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Wheels: Infiniti JX35 Nearly Drives Itself to St. Petersburg

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An Infiniti JX35 taking a bow across from St. Isaac's Cathedral during a weekend road trip to St. Petersburg. **Vlad Keeko**

Editor's note: Wheels is a section featuring car reviews.

Friday, 4:57 a.m.: A thrill shoots down my back as we sweep along the deserted Moscow embankment and past the red-brick Kremlin walls. I am embarking on a weekend trip to St. Petersburg in a brand-new Infiniti JX35, a seven-passenger luxury crossover SUV on loan from the folks at Nissan. Accompanying me is photojournalist Vlad and his son, Anton.

Facts at a Glance

Infiniti JX35

Starting price: 2.22 million rubles

($67,850)
The model that I drove cost 2.56 million rubles ($78,250)
Technical specifications
0 to 100kph: 8.4 seconds
Top speed: 190 kph
Economy: 11.5 kpl

Source: Nissan

The JX has passed the first test. On the dashboard, the eight-inch touchscreen display gleams in the predawn darkness, showing the 690-kilometer route to St. Petersburg's Admiralty, the Russian Navy's headquarters and a city center landmark. When I had entered St. Petersburg as the destination a few minutes earlier, the navigator had automatically proposed the Admiralty on Nevsky Prospekt as the address, and I had agreed.

5:39 a.m.: We are leaving Moscow's city limits, and we are already admiring the advanced driver's aids. A flashing light near the a side mirror and an audible warning caught my attention as I prepared to switch lanes and, after a few moments, I appreciatively realized that the car's Blind Spot Warning (BSW) was at work. The BSW automatically emits the warnings if you signal a lane change and another vehicle is in your blind spot. The JX also features a Lane Departure Warning system (LDW), which alerts you if you drift out of a marked lane without using the turn signal.

9:24 a.m.: Anton, seated in the second row, is fiddling with the seven-inch color monitors inserted in the front-seat headrests. I pop a U.S.-bought DVD into the car's entertainment system, but the touchscreen says the disc's format is unreadable. Disappointed, Anton scoops two wireless headphones with a remote from the enormous center armrest in the front row and tries to connect them to the car's entertainment system. After a few minutes, he gives up and loads a game of "Minecraft" on my laptop.

10:23 a.m.: We're about halfway between Moscow and St. Petersburg and have momentarily run out of things to talk about. Vlad inserts into the dashboard a memory stick loaded with songs by Boris Grebenshchikov, the musician sometimes referred to as Russia's Bob Dylan. Classic Soviet rock fills the air through 15 Bose speakers placed around the vehicle, including a powerful subwoofer under the trunk's floor panels. The crystal-clear guitar chords leave the impression that Grebenshchikov is giving us a private performance. I settle back in my creamy leather seat and grin.

4:12 p.m.: We pull into the courtyard of a sprawling concrete apartment courtyard in St. Petersburg. Our arrival is late after we faced problems confirming the booking of our rented apartment and then failed to find the apartment building's address with the assistance of the car's navigator. For some reason, the navigator stubbornly insisted on directing us back to the Admiralty. So finally I used the Yandex Navigator app on my cell phone.

The JX is loaded with gadgets, as I learned on the drive to St. Petersburg, but even some of the basic ones like the navigator and headphones can take time to figure out.

Although the working day is not over, the apartment courtyard is packed with cars. We find a free spot between a 10-year-old Toyota sedan, a boxy Lada and the gray-brick wall of the apartment building. Maneuvering into the cramped spot is a piece of cake. The touchscreen automatically switches into parking mode, and cameras on all four sides of the JX offer a 360-degree view around the vehicle. Making the parking process even simpler, the touchscreen can be switched to a bird's-eye view complete with trajectory lines showing precisely where you are going. This allows the car to make incredibly tight turns.

I realize that I will never settle for any other parking system again. This is the easiest, least stressful parking experience ever!

Saturday, 1:46 p.m.: Today we are walking around St. Petersburg instead of sitting in the car. But the JX still earns its keep when a group of Vlad's friends invite us over for lunch. The seven of us pile into the car: Two in the front, three in the second row and two in the back. Everyone is comfortable except the two adults seated at the back, who are grumbling about severely limited legroom. The last row folds down to create a cavernous trunk, and it now seems that this would be a better use for the space. But then we realize that we could instead scoot forward the second row, which has generous legroom. Instead, we ask Anton to move to the back.

Sunday, 3:24 p.m.: We're getting a late start back to Moscow after some last-minute sightseeing. As I ease the JX onto the M10 federal highway outside the city limits, Vlad reclines the seat in the second row, complaining that the front seat is much more comfortable. But after a few minutes he is sound asleep. Anton is playing "Minecraft."

9 p.m.: It's dark outside. Vlad is still sleeping, and his son remains immersed in the computer game. I decide to figure out how to use the cruise control. After pressing a few buttons on the steering wheel, the car obediently sets the speed to 100 kilometers per hour, and I gladly take my foot off the gas. But a few minutes later, the car begins to slow down. Worried, I look at the speedometer and then at the cruise-control buttons. In the darkness ahead, I see a car flip on its turn signal and turn off the highway. Immediately, the JX speeds back up to 100 kph.

Infiniti's makers call this function Intelligent Speed Control (ISC), and it applies the brakes when the traffic ahead is slowing down. In addition, the JX is equipped with a Forward Collision Warning (FCW), which beeps and tightens the seatbelt when you approach a car too rapidly, and a Backup Collision Intervention (BCI), which warns you about a possible crash when you are driving in reverse and will even stop the car if it detects an obstruction is too close.

I am in heaven. While Intelligent Speed Control and Forward Collision Warning might be handy at daytime, they made my night. Sometimes it is difficult to guess distances in the dark, and now the car is handling this dilemma for me with radar cruise control. The drive back to Moscow is a breeze.

3:10 a.m.: We pull into my apartment courtyard in Moscow. We're tired, but not exhausted. The JX has provided a comfy, roomy ride — and done most of the work for me. The cameras

on all four sides and radars and sonars in the front and back have taken the headache out of long-distance driving.

After unloading the trunk, I lock the doors with the remote, and the JX seems to go one last mile to prove its value: small lights shine around the door handles, offering reassuring illumination in the darkness cloaking the area.

Perhaps Vlad summed up the JX best somewhere along the stretch of highway between Moscow and St. Petersburg when he said: "This car drives itself. We're just along for the ride."

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