

Toyota's Retro-look FJ Cruiser



What started as a 2003 North American Car Show concept vehicle is now a right-hand-drive reality. Toyota's FJ Cruiser is available in Australia, after five years' production history in the USA.

The FJ Cruiser is described by its designers as a modern interpretation of a Toyota classic: the FJ40 two-door wagon that was produced from 1960 until 1984. Its FJ-inspired features include angular lines, round headlights set either side of a wide, mesh grille, an upright windscreen with three wiper blades, a white roof and wrap-around rear corner windows.

Toyota has provided easy entry to the second row of seats by incorporating rear-opening 'suicide' access doors, while retaining the two-door style of the original FJ. The B-pillars are built into the access doors and support upper and lower front seatbelt anchorages.



In addition, the new FJ scores modern safety equipment, including six airbags, vehicle stability control, anti-skid brakes with brake assist and electronic brake force distribution, active front-seat head restraints and a reversing camera with display located in the electro-chromatic rear-view mirror. Standard kit includes rear fog lamps, privacy glass, rear parking sensors, cruise control, air-conditioning, steering wheel audio controls, multi-information display and central locking.

The FJ Cruiser has an eight-speaker audio system with a CD stacker, in which the ceiling headliner is an integral part of the speaker system. The system also features a USB port for iPod connectivity, 3.5mm input jack for other MP3 players and Bluetooth for mobile phone hands-free use and audio streaming.

While the new FJ has design features that mimic those of the original, the mechanical package has more in common with the US-market 4Runner and the Prado than with Toyota's FJ40 successor, the 70 Series.



Being a US-market-derived model, the FJ comes with a petrol-engine only powertrain: 200kW/ 380Nm four-litre V6 with five-speed automatic transmission, 72-litre fuel tank, part-time 4x4, electrically activated rear differential lock and switchable traction control.

Ground clearance isn't the equal of the old FJ40, but a 36-degree approach angle, 31-degree departure angle and 29-degree break-over angle provide some off-road rock-climbing ability.

Local testing contributed to recalibration of the all-coil suspension and power steering to suit Australian conditions. Standard wheels are 17-inch aluminium, with 70-profile tyres. Local testing also resulted in the addition of grab handles on the back of the driver and front-passenger seats to improve comfort for rear-seat passengers.

Nine exterior colours are offered, including the hero colours Voodoo Blue and Hornet Yellow, with a white roof. FJ Cruiser has a recommended retail price of \$44,990 and metallic paint is \$400 extra.

On and off road

The front doors are quite long, so entry and exit are easy in unrestricted spaces, but tight car parks can be a challenge. The rear doors open from the forward end and cannot be opened unless the front doors are opened, which can be a nuisance when rear-seat occupants need to get out. Car parks pose a particular

problem, because when the front and rear doors are opened at the same time, the vehicle occupants are trapped in a vee-shaped space. Exit strategy and planning are necessary!

Once aboard and on the move, FJ Cruiser occupants travel in surprising comfort. Front and rear seats are supportive with plenty of head and leg room, and while the back seat is best for two adults, three can squeeze in for day trips. As befits a retro-cruiser that is most likely to be city-based, the



sound system is first rate and supplemented by Bluetooth functions, including wireless music connection from an iPhone or Android smart phone.

Controls and knobs are fattish retro-designs that function well. Vision isn't as compromised as you might think from looking at the low windscreen and triple washers/wipers make a clean sweep of the glass. The world's smallest wiper clears the back slit, but rear vision is aided by a camera.

Headlight power is adequate for bush touring, but the flat front bumper space is begging for some bling spotties to be fitted.

The FJ Cruiser is a very comfortable touring vehicle, albeit with woolly steering that's vague in the straight-ahead position. The four-litre Prado petrol V6 is quiet, powerful and responsive, but very thirsty if revved hard. However, even light-foot driving will see consumption in the 12-15L/100km region. Towing a loaded trailer sees consumption decay into the 20+L/100km zone.

The five-speed automatic box shifts smoothly and is easily stick-stirred for some sporting driving or for selecting low gears for engine braking or when off-road.

Ride and handling are very good. The FJ takes bumps without pitching and snit-sway bars keep cornering stance quite flat. However, the suspension calibration is for a relatively light load and a full cargo area sends the stern into droop mode. Stability control makes up to some extent for a part-time 4WD system that works only in rear wheel drive on high-friction surfaces.

Rear suspension softness is a problem with the FJ Cruiser when towing, even with modest ball weights less than 100kg. The rear springs and dampers aren't set up for towball weight and the vehicle 'nods' over undulations. Air-assist springs might do the trick, but better would be stiffer rear coils.

Towing power and torque aren't issues and engine braking on long descents is quite good. Braking power is quite adequate.



The rear vision camera projects a small picture on the rear vision mirror and this proved quite useful when coupling up to our test trailer.





With the transfer case in low range and the rear diff locked the FJ Cruiser becomes a useful off-road machine, but progress in rocky terrain is restricted by poor front end ground clearance. An after-market Prado lift kit would help greatly.

Standard tyres are passenger car types and serious bush travellers would be advised to replace them with light truck rubber.

Fat rubber and plenty of grunt make the FJ Cruiser an ideal beach sand machine. The stability control system can be switched off for sand driving, so that it doesn't reduce momentum when climbing dunes.

Our Toyota FJ Cruiser test vehicle seemed to polarise opinions: people loved it or hated it, but it turned more heads and prompted more comment than any other vehicle we've tested in recent months. If you like the retro concept this example has few compromises.