

4WD BUYERS GUIDE

ISUZU D-MAX

MEDIUM UTE

Isuzu Ute's D-Max is a competitor for the mechanically similar Holden Colorado and both brands are successors of the Rodeo lineage.



When launched in 2009 the 11-model D-MAX range was all diesel-powered. Isuzu's 4JJ1 Hi-Power 3.0-litre common-rail, direct injection VGS turbo-diesel engine had maximum power of 120kW at 3600 rpm, with peak torque of 360Nm from 1800 to 2800rpm (manual transmission models) and 333Nm at 1600 to 3200rpm (automatics).

D-Max variants included single and crew cab, ute or cab/chassis.

Significantly, the D-Max platform was the only one in the ute/one-tonne class that offered a longer wheelbase in cab/chassis variants than in ute variants, to allow correct load balance. Consequently D-Max had the longest cab-to-axle dimensions in the class for single and crew cabs, permitting more load length ahead of the rear axle. Isuzu's D-MAX range comprised three trim levels: EX, SX and LS and all D-Max 4WDs were equipped with high-ride suspension, steel sump and transfer case guards, wheel arch flares and 16 x 7 wheels shod with 245/70 tyres.

The sole D-Max EX model was a single cab/chassis manual which targetted the farm truck niche and offered seating for three, a load-sensing brake proportioning valve and drilled silver steel wheels.

SX variants came with ABS with EBD, dual front airbags, power windows with driver's window one-touch auto-down and remote entry via a single integrated key/pad.

The top duo of 4WD crew cab utes was badged LS-U and LS-M.



They picked up the following additions over SX: four-speed automatic option, cruise control, aluminium wheels, leather steering wheel rim and shift knob, electro-luminescent instrument cluster, five-function trip computer, projector headlights and front fog lights, rear step bumper, power-adjustable and remote fold-back door mirrors with LED turn indicators, flush fascia CD/FM/AM audio with MP3/WMA and six speakers, overhead console with twin map lights and a flip-down sunglasses case, variable intermittent wiper mode

D-Max LS-M was the more off-road-themed LS variant, distinguishable by its cabin protection frame in the cargo tub, scratch-resistant grey front bumper, grille surround and wheel arch flares, black finish on the rear step bumper and exterior hardware, and vinyl floor covering instead of carpet.

Shifting between 2WD to 4WD High Range could be done 'on the fly' at speeds up to 100km/h via a dash push-button Drive Mode Selection panel.

D-Max towing capacity was three tonnes of braked trailer.

Endorsed accessory hard tonneaus and a canopy were available.

Pricing in 4WD range started at \$27,800 for the EX single cab/chassis manual and topped at \$42,500 for a fully kitted automatic 4WD LS-U Crew Cab ute



In July 2009 a lower cost SX 4WD Crew Cab ute was added to the lineup, at a RRP of approximately \$42,200 drive-away. At the same time dual front airbags were added to the farm spec EX 4WD single cab /chassis, then priced at \$35,600 drive-away, with a 2.55m aluminium tray body fitted.

The Space Cab D-Max was added to the range in August 2009, for only \$2200 more than its single cab/chassis stable-mate, compared with the \$4000 to \$5500 extra that other brands charged for this variant.

With a RRP of \$35,800 the D-Max Space Cab SX 4WD cab/chassis provided room behind its two bucket seats for stowing valuable gear and opening rear quarter windows.

An automatic transmission option in the D-Max SX mid-spec 4WD Crew Cab ute in May 2010 and standard cruise control was added to all SX variants.

Also, twin rear 'jump' seats with lap-sash belts and multiple folding modes were added to the SX 4WD Space Cab/chassis manual.

The Isuzu D-Max has established itself in the Australian market as a worthy successor to the Rodeo, despite fierce competition from the mechanically identical Holden Colorado.

Our test D-Max was a crew-cab LS-U automatic-transmission model, with colour-coded wheel arch flares, aluminium sidesteps, projector (not xenon) headlights and powered, chromed mirrors. The test vehicle was fitted with an optional canopy, towbar and 'roo bar and after-market suspension.

Equipment levels were quite high for a ute: dual SRS airbags, remote central locking, immobiliser, air conditioning, cruise control, backlit instrument panel, overhead console, trip computer, leather wheel and gear knob covers, two 12-volt power outlets, ABS/EBD brakes, 245/70R16 tyres on aluminium wheels, limited-slip rear differential and push-button 4x2/4x4 controls. However, Isuzu Ute is yet to make the move into stability and traction control.

This was OTA's second towing trip with an Isuzu D-Max, but on the 2010 occasion a video crew had the machine and Keryn and I were in our Land Rover Discovery 3. My testing of the D-Max before the trip showed that the standard suspension was a tad on the harsh side.

When we met up with the D-Max crew in Cunnamulla they'd done the 800-odd kilometres from the Gold Coast in one hit, yet they were as fresh as daisies.

'We'll see how chipper they are after a couple of days on the gravel,' I thought to myself, as they praised the D-Max's economy and ease of driving. So, there we were, in the middle of the seemingly endless Sandover 'Highway' and I checked with them once more:

"How's the ride?" I ventured.

