

4WD BUYERS GUIDE

MAZDA BT-50

LARGE UTES

Mazda's new ute market entry ticks all the boxes. Look out Toyota and Nissan.



The outgoing BT-50 had part of the required package for market share improvement, boasting the most potent four-cylinder diesel engine in the ute class. However, it powered re-skinned bodywork that was tad on the small side and the chassis had a torsion-bar suspended front end that didn't really work in concert with an over-stiff set of rear leaves. It wasn't a bad package for a ute, but Ford/Mazda knew that more would be required in the near future: more people space and cargo volume; more refinement, more performance and more presence.

In the words of Takasuke Kobayashi, the Mazda BT-50 Program Manager, who attended the Australian launch:

"The current BT-50 looks good, drives well and has tremendous functionality...but with the new BT-50 I wanted to move into uncharted territory.

"I wanted to create a completely different kind of pickup; one with the personality of a passenger car." With the new BT-50 Kobayashi-san's design team may just have done it.

The Aussie BT-50 Lineup

As with the outgoing model the new BT-50 is based around three cab styles: Single, Dual Cab and Freestyle (with forward-opening rear doors and no obstructive B-pillar). The launch model is the Dual Cab, to be followed by Freestyle models and Single Cabs.

All models are longer, wider and higher than before, with no carry-over components from the previous range.



A new box-section ladder frame that's taller, wider and thicker than before mounts a double-wishbone, coil-sprung front end with rack and pinion steering. An underslung rear axle design with bias-mounted shock absorbers continues, but with longer springs and stronger brackets and shackles. A brand new five-cylinder, turbo-intercooled diesel has been developed and six-speed manual and automatic transmissions are offered.



The 3.2-litre five-cylinder produces claimed maximum power of 147kW at 3000rpm, with peak torque of 470Nm in the 1750-2500rpm band. Claimed fuel consumption is 8.9L/100km.

More grunt, improved chassis dynamics and car-level electronic aids ensure that the new BT-50 easily outperforms and out-handles its predecessor.

Standard kit includes ABS with disc/drum EBD brakes; traction control; dynamic stability control; emergency brake assist and hill start assist; shift-on-the-fly 4WD selection; dial-selectable low range gearing; hill descent control and a lockable rear differential. The dynamic stability control system incorporates roll stability control, trailer sway control and adapts to suit different payloads. Incidentally, drum rear brakes are retained because they provide a more powerful parking brake than the tiny drum-in-disc units fitted to 4WD wagons.

Three equipment levels are offered: XT, XTR and GT. XT is far from being a 'poverty pack', with aircon; power windows and mirrors; remote central locking; Bluetooth; steering wheel cruise control and audio controls; trip computer; USB input; six speakers in all but Single Cabs and front and curtain airbags. Mazda expects an NCAP rating of five stars for all variants when local testing is completed.



XTRs score carpet, aluminium 17-inch wheels instead of steel 16s; 265/65 rubber in lieu of 215/70s; front fog lamps; dual-zone aircon in Freestyle and Dual Cabs; chromed rear step bumper; ambient temperature gauge; leather wrapped knob and steering wheel; satnav; height and lumbar adjustable driver's seat and a high-mount stop light. The GT is a Dual Cab Ute model with leather seat trim, auto headlights, rain-sensing wipers and an auto-dimming rear view mirror.



In addition to the standard kit there's a pile of accessories available, including a cargo-tub sports bar; steel and stainless steel side steps; hard and soft tonneaus; different aluminium wheels; canopies; tub liners; driving lights and steel and aluminium 'roo bars. The cast aluminium bar was tested in a 100km/h impact against a 100kg dummy kangaroo and protected the vehicle front quite well.

The BT-50 on and Off Road

For the Australian launch Mazda Australia put on a drive event that took in freeway, secondary bitumen some gravel and a demanding 4WD off-road track. The evaluation vehicles were all 3.2-litre XTR Dual Cabs fitted with a mixture of manual and automatic transmissions. The utes were empty, so we were able to assess ride quality and off-road tractive ability without the benefit of weight over the rear axles.



