TOW TEST

ISUZU D-MAX

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.

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All Australian-market Isuzu D-Max single cab and crew cabs are powered by Isuzu's 4JJ1–TC, three-litre, turbo-intercooled, common-rail-injected diesel four. Claimed outputs are 120kW at 3600rpm, with peak torque of 360Nm at 1800rpm (five-speed manual transmission models) and 333Nm at 1600rpm (four-speed automatics).
The torque cut-back in the case of automatic models is made up to some extent by a higher mechanical ratio final drive.

The Rodeo chassis and suspension design is carried-over: ladder-frame chassis with torsion-bar front suspension and leaves at the rear. Unlike other mid-sized utes the D-Max and Colorado have their rear axles mounted above the leaves and are damped by rear-mounted shock absorbers. Competitor utes have their rear axles mounted underneath the axles, with bias-mounted, fore and aft location shock absorbers.
Rear axles mounted above leaf springs usually have inherently better handling than underslung axles, but the trade-off is reduced ground clearance under the vehicle belly. In the case of our test vehicle this disadvantage was overcome by a suspension lift of 40mm front and rear.

Our tow test trailer was a Cub Supamatic, weighing in at around 900kg, which we took on a three-week trip. Towing conditions varied from freeway to rutted bush tracks.

ISUZU TOWING

This is our 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. Our 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.

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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-Max's have been 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 the 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 4x4 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: by the end of the trip 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 LongRanger 130-litre tank under the bodywork. Economy on our test worked out at exactly 12L/100km, which is pretty good.

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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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