

Ute Modifications

As today's 4x4 wagons become larger, heavier and 'softer' the 4x4 ute has great appeal to many off-roaders. However, a ute – even one of the up-market ones – needs the personal touch to fit in with your work and bush travel plans.



Ute buyers fit mostly into two categories: those who need a dual-purpose work-and-play machine and those who want a tough off-roader. Utes have appeal for the self-employed and primary producers, because their one-tonne payload capacity means no fringe benefits tax.

Utes have much more payload capacity than wagons, because 4x4 ute makers have to guarantee payload capacity for their commercial customers. Today's 4x4 utes aren't much heavier than yesterday's, whereas today's wagons are up to 50 percent heavier than those of 15 years ago.

The payoff for off-roaders is that a 4x4 ute's load capacity allows it to carry plenty of camping and recovery gear.

Lack of performance used to be a complaint against utes, but in the last few years utes have picked up V6 petrol and four-cylinder turbo diesels and can match all but high-performance wagons against the stopwatch.

The downsides with utes are that their suspensions are more agricultural than wagon springs and they lack the 'frills' that many buyers now expect. That said, current-model 4x4 utes can be ordered with power everything, central locking, quality sound systems and aluminium wheels.

Ute makers are also cashing in on the accessories business and it's possible these days to buy a new ute with snorkel, bar, tonneau, canopy, lights, winch and dual battery system installed.

However, even a tricked-up new ute will need some after-market treatment.

Bodywork

Utes come, obviously, with a cargo space and tailoring it to your needs is the first priority. Crew cabs are the most popular designs for families and a plastic canopy is the usual tray covering, but not the only choice.

The serious bush traveller often chooses a metal canopy with a sturdy roof, to better support loads such as a 'tinnie' or firewood, but some plastic canopy makers now supply roof racks.

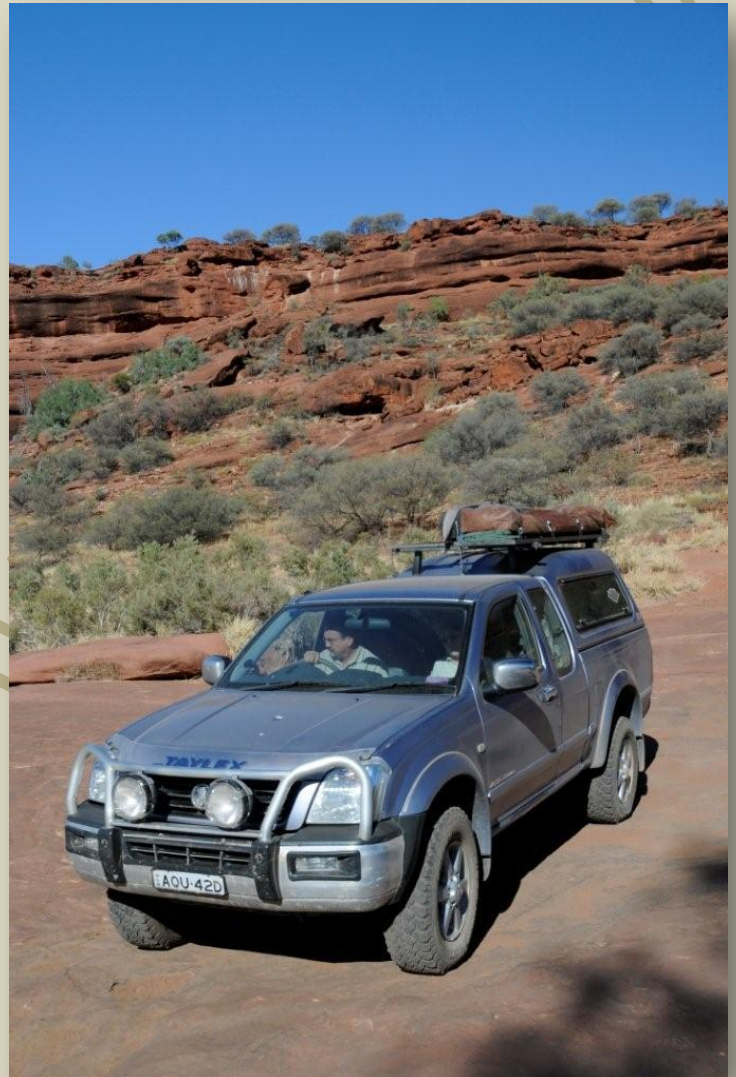
Those who travel light, or tow a camper trailer, don't need the volume in the ute tray, so a tonneau is an option. A simple vinyl tonneau does the trick, but expect some dust entry.