"Love it!" they chorused.

(Thought: 'Maybe I'm missing something, or maybe Isuzu Ute Australia has revamped the back end: I'd better have a go myself.'))

"Mind if I have a drive?" I suggested.

“Go for it – you organised the ute, remember.”

I slid behind the wheel and soon found that the front end was very good, with no steering ‘kick’ and excellent bump control, but the back end was decidedly firm and bouncy.

For our 2011 tow test Isuzu Ute Australia provided a D-Max fitted with an after-market suspension kit designed and fitted by Carrolls Springs. Replacement torsion bars and leaf springs and four EFS twin-tube dampers gave the D-Max a much-needed lift of 40mm for off-road driving and produced firm, yet controlled, ride quality. The Cub’s 100kg ball weight didn’t cause any suspension sag at the rear end.



Our previous test D-Maxs were manuals, so it was interesting to have an automatic this time. With only four ratios it wasn’t as seamless as the latest five- and six-speeders, but shift quality was quite acceptable when accelerating with a trailer behind. The only situation that caught out the auto box was encountering a grade at 100km/h in cruise control: the necessary downshift sent revs up to 3200rpm, where a five or six speed auto would have dictated only 2500rpm or so.

Engine braking on downgrades wasn’t as effective as with a manual box, but powerful enough to spare the service brakes most of the time.

The D-Max had dashboard push button control for shifting from two-wheel-drive to 4WD and it worked instantly when required. Four wheel drive engagement happened under full power, which was handy on some slippery track sections and disengagement was also rapid, after a slight lift of the accelerator pedal. In-cabin noise level was car-like, except for the aforementioned downshift issue, making a Bluetooth phone link quite useful.

With the Cub set up back at camp the solo D-Max shone in off-road situations, with the after-market suspension’s ground clearance increase complementing the D-Max’s already good off-road credentials. The rear axle limited slip diff centre worked well to control wheelspin in soft and slippery conditions.

Dust entry wasn’t an issue in the cabin, but the cargo box was another matter: it had almost as much dust in it as freight. Would a wagon-style dust exclusion kit be out of the question? All utes suck in piles of dust and it surely isn’t rocket science to dust-seal a tailgate.

Fuel capacity is a marginal 76 litres, like all mid-sized utes, but there’s ample space for an after-market 130-litre tank under the bodywork. Economy on our tow test worked out at exactly 12L/100km, which is pretty good.

Previous Models

See Rodeo models in this 4WD Buyers Guide under *Holden Colorado*



Bush Modifications

Our extensive solo-vehicle and tow-testing in Isuzu D-Max utes shows that they need very little in the way of bush mods to go virtually anywhere. We'd suggest a long-range replacement fuel tank, a snorkel and a suspension lift similar to the one we evaluated. A front-end diff lock would be nice, for severe trails.

Will The True Son of Rodeo Please Stand Up

The Isuzu D-Max and the Holden Colorado are badge-engineered utes, in much the same manner that Mazda's BT-50 and Ford's Ranger are mechanically identical, but aesthetically different. However, while Ford has a controlling interest in Mazda, making that arrangement quite tidy, the D-Max/Colorado pairing is messier.

Here's the background.

Isuzu's four-cylinder KB ute range that was badged 'Rodeo' from the 1980s was originally produced in Japan and exported globally, including into Thailand. Isuzu utes have been selling in Thailand since 1957 and local production by Isuzu Operations Thailand (IOT) began in 1974, in parallel with Japanese production. By the 1980s Isuzu had light and heavy truck production and marketing agreements with GM that eventually culminated in GM control of Isuzu.

The Asian meltdown of the 1990s saw GM relinquish its control of Isuzu, but some production and marketing agreements remained in place, including the production of utes badged Chevrolet and Holden.

In 2002, the remainder of Isuzu Rodeo ute production was transferred from Japan to Thailand. In 2004 GM began parallel production of the Chevrolet-badged Rodeo vehicle design at its own new plant in Thailand. The IOT-owned D-Max is built in Samrong and the GM-owned Colorado is built by GM Thailand in Rayong - neighbouring satellite towns near Bangkok.

GM pursued this new-plant initiative in 2004 to bolster its flagging market shares around the world. Once its Thai plant was in full swing it was logical for GM to sell the Colorado in Australia, through Holden dealers, but that move cut IOT's former product channel into Australia - one of the largest ute markets in the world. Hence, the birth of Isuzu UTE Australia Pty Ltd (IUA), to bring in the IOT-built D-Max.

The outcome is Holden dealers selling the GM-built Colorado and IUA dealers selling the IOT-built D-Max.

You could be forgiven for thinking that Australia's successful Isuzu truck dealerships would be the most logical outlets for the IOT-built D-Max, but there's an additional complication. IOT is a joint corporation, with 80 percent shareholding by Mitsubishi Corporation (not Mitsubishi Motors) and 20 percent by Isuzu Japan. Isuzu Australia Limited (the truck-importing subsidiary that's 100 percent Isuzu-owned) is fiercely protective of its market leading brand image and doesn't appear happy to 'go to bed' with IUA. However, some Isuzu truck dealers have signed D-Max dealership agreements.



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