifters on the steering column for drivers who want to shift the five-speed automatic transmission manually.

At least from a bragging standpoint, the transmission is a drawback, though it works seamlessly. Competitors offer six-, seven- and even eight-speed automatic transmissions.

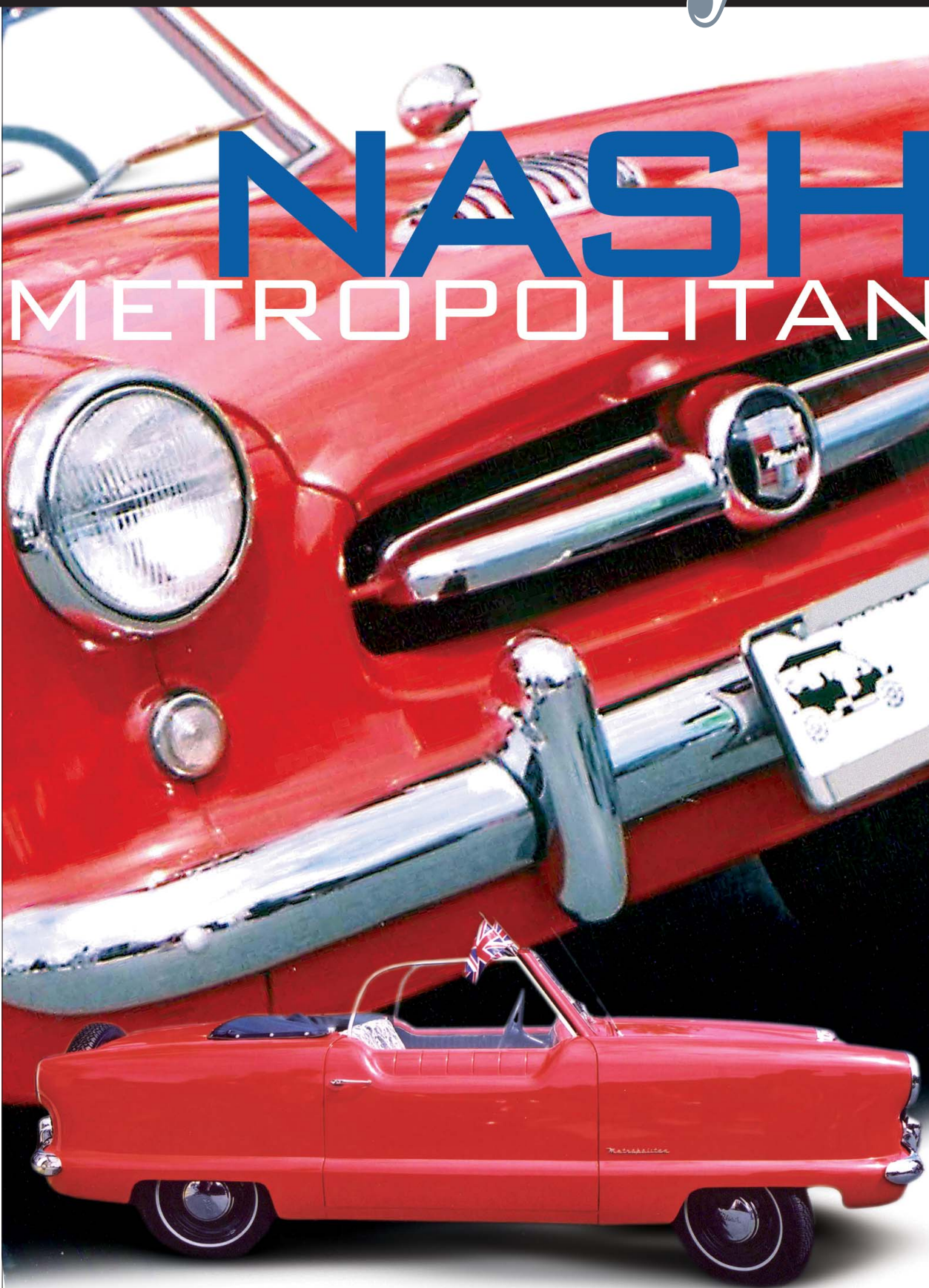
With a price tag that starts at \$54,815, the M45x competes in a class that includes the Mercedes-Benz E-Class, BMW 5-Series, Audi A6, Cadillac CTS, Volvo S80, Jaguar XF, Acura RL, Lexus GS, Hyundai Genesis and the new Lincoln MKS. Except for the Hyundai and Jaguar, all of these are available with all-wheel drive.