Next up the scale is a lockable hard tonneau, available in aluminium or plastic. The problem with a hard tonneau is exactly that – its hardness – so the volume it covers can't be enlarged to accommodate a bigger load.

Most off-roaders opt for a canopy of some sort. By far the most popular choice is the fibreglass canopy and of these we'd recommend the more expensive types that have lifting side glasses. Canopies that offer only rear access are awkward to live with on a camping trip.

Next up the price scale is a custom-built metal canopy, with canvas covering. The framing and mesh can be made from galvanised steel or more expensive aluminium. The advantages of a covered mesh canopy over a fibreglass one include increased load security and the ability of any wet-stowed items inside to 'breathe'.

If your gear won't fit into a covered ute tray the starting point should be a tray-back ute that offers wider bodywork, without intruding wheel arches. The downsides of this bodywork are increased tray floor height, making loading more difficult, and the additional wind resistance of bodywork that usually exceeds cab width and height.



Utes are easier to pack than wagons, because the cargo area is robust, scratch-tolerant and separate from the occupants. If you're using a canopy it's easy to build-in a floor at the coaming height and pack heavy stuff underneath and lighter gear on top. Cargo drawers fit well into ute trays.

The most popular touring utes are four-doors and the major drawback with them is that most of the tray volume is behind the rear axle. It's important that heavy stuff is loaded as far forward as possible. A short-cab or an extra-cab is a better loading proposition.

Load securing can be a problem in ute trays that lack tie-downs, but it's easy to pick up after-market ring bolts or eyes to supplement the originals.

A cargo barrier between the freight in the tray and the back seat occupants is necessary. Most working utes come with a mesh barrier, but up-market ones don't. The rear window of a ute isn't an adequate barrier between freight and people.

If you want to keep your ute tray in good condition and enhance your vehicle's resale value a ute liner is a worthwhile addition. The basic type consists of a rubber floor mat and the next step up is a moulded plastic liner that is screwed or rivetted in place. Another choice is a sprayed-on protective coating.

We've evaluated all types of ute tray protectors and we lean towards the spray-on coating for severe-service utes or for those situations where it's important not to lose any interior volume – slip-in types have an air gap between the original floor and sides and the liner.

Liners work well and can be removed if necessary, but it's important to have adequate ventilation and drainage between the liner and the original bodywork. Trapped moisture can work villainy on the original panels.

Running Gear

No maker produces a real 4x4 ute with wagon-style ride quality. However, the all-coil Defender and Patrol ride better than any other ex-factory utes.

Utes are usually one-tonne-payload-rated and that means strong rear springs are fitted at the factory. Strong leaf springs don't ride well at low load factors and that's where a suspension specialist can help. Most after-market 4x4 suspension companies have several ratings for popular utes and can dial up the ideal ride-load compromise.

The way to buy replacement springs and shockers is to pack your vehicle with its full touring load – and the camping trailer if you intend towing one - and let the supplier see the vehicle as it will be used.

Most 4x4 ute owners opt for a 50 mm lift at the same time as they specify better-riding rear springs and that height increase can usually be matched by a torsion-bar lift or replacement coil/struts up front. Air rear suspension is becoming increasingly popular.





Factory-fitted ute tyres are light truck types, but there are two types these days. The ones fitted to the aluminium wheels of up-market utes are likely to have lighter construction than the narrower 'pure' light truck types fitted to base model utes.

It may pay to opt for heavier-construction tyres on the fat rims, or else you can keep the flash wheels for street use and buy some steel wheels with tougher rubber for your bush trips.

Cheap wheel swaps are easy for some utes, to allow fatter rubber to be fitted – Prado steel seven-inchers can replace the 5.5-6.0 inchers on HiLuxes, for example – but make sure the wheel is strong enough to handle the ute's gross mass.

Traction Aids

The standard traction-aid fare for 4x4 utes is a rear limited-slip differential and that's not enough grip enhancement for most bush work. (The 2009/2010 Triton is an exception, coming with full-time 4WD, traction control and an optional rear diff lock.) On top of that, utes are skittish when unloaded – especially when running on-road in rear wheel drive – and are all too happy to spin their inside rear wheels when cornering.

