mid-sized, but not middle of the road

ABBRVIATIONS: ABS (anti-lock brakes), AC (airconditioning), ACC (climate-control airconditioning), ACCD (dual-zone climate-control), AL (anti-theft alarm), ASS (auto stop-start), AW (alloy wheel and size in inches), BA (brake assist), CC (cruise control), DFSCA (dual front/front side/curtain airbags), DKA (driver’s knee airbag), EBD (electronic brakeforce distribution), ESC (electronic stability control), HDC (hill descent control), HFS (heated front seats), HSA (hill start assist), KE (keyless entry), LT (leather trim), MLP (Manufacturer’s List Price), NAV (satellite navigation), PS (parking sensors), TC (traction control).
year/15,000km for the Korean) – approximately $325.
It’s even-steens on insurance, with an annual premium of $953.59 for the i40 and Optima and $902.83 for the ST-L. The Hyundai and Kia further enhance their value-for-
money proposition with warranties of five years/unlimited km, which trump Nissan’s three years/100,000km offering.
There’s little between all three in fuel consumption, with Hyundai and Nissan claiming an ADR combined cycle number of 7.5 litres/100km, 0.4 less than the Kia. On test, Optima got closest to its official figure with 9.4, while i40 returned 9.3 and Altima 9.5. All run on 91 RON ULP.

DESIGN AND FUNCTION
In crash testing, each of our contenders shines brightly with a five (out of five) ANCAP star rating. And in the Federal Government Green Vehicle Guide environment ratings, the Kias scores four and a half (out of five) stars and Hyundai and Nissan four.
They’re practical cars, too. Being four-door sedans, entry and egress is good, a full-size spare is standard and there are three restraint points for baby capsule/child seats in the rear.
By our measurements, there is very little (10-20mm) between all three in interior space, front and rear, although Altima offers more rear leg room, regardless of where the driver’s seat is positioned. Each is capable of carrying its five occupants comfortably.
However, the Nissan trails a little on cargo space. Using the industry standard of measurement (litres), it is rated at 488, some 17 less than the Hyundai and Kia. By dint of its higher specification, Altima boasts powered front seat adjustment – eight-way, with two-way lumbar, for the driver when cornering. The Korean pair does a better job overall, the interiors are a pleasant and functional place to be.

ON THE ROAD
Throughout our test, whether it was commuting around town, cruising the highway or carving up a mountain road, Altima and Optima felt lively and responsive. This was backed up in our acceleration tests, where the pair traded blows as to the fleetest. The latter was the sharpest off the line, racing to 60km/h by a tenth of a second and proving two tenths quicker in roll-on acceleration from 50-80km/h.
But from 0-80, 0-100, 60-100 and over the standing 400 metres, it was Altima the victor by similar minute margins.
This proved a surprise, as the Nissan’s 2.5-litre engine produces 127kW of power (@ 6000rpm) and 235Nm of torque (@ 4000rpm), some 21kW and 20Nm less than the Kia’s 2.4.
At 2.0 litres, the i40’s engine is the smallest and, though it produces 4kW more power than Altima, its torque peaks at just 114Nm. In most aspects of driving – even in Sport mode – it felt less energetic and this, too, was reflected in all six tests where the i40 trailed the quickest by between 0.2 (0-60km/h) and 1.0 second (60-100km/h). It works harder, too, at 100km/h sitting on 2100rpm compared with the Nissan’s scarcely believable 1500rpm and the Kia’s also amazing 1600rpm.
Altima’s CVT is one of the smoothest we have tested and the six-speed autos in the Optima and i40 also impressed with their fluidity and calibration.
Dynamically, the i40 ruled. With Sports mode selected (there are also Eco and Normal modes for everyday driving), auto transmission points are delayed and steering assistance reduced to provide more feel and feedback, and the Hyundai turns in to corners smartly and grips resolutely.
The Altima and Optima, by comparison, failed to demonstrate the same tautness of body control. Their steering, while nicely accommodating in lightness when manoeuvring and at low speed, came up short on weighting and feedback at higher velocity.
The cosseting, smooth ride offered up by the Nissan around town gave way to a lack of composure out on the ubiquitous patchwork quilt that is the fabric of many of our country roads. In contrast, the Hyundai and Kia coped well. It would appear their local ride and handling test programs are paying dividends.
Our trio all felt reassuring under braking at all times, though our series of emergency stopping from 80km/h had the Optima way out in front with an excellent 22.6 metres, nearly 1.5 shorter than Altima and 2.5 better than i40.
While general NVH (noise, vibration and harshness) levels are good, all give off tyre rumble out on coarse chip roads, but this is something that is the norm rather than exception.
Our noise meter readings showed the Nissan to be quietest at idle, 50-80km/h and a constant 80km/h.
By dint of its higher specification, Altima boasts powered steering, while nicely accommodating in lightness when manoeuvring and at low speed, it came up short on weighting and feedback at higher velocity.

CONCLUSION
Hyundai and Kia have made something of an art form of offering great value for money and the base model i40 and Optima are no exception, bettering the mid-spec Altima on price, forecast residual, warranty and insurance premium. While short on the standard equipment of the Nissan, they have plenty of kit regardless and also boast a slightly bigger cargo carrying capacity.
As an all-round drive, the Optima just shades its rivals. Though not as dynamic a handler as the i40, it is nearly a match for the Altima in performance and comprehensively out-brakes them both. Throw in the lowest price tag, and the Kia shapes as the best of three good buys.
Remember, though, if you’re seriously in the market for a new mid-sized sedan, also check out the Mazda6.
Despite our trio’s impressive showing, for us, it remains the benchmark.