WE PUT TWO NEW MID-SIZED FAMILY WAGONS TO THE TEST.
WITH SOME 30-PLUS models, the medium SUV segment is not short of choice. And within that number, you can take your pick of diesel and petrol engines, two or all-wheel-drive and a plethora of specification levels to suit a budget of less than $30K to well over $100,000.

But if you’re after a seven-seater, the choice narrows dramatically. Among just a handful of offerings are the Honda CR-V and Nissan X-Trail.

New to market, the fifth-generation CR-V is based on an all-new platform architecture and comes with a first for the long-running nameplate – a 1.5-litre VTEC turbo petrol engine, across the five-variant range. The only seven-seat variant is the 2WD VTi-L.

The new X-Trail caters for seven in its entry level ST and mid-range ST-L, both 2WD and powered by the 2.5-litre, normally-aspirated petrol engine carried over from the previous generation.

Our test cars were the VTI-L and STL, which lined up nicely on price and specification.
VALUE FOR MONEY
At $38,090, the Nissan shades the Honda by $900, but thereafter it’s advantage CR-V. The latter enjoys better retained value after three years – 55 to 52 percent – according to Glass’s Guide and capped price servicing is fractionally cheaper at $295 to $322 (average) per one year/10,000km service.

Annual insurance premiums are also a tad lower ($777.77 to $809.17) and Honda’s recent decision to extend its warranty to five years/unlimited kilometre trumps Nissan’s three years/100,000km.

ADR combined cycle fuel consumption is also thriftier at 7.3 litres/100km compared with 8.1, a difference which was validated during our test. On a 500km highway run, the Honda averaged 6.9 and the Nissan 7.9, while a spirited 270km country drive returned 9.4 and 10.2 respectively.

With the letter ‘L’ (for Luxury) in their nomenclature, it’s no surprise that both are very well equipped, to the point where it’s more relevant noting what they do not have as standard.

The VTi-L misses out on Auto Emergency Braking (AEB) – which is available only on the VTi-LX – rear cross traffic alert and blind spot warning. The X-Trail boasts AEB across the range, but the ST-L is devoid of Apple CarPlay/Android Auto, front/rear parking sensors and lane departure warning along with aircon vents and curtain airbag extension for the third row.

DESIGN AND FUNCTION
Importantly, a five-star ANCAP safety rating applies to each.

In terms of cargo storage and occupant comfort, both vehicles do space well, offering airy, comfortable interiors with plenty of storage and accommodating, if somewhat flat, seating.

The CR-V is bigger inside than its predecessor, thanks to a 40mm increase in wheelbase and 34mm greater width. This makes for 250mm more load space than before when the rear seatbacks are dropped. Second row passengers enjoy better foot and knee room as well as inclusion of a pair of USB charging points. Access to the third row is more restricted, though. The second-row seats don’t slide forward as far as the Nissan’s, and the position of aircon vents in the roof (otherwise very welcome) and sunroof imposes on head room.

Then there’s the positioning of child restraint mounting points. In the Nissan, the middle of three is roof-mounted – bad enough – but in the Honda all three are, which compromises the third row. The reality is, in both vehicles this extra row is suitable only for occasional use – and for younger children, at that.

A power tailgate is a handy addition on the CR-V, and the full-sized spare wheel is superior to the X-Trail’s spacesaver item. We are also not fans of a foot-operated emergency brake (which the latter has).

ON THE ROAD
Introduced in 2001, the X-Trail’s 2.5-litre, normally-aspirated four-cylinder engine is a tried-and-proven unit. It has no major vice and can claim a superior rated towing capacity, 1500kg vs 1000kg. However,

**COSTS + RATINGS**

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<th>HONDA CR-V VTi-L</th>
<th>NISSAN X-TRAIL ST-L</th>
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^ PRICES ARE MANUFACTURERS’ LIST PRICES UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED AND DO NOT INCLUDE STATUTORY AND DELIVERY CHARGES. PRICES CORRECT AT TIME OF PRINTING.

