

4WD BUYERS GUIDE

SUZUKI JIMNY

SMALL WAGONS



We'll never know, but it probably happened at the Berlitz language school in Tokyo - with a starry-eyed Suzuki junior marketing executive sitting in English class, dreaming of the day he'd be allowed to name a new model. 'Mnemonic' was the word that fascinated him and that was the word he'd use as the base for the new model name - 'Jimny'.

Greco-Japlish apart - and obeying the direction of the Immortal Bard who told us that names don't matter a sniff of rosewater anyhow - the Jimny was the replacement for the little Sierra and should have had more market appeal than its predecessor did. While being essentially as box-shaped as the Sierra the Jimny had much more style about it.

However, the Jimny arrived in 1999, at a time when most small-4WD buyers were more interested in 4WD image than actual off-road ability, so sales were limited mainly to genuine enthusiasts.

The Jimny came with a five-year/100,000 all-vehicle warranty, so many used examples are still within that time and distance frame.

'Smart in city', said the inaugural Jimny brochure, and 'Tough in nature'. We think we know what they meant. Although still powered by a small, 1.3-litre, four-cylinder petrol engine the Jimny had more go than the Sierra. The difference was eight more valves in the head, giving the under-square (74mm bore x 75.5mm stroke) donk more breathing power at higher revs. Output went up to 59kW at 6000rpm - formerly 47kW - while torque barely changed - 104Nm compared with 100Nm previously.

A 2005 upgrade included a four-speed automatic transmission option, a 62.5kW/110Nm VVT engine needing premium 95 RON unleaded and a button-operated 4WD system.

The Jimny's bodywork was built from steel panels with plastic bumpers and lower door mouldings. The body sat on a ladder frame, with coil-sprung, telescopically-damped live axles front and rear.

Disc brakes were fitted to the front axles and drums at the back.

Inside there were two bucket seats up front and two split-folding rears. Changes to the rear seat also allowed fold-down in a single action, for greater luggage space.

Base-model JX variants had vinyl floor mats and unassisted ball and nut steering. J LX models came with carpets, power steering, windows and mirrors, central locking, door pockets, body-coloured mouldings and bumpers, and roof rails.

The standard wheels were steel, shod with 205/70R15 tyres.



Air conditioning and aluminium wheels were optional on both versions.

A four-speed automatic was available on the J LX version.

That's pretty much how the Jimny has remained; making it one of the longest-running models in history.

On and Off-road



On road the Jimny could be enormous fun, because it weighed bugger all: 1100kg one-up. That gave the little Jimny a power to weight ratio about the same as that of a V6 4WD wagon, with a lot less inertia. Traffic light grands prix could cause others much embarrassment and if you lost, who cared?

It was great around town on dry roads, but the Jimny wasn't so composed when things got bumpy and slippery. The little rocket bump-steered from whichever end got the input and there was no full-time 4WD to help with traction.

The Jimny wasn't a serious highway cruiser because it needed to be kept above the peak torque of 4500rpm for constant performance and that soon became tiring. Dirt roads were fun if you knew what you're doing and if the surface was loose enough to allow 4WD engagement. (There's no centre diff so you can't run in 4WD on high-friction surfaces without risking transmission damage.)

Off road the Jimny had limitations. It ripped along on sand, but needed a boot-full of revs in soft stuff and the noise level could be annoying after a while. On rocky trails the combination of too-tall low-range gearing, short wheel travel and open front and rear diffs provoked plenty of wheelspin, while the firm suspension and short wheelbase set up choppy progress.

It would be difficult to foul up the ergonomics in a vehicle as small as the Jimny, provided the designer treated the project as a two-seater with occasional rear seat accommodation, and that's apparently what was done.

Most front seat occupants found there was adequate space and comfort. The Japanese don't like their mothers-in-law any more than we do: hence the rear perch.

The Suzuki Jimny is a well-made, well-pedigreed small 4WD that should appeal to more punters than the plain-Jane Sierra did. It's no RAV three-door around town, but it doesn't have the RAV's price tag.