In this category, most buyers are not unduly impacted by higher gasoline prices. It's a good thing for the M45x because its city/highway government rating of 14/18 miles per gallon gets it a \$3,000 gas guzzler penalty. That's the result of a 325-horsepower V-8 engine in a car that weighs more than two tons.



COURTESY OF INFINITI

Even with all its luxury, the Infiniti M45x still exhibits a sports-sedan personality.



Even in the excess-driven 1950s, this forerunner to the modern-day subcompact struck a chord

BY MALCOLM GUNN

Wheelbase Communications

Fine Lines

1954-'64 Nash Metropolitan

If you've ever wondered where the first modern-era, North American subcompact car originated, or what it was called, you would have to go on a 50-year trip back in time to find out.

The Nash Metropolitan wasn't flashy or powerful — far from it, actually — and didn't cost much. These, of course, are virtues of every small car that followed in its footsteps.

Although hardly a roaring success, the Metropolitan was a trendsetter in more ways than one. It was one of the reasons that American-based car companies began to think small.

The "Met" was the brainchild of George Mason, president of Nash-Kelvinator and a strident believer in small, lightweight automobiles. His company had enjoyed considerable success with the launch of the Nash Rambler in 1950, a car with streamlined looks and weight-paring unitized (frameless) construction.

But Mason wanted to further push the small-car concept by creating a runabout that would be perfect for suburban commuting or the needs of the newly emerging multicar household.

Styling for this tiny, essentially two-passenger grocery getter mimicked the rest of the Nash lineup. It featured exterior positioning of the spare tire and unique indentations in both doors that served as a kind of exterior arm rest. Most noticeable were the fenders that, in typical Nash style, were devoid of tall wheel openings. And, instead of a trunk lid, the "Met" was designed with a pass-through area behind the minuscule rear seat to provide access to luggage.

Because Nash lacked the production capacity to build the Met in high enough quantity to make it profitable, Mason farmed out the task to two British companies, one that built the bodies and another — Austin Motor Co. — that supplied engines, suspensions and completed the assembly.

Back in England, Austin plugged

in a 42-horsepower 1.2-liter four-cylinder engine and a four-speed manual transmission that was converted to three-speed duty. That change, as well as locating the shifter on the column (to make room for the bench seat), made North Americans feel more at home in the Met's tiny passenger compartment.

Rolling off the boat at a light 1,800 pounds and with a wheelbase shorter than that of Volkswagen Beetle, the softly-sprung Metropolitan literally crawled. In fact, it could barely manage a top speed of 70 mph.

But what it lacked in performance, it more than made up for in fuel economy: about 40 mpg.

Astonishingly, both a hardtop and a convertible models were available when it first went on sale in late 1953. Nash sold more than 13,000 Mets in its first full year of production, a respectable number given the overall small size of the company. The car was priced at an affordable \$1,445 with the convertible costing a mere \$24 extra.

The first major revision to the Metropolitan came in 1956. The car's faux hood scoop was smoothed over and a new wire-mesh-style grille replaced the original thick chrome bar. More importantly, however, the original engine was replaced by a larger 52-hp, 1.5-liter version from the Austin A50. This gave the Met a bit more around-town dash and increased top speed to 80 mph.