Getting comfortable wasn't a problem, thanks to the XTR's adjustable driver's seat and tilting steering wheel. However, some of the short-armed testers hankered for a telescopic column.

On bitumen and smooth gravel surfaces the BT-50s rode and handled superbly, with noise levels that were almost car-like at cruising speeds. Only when the loud pedals were floored did engine noise intrude.

Rough surfaces stirred some leaf-spring reaction at the rear end, but the ride wasn't harsh and dynamic stability and traction control preserved direction. We checked out gentle and emergency stopping power and were impressed with the BT-50's pedal feel and stability under panic braking.

The six-speed auto was slick, with a manual override function that was easy to operate, once we adjusted to a forward movement for downshifts, not the more commonly used backward flick.

A light clutch with a vague friction point caught out some of the testers, but we found the manual gearbox very easy to use. That said, we preferred the auto, both on and off road.

Steep, stony and dusty grades that were too steep to stand on proved to be no problem for the new BT-50 that made a tidy job of conquering these quite demanding conditions. The 3.2-litre lugged happily down below 1000rpm, with no protest from engine or driveline.



The traction control system worked unobtrusively to control wheelspin and hill descent control was powerful, yet speed-variable by using the cruise control buttons.

We checked out the diff lock operation on the steepest climbs and found that it engaged and disengaged quickly. Unusually, it could be engaged when in two-wheel drive as well.



The new Mazda BT-50 and its mechanically-similar Ford Ranger stable mate seem set for increased market share.

Previous Models

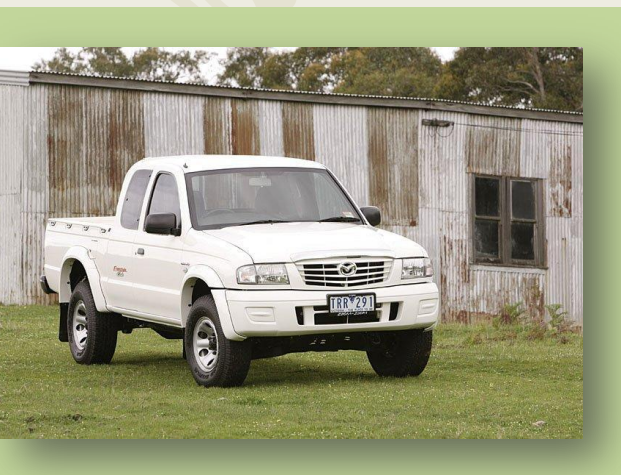
Mazda has retained the name 'BT-50' for its new large-ute range, which is somewhat confusing, because the 2011 model is much larger than its predecessors.

Before the BT-50 came the Mazda B-Series or Bravo range. For 2003 Mazda introduced the extended-cab Freestyle to replace the former Stretch Cab. The new bodywork featured rear-hinged rear doors that locked to the front doors without the need for a B-pillar, giving unparalleled access to the cabin.

At the same time, all Bravos picked up new head and tail lamps and redesigned interiors. Dual Cab SDX models came standard with wheel arch extensions, side steps, new-look aluminium wheels, chrome-finish exterior trim highlights, larger 265/70R15 tyres, power mirrors, remote locking and four speakers.

Petrol 4WD models were DX and SDX Dual Cabs with 92kW at 4600rpm and peak torque of 206Nm at 3500rpm. Diesels 4WD were Single Cab/chassis, Freestyle Cab/chassis DX Plus, Freestyle Cab ute DX Plus, Dual Cab ute DX and SDX. Engine output was 86kW at 3500rpm, with peak torque of 280Nm at 2000rpm. A larger-capacity, cylindrical air cleaner was fitted to all models.