A self-locking rear diff – Detroit Soft Locker or Lock Right - can solve that problem and also provide excellent traction control off-road.



The perfect complement to that arrangement is an ARB Air Locker in the front axle, coming with an on-board air compressor as a bonus. The alternative is a pair of Air Lockers front and rear.

Deeper-reduction transfer-case gears are available for some utes, to improve crawl-speed torque and engine braking. They're handy if large-wheel packages are part of the modification plan, because increased rolling radius detracts from low-range gearing.

The down side of lower-speed gearing is an increase in the torque load on the uni joints and the diff centres.

No matter how much traction assistance you give your ute there'll come a day when it gets bogged. It's winching time.

Fixed, power winches are electrically or hydraulically driven and portable ones are electric or manual. Our preference is for an electric winch that slots into a towing tongue in the front or rear bar, giving you the choice of forward or rearward recovery.

The drawback of a portable electric 8000 model is its 47 kg weight, but a manual winch requires much more effort – believe us.



Bars – Front and Rear

Bar work is almost compulsory on a ute and our preference is for a steel bull bar, for true off-road work. If your 'roo risk is low an aluminium one looks smart.

It's a good idea to order your bar with spottie and aerial brackets welded on, because welding on a bar once it's in place isn't a good idea with today's computer-infested engine management systems.

Utes invariably have their spare wheels tucked up under their trays, so the obvious way to cart a second spare is to rip off the pressed-tin stock rear bumper and replace it with a swing-away. The bonus of a Kaymar swing-away is a proper rear bar, with a tow bar function thrown in.

Utes without canopies are just asking for roll-over protection bars to be fitted and there's a host of steel and polished aluminium designs to choose from.

We're not sure about the value of lights fitted to the top of roll-over bars. They're not much use in dusty conditions, because the dust-filled light beams can be blinding. As well, they're vulnerable to being mangled by overhanging branches.



Performance Upgrade

Most diesel utes these days are turbocharged and some are intercooled. Performance from these turbo-diesels is excellent, but the drawback is electronic engine management that worries remote-area users.

One advantage of electronic engine management is a quick, chip-related hot-up, but don't be tempted to make a dragster out of your ute, or you risk paying a high reliability price.

The mechanical-injection option is to buy a naturally-aspirated diesel ute and after-market turbo-charge it, but you'll lose your power-train warranty and you risk an overheating problem if your cooling system isn't as-new.

Another diesel engine improvement is to fit an intercooler to a straight turbo engine, to cool the incoming air and allow it to burn more fuel. As with electronic chip modifications we'd urge caution, so you don't risk overheating and engine durability problems.

Fuel Capacity

Only Toyota 75/78 Series and Patrol utes have sufficient standard tankage for long bush trips, so a long-range fuel tank is an obvious addition to other utes. Our preference is for the single, replacement tank type, rather than an auxiliary, because there's no need for siphon or pump transfer to the main tank.



Auxiliary Power



Bush utes will need an auxiliary power source, to run a fridge, or the back up the starting battery. A conventional dual-battery setup used to be an easy fit, but in many of today's ute engine bays there isn't sufficient space for a second battery.

One solution is a deep-cycle battery clamped in place beside the fridge, with an under-bonnet charger to keep it topped up. If your fridge is stowed in the back of an extra-cab or crew-cab ute the battery can be clamped to the floor. Gel or AGM types eliminate the possibility of acid spills and fumes.

Interiors

If the starting point for your modified 4x4 ute is an up-spec model you'll already have most of the necessary creature comforts, but very few new utes come with cruise control. After-market kits can give your right foot a rest on long hauls.

Seat covers are a practical way of protecting your ute's original upholstery, but don't slip heavy canvas covers straight over the seats or you risk wearing out the original stuff faster than if you did nothing - canvas seams can be abrasive. Chuck a cheap set of 'covers over the seats, between the canvas covers and the original seat coverings.

Overhead consoles and central bins can provide storage space that's usually at a premium in ute cabs. Fortunately today's CB radios are tiny by comparison with yesterday's units, so slotting one into the dashboard isn't usually a problem.

The dash top is an ideal place for a compact GPS, in sight of the driver and the navigator.

Customising your ute is the closest you can get these days to the good old times of early 4x4ing, when individual expression was the way of the bush.