^^ BASED ON AN RACQ INSURANCE COMPREHENSIVE POLICY FOR A 35-YEAR-OLD MALE, MAXIMUM NO CLAIM BONUS, VEHICLE FINANCIALLY UNENCUMBERED, AND $650 EXCESS. MULTI-POLICY AND RACQ MEMBER LOYALTY DISCOUNTS MAY APPLY. DISCOUNTS OF 2.5-15 PERCENT MAY BE AVAILABLE TO RACQ MEMBERS DEPENDING ON LENGTH OF MEMBERSHIP.
CONCLUSION

As occasional six or seven seaters, the CR-V VTi-L and X-Trail ST-L fulfil their design brief well – but not without some compromise. By our number crunching, the Honda offers better value for money, is more up-to-date and the better overall drive. But, if that old saying ‘nothing succeeds like success’ rings true, then the X-Trail has plenty going for it. Since launching in Australia in late 2001, it has chalked up 200,000 sales.

HAVING MY OPINION included among those of RACQ’s motoring experts was a daunting prospect. After all, when it comes to cars, I’m certainly no expert. But when it comes to knowing what I like in a car, especially one I’m driving with my family, I’m never short of an opinion. Just ask my husband.

For this edition, I was lucky to take the Nissan X-Trail and Honda CRV for a spin on perhaps the most precarious journey of all – the school pick up.

First up was the Nissan, and my first impression was that the manufacturer’s idea of a ‘compact’ SUV clearly wasn’t the same as mine. That certainly isn’t a criticism – in fact, compared with the Honda, the Nissan accommodated my clan far more comfortably.

While it offers seven seats, to have all of them in use negates the amount of room in the boot. To fit my three kids and their school bags, it was better to have them all sitting in the back row, with their bags in the boot, rather than spread out. There was plenty of room in the back seat though, so mutiny was avoided.

Which brings me to the Honda and its back seat, which better fit the description ‘compact’. Rather than three distinct spaces, the middle seat was more like a half-seat which, given the width of the rear-ends in question, meant the passengers were rather close together. In the CRV the seven seats would be needed to keep the peace, but at the expense of luggage space.

Where the CRV did score points over the X-Trail was on the cool scale – literally. My son quickly pointed out that the X-Trail didn’t have air conditioning vents at the rear which, for a relatively large car, could leave passengers a little hot under the collar.

The big question is, though, how do they drive? In stop-start traffic the X-Trail won hands-down in terms of smooth, easy driving. Visibility was excellent thanks to a huge windscreen, big side mirrors and no blind spots.

Though not as smooth as the X-Trail, the CRV was the better of the two when it came to steering, offering a solid drive with better handling. It’s slightly smaller size made it easier to park too.

All in all, for vehicles in this price range I had high expectations. If I’m going to spend $40K on a car, it needs to tick all my boxes – and while the X-Trail ticked more than the CRV, I reckon I could find a similar drive in a cheaper price range.

ANOTHER SET OF EYES...

TWIN TEST

Turbo gives CR-V a power and torque advantage.

X-Trail also does rear space well.

X-Trail boasts superior towing capability.

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up against the CR-V’s new 1.5-litre turbocharged four, the Nissan is showing its age. Not only is Honda’s smaller engine 14kW more powerful and fuel efficient, it wins out on peak torque by 14Nm delivered across a much broader band. From 0-100km/h, the CR-V is some two seconds quicker – and feels like it. And unlike many turbo engines, there’s no requirement for costlier PULP.

Each drives through a Continuously Variable Transmission (CVT), but only the Honda has a Sports Mode shift.

For market segment, both offer a composed ride (the Nissan, a little firmer) and agreeable handling. Increased rebound damping has improved the CR-V’s body control, and it feels more poised when the going gets twisty at speed. For our liking, the X-Trail’s steering – though quick and precise – is a little too light and lacking in feedback at speed.

Again, for segment, NVH (noise/vibration/harshness) levels are acceptable, though tyre noise can intrude over coarse chip bitumen. And under full acceleration, both engines are guilty of getting a little raucous.

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