For 2005 the Bravo range was given better, bush-capable tyres. All Bravos scored a CD player as standard and there were revised interiors for Freestyle and SDX models. SDX models also featured new-look wheels, a lidded centre armrest console with dual compartments, three cupholders, a fuel lid opener and a new-style retractable ignition key.



Model year 2006 B Series Bravo range was expanded with Freestyle and Dual Cab models available with a powerful 154kW 4.0-litre V6 engine. Boasting 323Nm of torque at 3000rpm, the Bravo's V6 powerplant mated to a five-speed manual or five-speed automatic transmission.

All 4.0 V6 models – as the new V6 versions were badged - - featured a new bonnet, body coloured wheel arch flares and 245/75 R15 tyres or 265/70 on SDX variants on 15 x 7 wheels and an impressive 205mm of ground clearance.

Standard features included air conditioning, tilt adjustable steering, remote entry, engine immobiliser, centre cool box and CD player.

4WD models were priced from \$37,590 for the Freestyle Cab Chassis with manual transmission.

Dual Cab models were priced from \$39,090.

Fuel consumption was a claimed 13.5L/100km on the combined 81/01 Government fuel cycle and an 85-litre fuel tank was standard.



For 2007 the all-new BT-50 replaced Mazda's B Series, which sold more than three million vehicles worldwide.

All models in the range – 4x4 Single Cabs, Freestyle and Dual Cabs – were powered by a new 3.0-litre common rail, DOHC 16-valve diesel engine, with variable geometry turbocharger that developed 115kW at 3200rpm (up 33kW) and 380Nm at 1800rpm (up 109Nm) on the superseded 2.5-litre diesel engine. Cooled Exhaust Gas Recirculation (EGR) ensured Euro IV compliance.

Claimed fuel consumption for 4x4 five-speed manual models was 9.2L/100km, down from 10.1L/100km for the B Series.

Range-topping Dual Cab SDX 4x4 models were offered with a five-speed automatic transmission option.

Braked towing capacity went up from 1800kg to 2500kg.

Featuring the large door opening and easy access of Mazda's pillar-less four-door body, the Freestyle Cab body accommodated two in the front and two in the back, with the back offering plenty of room for carrying belongings.



A keyless entry system was standard on all models and both the single-disc and six-disc systems were MP3 compatible.

ABS brakes with Electronic Brake force Distribution were available on all models. Dual front airbags and front seatbelts with pretensioners and load limiters were standard on all but the farmer-focussed Single Cab 4x4 model, where they were optional. Front seatbelt height adjusters were standard on all Dual Cab models.

Manual shift and electric shift 4x4 selection were available.

The promotional price for the 3.0-litre powered 4x4 version, complete with over-fenders and automatic locking remote free wheel hubs, as well as an alloy tray and air conditioning, was \$28,990.

While carrying over the B Series' double wishbone, torsion-bar front design and rear leaf springs, Mazda claimed a smoother, more comfortable ride. However, a jerky ride remained our major criticism of this otherwise class-leading ute range.



For 2009 the Mazda BT-50 range scored mechanical and styling upgrades, and improvements to interior comfort and ergonomics.

The automatic transmission was available on Freestyle Cab Utility SDX and on the Dual Cab Utility, from the DX model through to the range-topping Dual Cab SDX.

Bush Modifications

The Ford Ranger and Mazda BT-50 are pretty right for bush tripping out of the box, but a snorkel and some bar work up front, with or without a winch and spotties – would be desirable. Ground clearance is quite good, but 50mm increase would be an advantage for those venturing into rocky terrain. We're planning some long bush trips in these vehicles over the next few months, so we'll know more after that exercise.

An advertisement for Hella Luminator LED driving lights. On the left is a close-up of a circular LED light. To its right, on a dark blue background, is the text: "New HELLA LUMINATOR LED driving lights. Brilliant!". On the far right is a yellow rectangular box containing the Hella logo, which consists of the word "HELLA" in a stylized font inside a blue oval.