

# UTE WARS

## MAZDA and FORD TAKE ON THE BIG BOYS

Newly released, jointly-developed Ford Ranger and Mazda BT-50 utes are set to tackle the traditional ute-market leaders in Australia: 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.