Previous Models - Suzuki Sierra



The Sierra SJ was introduced in 1981, following the success of the earlier LJ10 two-stroke model. Although the 540cc two-stroke model had woeful on-road performance, it was brilliant in the bush, combining light weight, compact dimensions and deep gearing.

When Suzuki upgraded the machine by introducing a 970cc, four-stroke engine and stretching the gearing, the on-road performance was improved, but bush ability declined.

In 1984, a 1.3-litre engine option was offered. Badge-engineered Holden Drivers were really Sierras and all had the 1.3-litre engine.

The engine was refined in 1989 and had a slight displacement change from 1324cc to 1298cc.

In 1996, the Sierra was given new bodywork and all-coil suspension. The appearance didn't change much, but the old and new panels aren't interchangeable. There were two Sierra wagon models: soft-top and hard-top. Competition for the Sierra came from the Lada Niva and then from the base model Rocsta, but both these brands failed to proceed.

A carburettored, eight-valve 1.0-litre or 1.3-litre engine wasn't going to put anything into orbit, so even with the Sierra's modest one-tonne weight, you had to stir the stick and use the right foot to get it to buzz.

Handling was something the leaf-sprung Sierra never had, thanks to stiff springs, narrow track and a short wheelbase.

Progress over any surface rougher than an internationally-rated airstrip was a series of jerks, while the pilot swung the wheel this way and that, aiming his charge.



The poor ride of leaf-sprung versions wasn't helped by thinly padded, vinyl-covered seats. We've driven Sierras with after-market suspensions that soften the ride marginally, but there's a limit to what can be achieved. The coil-sprung model was a different kettle of fish entirely. The softer springs soaked up most bumps without any unwanted steering effect, so the driver was free to exploit the much lower roll centres that coil suspension brought.

A post-1996 Sierra cornered in the dry like most similar-age front wheel drive sedans and had the advantage of 4WD traction when the ground turned slippery or loose. However, it didn't handle like a RAV4 on wet and loose surfaces.

Off-road gearing was the main off road limitation. With only 30:1 reduction in low-low (it should have been at least 40:1) the Sierra didn't like steep stone shelf climbing. Its forte was sand, where the combination of light weight and greatly improved side-slope stability could be exploited to the envy of other 4WD owners.

The dashboard and controls functioned well, with everything easily scanned and reached.

The rear seats were for really good mates over short distances, but the seriously inclined whipped 'em out to get the fridge and the fishin' gear in the back.

Noise, vibration and harshness weren't at the top of Suzuki's priority list, so the little Sierra let you know when it was working. The front axle added slightly to driveline vibration when the hubs were locked.



The Suzuki Sierra was a blast from the past and a welcome change from the sleekly-styled small 4WD wagons that now proliferate.

What Breaks

You can replace a busted Sierra headlight for a few bucks at any auto-electrical shop, chuck wet fish in the back without staining carpet and hose it out at the end of the day.

It's this beach-friendliness that causes many Sierras and Jimnys to have cancer, so have a real good look at a prospective purchase.

Mechanically, there's nothing radically wrong with Sierras and Jimnys, other than old age in cheaper examples.

Bush Modifications

There's not much point trying to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear and there's no way you'll convert a used Sierra or Jimny into a plush highway cruiser. Both vehicles are best kept for short journeys into the scrub or onto beaches.

We've heard of successful engine swaps – the Corolla engine is a popular Sierra re-power – but make sure you match the new engine with a larger radiator, plus a taller overdrive or axle gearing, or larger diameter tyres.

If you want to turn your Suzuki into a world-class rock hopper there is a choice of crawler gear sets available, with low range reduction as high as 6:1. Additional ground clearance can be gained by fitting taller coil springs and longer shocks, or by under-slinging the axles on leaf-sprung models. However, don't be tempted into a lift above 50mm if you want to keep your road registration.

An engine swap, tyres greater than five percent over standard diameter or a high lift will require an engineer's certificate for road rego in most States.



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