Finally, with the merger of Nash and Hudson car companies under the American Motors banner in 1954, dealers of both were selling Metropolitanans under their respective nameplates.

The final revisions waited until mid-'59 when an honest-to-goodness trunk lid was finally whittled out the car's backside, horsepower was bumped to 55 and more comfortable seats and side window vent



Not much instrumentation was required to keep tabs on the Met's 42-horsepower, four-cylinder engine. In fact, the only gauge here is the speedometer.

wings were added. Metropolitan sales topped 22,300 units, the best year ever.

But the end was rapidly approaching. In the fall of '59, General Motors, Ford and Chrysler launched their own lineups of small cars. The 1960 Corvair, Falcon and Valiant were heavily hyped and initial sales were brisk. American Motors was trampled in the stampede for these thoroughly modern, low-priced and fuel-efficient automobiles, and sales of the company's entire lineup began to suffer. The Metropolitan took a major hit as 1960 sales plummeted by 40 percent. Seeing the writing on the wall, AMC halted production. A small number — around 1,300 in total — were sold as 1961 and '62 models, but that was the end for this odd-looking little car.

Probably the most amazing thing about the Metropolitan is that it survived as long as it did. The car was certainly cute as a button, but it was also cramped, underpowered and impractical. In the 1950s, the vast majority of car buyers wanted and could easily afford much flashier iron that featured the roar of big-and-beefy V-8 engines. Small cars were seen as a fad that would eventually disappear. Little did they know.

But Nash and AMC gave it their best shot. If only the Metropolitan had kept up with the times — and with traffic — it might have been around even longer.

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Ice, snow can cause car's tires to shake

The other day a car came into the shop with the customer complaining of a severe vibration and a steering wheel shake. A short test drive confirmed the customer's complaint.

After putting the car up in the air for inspection it was noted that all four wheels had heavy amounts of snow and ice stuck to the inside edge of the wheel. After carefully cleaning all of the snow and ice from the wheels, the car drove as smooth as glass.

Watch out for this especially if you get plowed in and the car sits in the packed snow for a few days. When the snow locks on to the wheel it causes a serious out-of-balance condition causing an extreme vibration.

Q. When my car idles it has a tinny, metallic, rattling sound, it seems to go away if I give it a little bit of gas. What could this be?

A. I would need to inspect the car to be sure, but it sounds like you might have a loose heat shield on your exhaust system. These shields are on the outside of the pipes to dissipate heat and sometimes a corner or a side rust loose and they start to rattle. They can usually be re clamped tight and the annoying rattle sound will be gone.

Q. My heat works good sometimes and sometimes it blows cold. Is there an easy fix?

A. Sometimes this is an easy fix and sometimes it is a symptom of a much larger problem. A couple of the easier fixes are flushing out the heater core and replacing the thermostat. Being low on engine coolant can also cause an intermittent heat problem.

Let's start with the heater core; The heater core is like a tiny radiator inside your dashboard that transfers the heat from your engine coolant to inside the car. If the core becomes plugged up, it will not dissipate heat properly and you will never get good heat in the car. The thermostat regulates the flow of the coolant through the engine allowing it to heat up properly. If a thermostat is stuck open even just a little bit, it will not allow the engine to reach operating temperature. Not only will you have poor heat but it could affect gas mileage and even turn on the "check engine" light.

A tip for winter icing

Recently we got some icing overnight and, true to form, the next day I had many phone calls with windshield wiper issues. Always make sure you gently work your wiper blades loose from the windshield before you turn them on. If you turn on your wipers when they are buried in the snow or frozen to the windshield you stand a good chance of doing extensive damage to the wiper system.

Another common issue is broken door handles. If your door freezes shut, don't pull too hard on the door handle or it may come off in your hand. Most of the door handles are made from plastic and they don't hold up too well when trying to pry a frozen door open.

• Douglas Automotive is in Barrington and Crystal Lake. E-mail underthehood@dailyherald.com.



Doug McAllister
Under the hood